



The Impact of Differentiated Instruction on Student Motivation: Perceptions from English Majors at Ibn Tofail University

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Abstract

The way lessons are presented in the classroom can be a major shift in the degree of motivation for learning; it can either enhance or diminish motivation. Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a modern learner-centered approach that addresses students' diverse needs, interests, and learning preferences. This study investigates the impact of DI on students' motivation, focusing on the perceptions of English majors at Ibn Tofail University. The researchers conducted a quantitative study and utilized a questionnaire to gather data from 140 undergraduates. The results show that most students perceive DI as a positive factor that harnesses a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment where everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Participants indicated a feeling of support, self-value, and active encouragement to participate in class.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, students' motivation, English majors, higher education, attitudes

تأثير التعليم المتميز على دافعية الطلاب: تصورات طلاب تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة ابن طفيل

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ملخص

يمكن أن تحدث طريقة تقديم الدروس في الفصل الدراسي تحولاً كبيراً في درجة دافعية التعلم؛ إذ يمكنها إما تعزيزها أو إضعافها. التعليم المتميز هو نهج حديث يركز على المتعلم، ويعالج احتياجات الطلاب واهتماماتهم وتفضيلاتهم التعليمية المتنوعة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في تأثير التعليم المتميز على دافعية الطلاب، مع التركيز على تصورات طلاب تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة ابن طفيل. أجرى الباحثون دراسة كمية واستخدموا استبياناً لجمع البيانات من ١٤٠ طالباً جامعياً. تُظهر النتائج أن معظم الطلاب ينظرون إلى التعليم المتميز كعامل إيجابي يُسهم في توفير بيئة تعليمية أكثر شمولاً وترحيباً، حيث تتاح للجميع فرص متساوية للنجاح. أشار المشاركون إلى شعورهم بالدعم وتقدير الذات والتشجيع الفعال للمشاركة في الفصل.

الكلمات الدالة: التعليم المتميز، دافعية الطلاب، طلاب تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية، التعليم العالي، المواقف

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation is one of the leading drives in learning. Margaret and Gardener (2003) states that age, personality, and motivation are the pivotal three factors that help a learner pick up a language rapidly. According to Dörnyei (2001), motivation is the essential element to learning a language, without which, even the most brilliant students cannot sustain learning. Brown (2014) reinforces this idea by adding, "Motivation is a star player in the cast of characters assigned to L2 learning scenarios around the world." (p. 158). Moreover, Dörnyei (2009) points out, "Motivation as a variable in L2 development is no longer seen as the stable individual difference factor it was once believed to be: Influenced by process-oriented models and principles, and especially by the growing understanding of how complex dynamic systems work, researchers have been focusing increasingly on the dynamic and changeable nature of the motivation process" (p. 704).

The aforementioned perspectives commonly highlight the fundamental role motivation plays in determining the success of language learners. Since students have different motivation degrees, Teachers try numerous approaches, methods and strategies to harness and foster it. They do so through attempting to create a stress-free learning environment that challenges the 'One-size fits all' paradigm of imparting knowledge. In addition, teachers can motivate students via reshaping what and how students may get exposed to new content, processes they undergo in their learning career, products they innovatively design and present, and healthy learning environment. DI is one of the modern teaching approaches that is perceived to be an effective force which motivates students to learn. Thus, the objective of the present study is to explore the perceived opinions of impact of DI on Ibn Tofail University students at the English department.

1.1. Research Questions

The current research attempts to find answers to the following questions:

- RQ₁: What are the perceptions of English majors at Ibn Tofail University regarding DI in their classrooms?
- RQ₂: How do students perceive the practices and impact of DI on motivation?

1.2. Research Hypotheses

- H₁: English majors at Ibn Tofail University have a generally positive perception of DI in their learning experience.
- H₂: Students perceive DI practices as having a positive impact on their motivation to learn.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES

2.1. Motivation Defined

Due to being a crucial term in English language teaching, scholars present a myriad of definitions of motivation. According to Gardner (1985) "motivation refers to the combination of effort plus desire to

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achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10). This definition entails that motivation consists of effort (the amount of time and effort an individual is ready to devote to learning), desire (the individual’s determination to be a proficient language learner), and attitudes (the individual’s feelings about the leaning process). He continues by stating that motivation is not an individual factor, but rather a multifaced combination of the above-mentioned elements (1985). Qashoa (2006) defines it as a psychological construct that drives learners’ actions. Furthermore, Pardee and Roland (1990) claim that motivation is the underlying reason which prompts an individual to perpetuate certain actions.

Zhou and Brown (2015) extend this by characterizing motivation as a decision-making process through which learners pursue desired outcomes. Since motivation is of great importance in language learning, unmotivated learners might find it very challenging to be active, productive and self-reliant in the learning process (Dewey, 1997). Depending on its intensity and relevance, motivation is be seen as the driving force that can positively influence the learning process (Rahman, 2016). Al Rifai (2010) gave a more specific definition of motivation by viewing it as the desire to achieve a learning objective. That is, motivation is closely related to the extent of efforts a language learner is ready to make. Similarly, Sagheer and Tehmina (2013) view motivation as the primary factor that pushes classroom participation and, thus, language acquisition. In short, motivation is the key to creating a self-regulated and goal-oriented learning environment.

2.2. Differentiated Instruction Defined

DI is a teaching philosophy and framework designed to challenge the traditional ‘one-size fits all’ approach to language teaching. It is tailored to address diverse learners’ needs, preferences, and readiness level of students in a heterogeneous learning environment. Tomlinson (2001) states, “differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively.” She adds, “differentiating instruction means “shaking up” what goes on in the classroom so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn” (Tomlinson, 2001). It also refers to creatively planning varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and how they will demonstrate evidence of that they have learned (Tomlinson, 2003). It is also believed as the process by which teachers and practitioners make goal-oriented instructional decisions to offer a wide range of learning opportunities that responds to the needs of different types of learners, depending on their readiness, interests, and preferred learning styles (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Thus, catering to different kinds of learners and personalities is of great importance to boost their motivation and, hence, promotes their academic growth.

2.3. Elements of Differentiated Instruction

Teachers differentiate what students learn (content), the way they learn it (process), how they execute their understanding (product), and the effect of the atmosphere (learning environment) (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). Firstly, content refers to the knowledge and skills students are expected to achieve. Secondly, process is how students make sense of and deal with the content. Thirdly, product is

how they demonstrate what they have learned. Finally, the learning environment encompasses the classroom's affective and physical climate (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers adapt these elements based on students' readiness level, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014), making learning more responsive and equitable. According to Heacox (2012), differentiating these components helps in maintaining students' engagement and increases academic and personal achievement by respecting individual differences. By thoughtfully adjusting these areas, teachers can better support diverse learners and improve motivation and outcomes in the classroom.

2.4. Empirical Studies

A myriad of empirical studies underscore the merits of DI on students' motivation and engagement. Subban (2006) synthesizes literature showing that tailoring content, process, and products to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles fosters greater intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement. Tieso (2001) discovered that students demonstrated various positive emotional outcomes, including increased engagement, improved motivation, and greater enthusiasm for learning. However, in the Moroccan context, there appears to be limited or no research that has examined the connection between DI and students' motivation after being exposed to a 3-week differentiated curriculum.

Differentiated instructional strategies shows improvement in students' reading levels, use of comprehension strategies, phonemic awareness, decoding abilities, and overall attitudes toward reading (Baumgartner, 2003).

Rock et al. (2008) found that using the REACH ((a)reflect on will and skill, (b) evaluate the curriculum, (c) analyze the learners, (d) craft research-based lessons, and (e) hone in on the data) framework of DI significantly increased middle school students' on-task behavior and self-reported motivation compared to traditional methods of instruction. Adjustments in content, process, and product create learning environments students describe as more supportive and motivating (Tomlinson, 1999).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Effective studies adhere selecting appropriate methods and instruments to investigate the research problem(s). Akhtar (2016) explains, "The design of a study provides the glue that holds the research project together" (p. 48). He adds, ""Research design is the conceptual blueprint within which research is conducted" (Akhtar, 2016, p. 68). Accordingly, a quantitative descriptive approach is implemented in the current study to investigate English majors' perceptions of DI and its impact on their motivation to learn. The methodology part includes details about the participants, research instrument, data collection, analysis procedures, and issues of the study's validity and reliability.

3.1. Research Design

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a research design explains how the study will be carried out and guides how data should be gathered to respond to the research questions. This study is drawn on a quantitative descriptive design that is chosen for its capability to collect measurable data regarding students' attitudes, practices, and perceived motivation related to DI.

3.2. Participants

The participants consist of undergraduate students enrolled in the English Studies department at Ibn Tofail University. A total of 60 students voluntarily participate in this study. They were selected using the convenience sampling method based on their accessibility and willingness to respond to the questionnaire items. The sample includes students from various academic levels, age, gender and backgrounds to ensure a broad representation and generalizability of the population.

3.3. Research Instrument

Data was collected utilizing a structured questionnaire which was crafted by the researcher and distributed online via Google Forms. The questionnaire consists of approximately 16 items, grouped into four sections: (Demographic Information, Attitudes toward DI, Practices of DI, and motivation to learn while implementing or Experiencing Differentiation). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" was used to measure responses. The instrument was reviewed by two educational specialists to ensure content validity.

A pilot study, consisting of 20 responses, was also conducted to assess the clarity and reliability of the items. Cronbach's alpha was conducted to measure the questions' acceptable coefficient of internal consistency and reliability. As shown in table 1, the results indicate an excellent level of reliability for the first section ($\alpha=0.929$) and third section ($\alpha=0.943$). For the second section, the test shows an average level of reliability ($\alpha=0.712$).

Table (1): The Questionnaire Reliability Based on Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient

	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Number of items
Attitudes	.929	5
Practices	.712	5
Motivation	.943	6

To ensure the questionnaire's validity, the researchers have employed Exploratory Factor Analyses (AFA) with a varimax rotation of all the Likert-scale items in the questionnaire.

This type of analyses was run due to having a number of data that is superior to 100 (140), and for that the questionnaire is self-crafted by the researchers. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy measurement is excellent for factor analysis (.939) according to Kaiser (1974).

Barlett's Test of Sphericity is also statistically significant ($p > .05$) which allows us to go ahead with factor analysis.

Table (2): The KMO and Bartlett's Tests Results

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.938
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	
Approx. Chi-Square	2185.547
df	105
Significance	.000

Principal Axing is incorporated as an extraction method to observe the common variance among the items after extraction. After observing the commonalities, the data shows a noticeable sum of variance between the items and extracted factors. Most of the items' extraction show a very strong and strong connection while only one item is acceptable (.423), which is just within the acceptable limit.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire is distributed electronically via a Google Forms link shared with student groups on social media platforms, mainly WhatsApp and Facebook. Participants are informed about the study's objectives and assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. Responses are collected over a two-week period to ensure a sufficient sample size. Informed consent is clearly communicated before questionnaire completion, and participation is strictly voluntary.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Responses are imported to Excel to encode them numerically and then are analyzed using descriptive statistics with the assistance of SPSS software. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations are calculated to interpret students' attitudes, reported practices, and motivation. The findings help identify patterns and trends regarding DI in the English language learning context at Ibn Tofail University.

The data were entered to IBM SPSS (version 26) for analysis. Descriptive statistics are incorporated to examine the participants' demographic information and their responses to the five-point Likert-scale items. The table below (Table 2) shows how we interpret the scores from the five-point Likert scale.

Table (3): The Interpretations of our Five-Point Likert-Scale Measurement

Scale Value	Description	Interpretation Range	Interpretation
1	Strongly Disagree	1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree
2	Disagree	1.81 – 2.60	Disagree
3	Neutral	2.61 – 3.40	Neutral

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4	Agree	3.41 – 4.20	Agree
5	Strongly Agree	4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree

4. DATA DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The present study presents and analyzes the findings derived from the research questions that explore English majors' perceptions of DI and its impact on their motivation. It also discusses the pedagogical implications of these findings for English language teaching and the potential contributions to higher education instruction in Morocco. Finally, a general conclusion is drawn to summarize the key outcomes of the study and highlight its limitations. What follows is a detailed discussion of the results.

4.1. Perceptions

Table (4) indicates the participants' perceptions towards DI among English department students (freshmen, sophomores, and juniors). The means of the five items range from 3.33 to 3.84 on the five-point Likert-scale, revealing a moderately high consensus. Standard deviations suggest a moderate degree of students' variability while responding to the statements (1.15 to 1.37).

Table (4): Students' Attitudes Towards Differentiated Instruction

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel motivated in class.	140	1	5	3.33	1.147
I feel that teachers who use different strategies make learning more interesting.	140	1	5	3.84	1.326
I believe students learn better when their learning styles are considered.	140	1	5	3.75	1.347
Differentiated instruction makes learning more enjoyable for me.	140	1	5	3.74	1.233
I support the idea of using various learning activities in the same lesson.	140	1	5	3.74	1.370
Valid N (listwise)	140				

4.2. Practices

Table (5) spots light on English department university professors' practices of DI. Means ranged from 2.91 to 3.26, which reflects a moderate agreement. The item *"I am allowed to choose tasks or topics that interest me"* had the lowest mean (M = 2.91, SD = 1.18). On the other hand, the item *"My teacher*

explains lessons in different ways to help everyone understand” received the highest mean ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.27$). These results propose that some practices are positively perceived, and others, like selecting own interesting learning tasks, are inconsistently regarded.

Table (5): Practices of Differentiated Instruction inside the English Major’s Classes

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
My teacher uses different materials to suit different learners.	140	1	5	3.16	1.127
I am allowed to choose tasks or topics that interest me.	140	1	5	2.91	1.175
In class, students work in groups based on their needs or levels.	140	1	5	3.00	1.206
My teacher explains lessons in different ways to help everyone understand.	140	1	5	3.26	1.267
I notice that classroom tasks are adapted to fit our abilities.	140	1	5	3.16	1.185
Valid N (listwise)	140				

4.3. Motivation

Table (6) reveals the perceived impact of DI on students’ motivation. Means scores were the highest among the three sections of the questionnaire (3.81 to 4.06). This executes that students have generally agreed or strongly agreed with the items. For example, participants strongly agreed with the items *“I am more engaged when lessons are adapted to my interests”* ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.22$) and *“I feel more motivated when my teacher gives me learning choices”* ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.18$). These higher means are combined with standard deviations in the moderate range (1.18 to 1.29) that suggest positive attitudes of DI’s effect on students’ motivation.

5. Table (6): Differentiated Instruction’s Impact on Students’ Motivation

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel more motivated when my teacher gives me learning choices.	140	1	5	3.91	1.184
I am more engaged when lessons are adapted to my interests.	140	1	5	4.06	1.222

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Differentiated tasks make me feel more confident in class.	140	1	5	3.81	1.193
When I understand the purpose of a task, I try harder to complete it.	140	1	5	3.87	1.291
I believe personalized teaching helps me stay motivated.	140	1	5	3.84	1.219
I enjoy learning more when lessons meet my needs.	140	1	5	3.96	1.289
Valid N (listwise)	140				

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study go hand in hand with the literature, which directly indicate a perceived impact of DI on students' motivation. Brunello and Brunello (2022) acknowledge that customizing teaching to student learning styles can noticeably boost students' motivation. They continue to report that motivation can also be enhanced through giving students choice over their learning activities (Brunello & Brunello, 2022). This shows that classrooms embracing DI strategies receive higher engagement and motivation.

The outcome of this research is also backed by a study on high school students in an English classroom by Zens (2021). The study, through observations, interviews, and surveys, reveals that students who received differentiated activities were more motivated than those who did not. To put it differently, the moderate high mean scores align with the assumption that students perform in a more engaging way when provided with personalized and customized instruction.

Lastly, through a quantitative study, Demir (2021) affirms that differentiated strategies enhance students' motivation. Compared to the control group, the motivation levels of the experiment group whose students have received DI strategies was higher (Demir, 2021). Henceforth, DI influences that motivation level of student. Students who get exposed to DI show indicators of high level of motivation, engagement, interest, enthusiasm, and excitement about learning regardless of their educational level (Saban & Atay, 2023; Liou et al., 2023; Ardiawan et al., 2024). All these studies have confirmed the effectiveness of DI in fostering students to learn.

7. CONCLUSION

This current research aims at investigating Ibn Tofail English Majors' perceptions towards DI, its practices, and its effect on motivation. The quantitative findings reveal that DI plays a pivotal role in boosting students' motivation among in the English department at Ibn Tofail University. The data indicated that DI is perceived positively by students, and its practices are highly welcomed by students. DI strategies like incorporating various teaching methods, giving students choice over their learning topics, and crafting interesting tasks are perceived positively by students. These findings go in line with

the existing literature that support the claim that DI strategies enhance students' motivation and self-confidence. Thus, it is recommended that English department professors, especially those teaching undergraduates at Ibn Tofail University, should embrace the use of DI approach while teaching. This is owing to its usefulness on creating an interactive learning environment where no student is left behind, and every student might have the chance to show evidence of development in the learning process.

Strategies such as flexible grouping, voice over topic choice, and various learning methods are crucial in promoting learning at the university's English department undergraduate program so that students would feel they are heard and recognized. However, the sample size and score are the primary limitation of this study. It addresses only English Major's views and focuses on one Moroccan University. Consequently, the result may not be possibly generalizable to other disciplines and institutions.

Besides, further studies need to implement a qualitative design to capture more in-depth attitudes since such research would contribute to a thorough understanding of DI's impactful job in fostering students' motivation in higher education and provide a solid basis for its informed implementation in the Moroccan EFL context.

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