Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Efl Classrooms in Croatia

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Rijeka

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September, 2015

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the attitudes of Croatian teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) towards the role and use of differentiated instruction in the EFL classroom. Using an online questionnaire an investigation was conducted into how frequently the participants encountered specific classroom situations or performed specific activities when teaching English to mixed-ability groups, and which type of students were most likely to receive differentiated instruction and attract their attention. Also, the familiarity of EFL teachers with specific differentiated instruction strategies was explored (Tomlinson 2001), as well as their opinion on the strategies they used in the classroom, the challenges they faced when using differentiated instruction and the factors that caused mixed-ability classrooms. The findings in this study reveal a gap between teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction at the theoretical level and their use in actual EFL practice. Teachers seem to be aware of student differences and claim that they use differentiated instruction, in particular with weaker students. They also maintain that they are familiar with specific differentiated instruction teaching strategies; however, when reference is made to their classroom practice, the participants seem to demonstrate inadequate knowledge and tend to use a rather limited repertoire of teaching strategies. The findings also reveal that the participants have a negative attitude towards mixed-ability classes, which they believe have an adverse effect on teaching and learning. It will be argued that teachers would benefit from more training in the field so as to be able to put theory into practice in the EFL classroom.

*Keywords:*Differentiated instruction, EFL, ELT, English teachers, mixed-ability

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1. Introduction to the problem

Child development has been thoroughly studies by researchers and psychologists across the world for decades. And while some models and conclusions have proved to be mostly accurate, there is still plenty we do not know.Piaget's theory of cognitive development identifies four stages in cognitive development of children and a great number of preschool and primary program are modeled precisely on this theory.

However, in the years following Piaget's research, there was continuing criticism that his model is too rigid and in fact only 30-35% of adolescents would reach the same formal operations stage through simple maturation and normal interaction with the environment (Huitt, Hummel, 2003). Therefore his work gave room to psychologist such as Leo Vygotsky and Howard Gardner, who researched different ways of child development. In fact, they do give a biological basis for reaching a certain stage of processing information, but put greater emphasis on the role of social interaction and the role of language in child development. According to the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Child Development (2005), Vygotsky believed the child's cognition develops during their social interactions with their parents, family members, peers, and teachers. They all shape the way a child's cognition develops.Thus, combining Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories, we arrive to the contemporary view of child development – it is in fact a combination of both biological and social factors, a child being both prepared and having the right support system.

That being established, we have to take into consideration the differences in both social and biological background of each child and their various interactions and experiences. Even two children coming from the same family can't possibly be the same, even if they are the same age.

Another child psychologist who has contributed greatly to understanding different needs of students was Howard Gardner. Gardner noticed that in the scholastic setting there is an emphasis almost exclusively on two types of symbol use – logical and linguistic. While these two forms are extremely important, Gardner had an issue with their exclusivity in constructing items on intelligence, aptitude and achievement (Gardner, Hatch, 1989). He took into account a wide variety of human cognitive capacities and many kinds of symbol systems and thereby stretched the concept of intelligence far beyond its conventional use. He divided it into seven different autonomous human intelligences, as seen in his article on the educational implications of his multiple intelligence theory (1989):Logical-mathematical; Linguistic; Musical; Spatial; Bodily-kinesthetic; Interpersonal; Intrapersonal.Gardner's work inspired many research projects in educational settings, designed specifically to detect human strengths and weakness and using them as a foundation for learning and growing.

As we assessed throughout this overview of research on child psychology and development, there is a lot that still remains unclear. However, we can determine that students vary in their socioeconomic status, gender, motivation, personal interests and more. And this all affects their development and ability to perform in a certain area. One can consider this as basis for the topic of differentiated instruction. These principles and strategies can help a teacher recognize various learning profiles, interests and readiness and address them so that teaching is appropriate for all students in a mixed-ability classroom. According to Tomlinson (2001, pg.8) "one-size-fits-all instruction will inevitably sag or pinch – exactly as a single-size clothing would". In her book, co-authored with Jay McTighe, "Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding by Design" she presents five different categories of student variance; biology, degree of privilege, positioning for learning and preference. Each of these categories has different implications for learning and therefore, they act as a guide as to how to approach each student and apply differentiated instruction in an almost efficient way. In a

similar vein, Gayle H. Gregory and Carolyn Chapman also explain the “one size doesn’t fit all” concept (2013).They claim that differentiating instruction, prior to the implementation of any strategies, starts as a simple mindset of a teacher, an understanding that each child brings their own memories and own previous experiences to class with them and that each one of them has their own areas of strength, areas that need to be strengthened, emotions, feelings and attitudes and most important of all, that each one of them can learn (Gregory, Chapman, 2013).

Given that English today is the most widely taught foreign language in the world in a vast array of contexts (Eurydice 2012), the diversity students and teachers involved in the learning-teaching process makes differentiated instruction particularly important for TESOL. As English language teachers increasingly face a challenging landscape in the flux and students with different experiences, levels of proficiency, and language, cultural and educational backgrounds, there has been a growing need to take these factors into consideration when teaching (cf. Celce-Murcia, 2001). This factors call for the use of an English language teaching (ELT) methodology which is appropriate for different contexts and situations (cf. Holliday,1994; Holliday,2005).

In line with these views, this study aims to examine how differentiated instruction is addressed in the EFL classroom. The paper is structured as follows. In chapter two, we examine the importance of English and TEFL in Croatian, as well as what our classrooms look like and the challenges that teachers face while trying to teach English to a large variety of mixed-ability students. Then, in the next chapter, we examine how the concept of differentiated instruction came to be and its main principles and strategies. The chapter after examines the study that was conducted on Croatian EFL teachers about their use and familiarity of differentiated instruction and the possible implications of mixed-ability classrooms.

2. TEFL and mixed-ability classrooms

2.1.TEFL in Croatia

Let us now turn to the English language and EFL classrooms which comprise a vast array of students of different backgrounds, abilities and needs. Today, English is slowly morphing into what can be considered a global language. According to current data, approximately one quarter of the population is fluent in English (Crystal, 2003) and the number is only growing rapidly. But the appeal of learning English has little to do with the number of people who speak it, and more to do with the fact that it is currently at the center of economic power, growth and multinational marketing. As a *lingua franca*it stands for globalization and possibilities. Crystal (2003) also writes about the world becoming more mobile as time goes on and people becoming more connected through internet, social media and various forms of communication and a common language is important in many academic and business settings. The status of English is certainly recognized by the Croatian public school system and therefore it is a mandatory subject for students since 1st grade, the very beginning of education. Later on, it is one of the subjects with most curriculum hours per year and one of the subjects required to pass the National School-leaving Examination for Secondary Education. Even various universities offer English courses as part of their mandatory curriculum later on or have mandatory literature in English for their students. Based on this we can conclude that fluency in English is extremely important for one's education, career and life in general. However, when children begin acquiring it through the public school system, their familiarity with it greatly varies. Their exposure is different, as well as their attitude, experience, language aptitude, encouragement from family, motivation and various other factors. Some parents even send their children to private foreign language school as early as kindergarten, led by the common belief that the younger the children are, the easier it is to reach proficiency. On the other end of the spectrum, there are children who rely on

acquiring their first, basic vocabulary words from their teacher, in school, along with their other peers. The reality ends up being that children find themselves all over the spectrum of familiarity and ability and it is something they are not even aware of; all they know is that some children are better than them and some children are worse and it is often as big of a challenge for them to overcome it as it is for the teacher.

2.2.Challenges of a mixed ability classrooms

What makes this particular topic important is the fact that mixed-ability classes represent a huge problem, not just for the teachers but also for the children who find themselves in them. If not dealt with correctly, the weaker students can fall too far behind to ever catch up and the stronger students can lose their motivation and interest in a subject in which they originally had a lot of potential (Caldwell, 2012). It can ultimately change one's educational experience entirely without the students even being aware of it. The challenges of a mixed ability classroom may seem as though they are simply issues a teacher deals with during instruction. However, with the way a curriculum is planned and knowledge accumulates, a student can lose focus during one lesson and then lose a little bit more with each following one. Soon, they are faced with a serious setback andunable to catch up. In the next subsections, we will briefly look at some of potential problems that arise in mixed-ability classroom with a ''one-size-fits-all' model.

2.2.1. Bored and lost student.

A teacher has a demanding role of preparing a lesson plan based on a curriculum. While it ideally should involve a wide range of fun, interactive and learning activities to keep the students interested and paying attention, there will always be students who are just unable to follow the instructions or cope with the material given to them. On the other end of the

spectrum there will be a student who finds the assignment almost trivial and finishes it before anyone else. In both if these cases this student stops paying attention, doesn't focus on other, similar tasks and potentially disrupts the class (Salli-Copur, 2012). Which leads to the next problem: discipline.

2.2.2. Maintaining discipline.

Many students who were initially believed to have behavioral problems and frequently caused commotion in the classroom were later on discovered to be quite talented in the subject (Diezmann& Watters, 1997). The reason for this can be traced back to their earliest years in school when they would finish the task first and then often felt bored waiting for others (Salli-Copur, 2005). They quickly lose their interest altogether and start misbehaving.

2.2.3. Maintaining interest

Different interest of students can also lead to students simply not connecting to certain lessons. According to the National Research Council (1990) that we learn most effectively when we feel a sense of safety and connection. Therefore, if a student is not interested in learning materials of a particular lesson it can seriously hinder their learning process. This can also apply to learning materials that are used and activities that are planned by the teacher. While some students may be quieter and prefer reading and learning through that, others may find that they learn best when given the chance to speak and interact (Salli-Copur, 2005). Some may enjoy listening to their teacher; others may be bored by it. This is why it is important that teachers know their students well and the kind of activity that suits them best and plan a variety of them so everyone has the opportunity for effective learning.

2.2.4. Reaching the maximum

When it comes to mixed ability classrooms perhaps the most challenging thing is making sure that everyone reaches their maximum potential (Salli-Copur, 2005). Reaching back to Vygotsky's theories, the concept of scaffolding emerges. Scaffolding can be explained as an interaction between an adult and child, in this case a student and their teacher, during which the latter is given a task just slightly beyond their ability. Nonetheless they are able to solve it during this interaction. As Vygotsky himself put it, "what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow" (1987).

Such helpful interaction where a student can reach something just above their limits proves to be extremely difficult when there is a classroom filled with children who have very different limits. How can a teacher help each one of them reach beyond them and fulfill their maximum potential?

3. What is differentiation?

3.1.Literature overview

The challenges presented in the previous chapter can be overwhelming for any teacher. This is precisely why educators turned to finding a solution. It was only some 15 years ago that an educator Carol Ann Tomlinson published her work "The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of all Learners" in 1999. In the first chapters, she explains how teachers had dealt with mixed-ability classrooms from the very start of organized education, back then even teaching to people of varied ages in one classroom. Even though differentiated instruction did not have a name back then, it was still something they had intuitively practiced in some form to deal with the challenge of teaching to students on such a wide spectrum of

abilities. Tomlinson (1999) then described differentiated instruction through two simple guidelines: having a "destination point" for students to strive forward and beyond but also having alternative approaches that appeal to a whole range of possible interests, different complexity levels, different support and even different instruction rate. The goal is to guide the learner as close as possible to the destination that was set through their own channels of learning because the same would not be possible if they are using someone else's. In the same book, Tomlinson writes: "In differentiated classrooms, teachers ensure that students compete against themselves as they grow and develop more than they can compete against one another, always moving toward – and often beyond – designated content goals." (Tomlinson, 1999, pg.4)

She later on published another work, an instruction guide, "How to Differentiate Instruction in a Mixed-Ability Classroom" in 2001. Her book tries to explain what effective differentiated instruction should look like and also describes what it should not be as well as some misconceptions and ineffective practices commonly mistaken for differentiated instruction. It also gives constructive advice on how to plan a lesson differentiated by interest, readiness and learning profile and helpful guidelines on how to differentiate the content, the process and ultimately the product. She describes specific useful strategies which embody this theoretical premise of differentiated instruction which she describes in the book.

Carol Ann Tomlinson went on to write various book on this topic and co-authored with other educational experts. Most recently, she and JohnMcTighe in 2006 wrote a book "Integrating Differentiated Instruction & Understanding by Design" where they focus extensively on why it is important to be responsive to each student's needs and create a positive, safe environment where a child can even handle failure as a normal part of their learning experience, without a significant drop in motivation. It also provides teachers with practical advice on how they can get to know their students better and on a more personal

level. As we are aware, in most public schools, classrooms are usually too crowded and time is usually very constrained. This is why it's important that a teacher implements certain activities which would prevent a child "falling through the cracks" in the system.

Certain new contributions to the field of differentiated instruction were added by Gayle Gregory and Carolyn Chapman whose work "Differentiated Instructional Strategies: One Size Doesn't Fit All" was published in 2013. They actually made a template for planning differentiated instruction in six steps:

1. Establishing standards which need to be taught
2. Identifying content
3. Determining what students know and what they need to learn next
4. Determining how they will acquire new knowledge and reach a new level of understanding
5. Students practicing and getting actively involved in the learning process
6. Assessment

Ultimately, many authors later on focused on this topic and cited Tomlinson's work as their source while compiling differentiated instruction strategies and being guided by the principles she describes in her books. Such as for example the South Dakota's Education Service Agency who published a booklet called "On Target: Strategies That Differentiate Instruction, grades 4-12" which provides teachers with strategies and ideas on how to lead a mixed-ability classroom and activities which can be used for successful differentiation.

Some of these strategies, as well as a deeper look into the theory of differentiation, will be further explored in the following chapters.

3.2.What is differentiated instruction?

As Tomlinson (2001) puts it, it can be seen as giving students options; options on how to gather information, how to process them and ultimately how to express them. Commonalities between students are an important element and therefore acknowledged, but their differences are not ignored. Perhaps the best was to explain what differentiated instruction is explaining what it is not and addressing some of the misconception.

3.3.The Do's and Don'ts of differentiated instruction

Tomlinson (2001) lists four situations which should be avoided when we are implementing differentiated instruction. Firstly, it should not be based on each student receiving individual instruction and their own assignments based on the level they're at. For example, if teachers placed each one of the 20-30 students in their classroom on an individualized instruction plan, they would quickly get lost and exhausted, while the students would not have a meaningful learning experience or be able to co-operate with their peers. Therefore, one should not think that differentiated instruction means individual tutoring of each student, but rather working with the whole class, small groups or sometimes individuals who are provided with different channels for learning and reaching a set goal.Based on this, Tomlinson (2001, pg.5) paints a picture of a successful differentiated instruction classroom as something like this: "…students coming together as a whole group to begin a study, moving out to pursue learning in small groups or individually, coming back together to share and make plans for additional investigation, moving out again for more work, coming together again to share or review, and so on."

Secondly, many teachers believe that a classroom with such flexibility and which allows students certain freedoms becomes chaotic or undisciplined, when in fact, it should not be the

case. Of course, there is always the possibility that a situation can escalate, however, it also happens in standard classrooms that offer a single approach to learning. In fact, one could say that it is even more likely to happen in such a setting due to children becoming bored or uninterested. In a differentiated instruction classroom, the teacher monitors various activities and directs students in their own behavior. A classroom which practices differentiated instruction may seem chaotic at first glance, but the movements of students, their talking and participation are not something disruptive to the class but have a purpose for their learning and building a sense of community.

Furthermore, what a teacher should avoid if they want to build a differentiated instruction classroom is to group students homogenously. Groups should include students who are strong in some areas, while struggling with other and each student should experience many working arrangements during the course of the school year and work with many of their peers. Ultimately, letting the students decide which groups fits them the best and allowing them to form their own groups.

Lastly, it is important not to base differentiated instruction simply on the quantity. Many teachers practice differentiation in a way that they let students skip certain questions on a test, giving them assignments without certain parts which they find too complex or giving advanced students additional work or additional questions for an assignment. If one finds the assignment too easy and is quick to finish it, additional work will not challenge them enough, it will in fact feel more like a punishment. Same goes for weaker learners; we are not doing them a favor if we are letting them skip essential information and allowing them to continue struggling with certain parts of the curriculum.

So with these situations being what Tomlinson (2001) wants teachers to avoid, she also lists what she wants them to focus on and be guided by.

The main difference when it comes to leading a differentiated classroom and a single-approach classroom is that in the latter, a teacher plans a lesson and then follows the students' reactions and adjusts certain things based on them. While in the former, the teacher proactively plans different approaches to appeal to various types of students. Thereby, in a differentiated classroom, the teacher does not end up surprised or caught off guard, they are prepared and active for the different needs of their students.

Next, a teacher in a differentiated classroom makes the class about the students and lets them to take responsibility for their own learning. That is why many differentiated instruction strategies include students being active and participating in their own learning process, they also make decisions and evaluate themselves. This is due to the fact that a teacher should understand that learning is best when it is "engaging, relevant and interesting" (Tomlinson, 2001, pg.5) and each student finds those things in different activities. That is why some students struggle with certain parts of the curriculum, while thrive with others. Instead of trying to make them learn through certain activities, teachers should let the students learn through their own preferred channels and in that way allow students to take learning in their own hands.

Teachers should asses their students all the time. At the end of a lesson or a unit, always comes a test which should determine how our students acquired the material. In a differentiated classroom, assessment happens every class, through every activity. A teacher monitors how the students are doing, who is struggling with which part, who is bored, who is lost and who needs extra help. A teacher monitors the students and gathers information on them which would be helpful later on when planning other activities and other lessons. They also adjust activities, work, groups and learn more about their students so they can make improvements in the classroom. And them, when time comes for the ''formal'' assessment,

they provide students with more than one way to express what they have learned. This is part of the next differentiated instruction principle: giving student choices.

Tomlinson (2001, pg.4) identifies three important parts for differentiation: content, process and product. Meaning the following: "By differentiating these three elements, teachers offer different approaches to what students learn, how they learn it and how they demonstrate what they've learned." The elements are crucial part of forming many strategies for differentiated instruction and many subsequent works that focus on differentiated instruction are rooted in them (Corley, 2005; Gregory, Chapman, 2013).

3.4.The needs of struggling and advanced learners:

On a wide spectrum of different abilities of students, there are always too ends – the advanced students and the weaker students. While some teachers may think that the needs of a struggling learner are greater due to the fact that they are more obvious and have more serious consequences such as failing the class, advanced learners also have their needs. Since they excel in almost every activity and have no trouble following the curriculum, these needs are often neglected in the flawed, over-crowded educational system. However, neglecting those needs can also have serious consequences for the students. Most importantly, there is evidence (Clark, 1992 in Tomlinson, 2001) that without vigorous use, our brain's capacity weakens and loses its ability. Therefore, if we don't challenge the minds of advanced students, very soon their will start declining instead of excelling.

Another risk is that if we allow our advanced students to perform easy tasks which will earn them a good mark, they will start valuing that mark and praise and won't actually even strive for more difficult work which would be beneficial for their development. According to Tomlinson (2001) they will quickly learn that they ''easy'' and ''safe'' assignments earn

them the title of ‘’the best’’ in class, a title which they will then get used to. They also won’t learn to handle and deal with failure in a healthy manner and won’t understand that it is a normal part of life and learning. The self-esteem they will get from being considered the best will not be a long-lasting feeling of accomplishment if they are constantly doing tasks which are considered ‘’easy’’. Advanced students are also known as not developing adequate learning strategies. When everything they do comes extremely easy and almost naturally for them, they do not see the need for studying, However, as they mature, higher education and more complex schoolwork will require of them to practice or study. They will not only not know how to study, but they will not know how to handle the mere fact that they have to study and it will affect their self-esteem significantly. That is why Tomlinson (2001) suggests that teachers should always raise the expectations for their advanced learners and continually provides them with support for anything that they might consider complex. Advanced learners should be properly challenged, given tasks slightly above their reach and learn to accept that support and help from others does not constitute as failure but as growth.

On the other hand, while the struggles of an advanced student may not be as obvious to teachers in present day to day activities, the struggles of weaker students create a lot of issues for them. They also often can’t keep up with the curriculum, they can’t participate in certain activities, they are slower when it comes to finishing assignments and they often have the bad grades that reinforce their already negative opinion in their abilities. And it is a very easy downfall from being a student who slightly struggles with a certain subject at hand to falling further and further behind until it becomes a major challenge for the teacher and students themselves.

Tomlinson (2001) gives a few guidelines on how to properly deal with struggling learners and help them achieve their maximum potential as best as we can.

One of the most important parts of excelling in a subject is one's motivation. Hence, it is vital that teachers work on motivating the struggling learners and to achieve that, they should avoid constantly making them practice certain tasks which they evidently can't do. This can cause an additional drop in their already low self-esteem and further loss of motivation to do anything related to the subject. A better approach would be to start from the part which they know and which makes them feel good about their own capabilities. Then, teach ''up''. Slowly introduce slightly more out-of-reach assignments and provide a lot of support and encouragements. Remind them of things they already know and can do and practice positive reinforcement. It will not only increase their motivation, but also a sense of self-accomplishment when they discover how they have managed to complete something they initially thought was beyond their ability.

Another important thing to remember is that one student can't possibly be struggling with every part of the curriculum. We all have our weaker and stronger points and when it comes to struggling learners it just a matter of finding what they are good at. When we find them, we allow students to use them to help overcome their difficulties. Teachers should not permit themselves to only see a ''struggling learner'', but rather to find out more about them, how they best learn, how they interact with their peers, what they know and what they need to achieve. Set up goals for them that need to be met by the end of the year and then use scaffolding for planning how they will achieve it. During the process, give them choices for learning and plan various channels for learning based on how the student reacts and the progress you notice.

Struggling learners can often be very difficult discipline wise and reject the teacher's efforts to help them, especially if they've previously had negative experiences and have little faith in themselves and their abilities. It is easy for the teacher to give into that and have an equally distant relationship with such a student as they have with the teacher. However, if our

goal is to help the student, we need to tackle the not so easy task of accepting the student with all their combative ways and not letting them go but giving our best efforts to bring out the best in them (Tomlinson, 2001).

3.5.Strategies

There are no set differentiated instruction strategies. Teachers can plan various activities which can embody all the principles of differentiated instruction and successfully implement them. Sharing certain practices which have had a positive outcome would be a beneficial learning experience for teachers who want to make improvements in their work.

However, some of the strategies which are commonly suggested will be reviewed further on.

The so-called "tiered assignments" (Tomlinson, 2001, pg. 101) are one of the most generally known differentiated instruction strategies. When using them, a teacher gives his or her students an activity which is related in concept, but differs in complexity. The complexity level matches and builds upon their prior knowledge and perpetuates growth. It is based on making differentiated instruction qualitative and challenges students, allowing them to expand concepts and principles which they posses thereby going a step further (Tomlinson, 2001).

"Interest Centers" (Tomlinson, 2001, pg. 100) are a differentiated instruction strategy which can sometimes be hard to organize and therefore is not commonly used in Croatian public schools. The core of this strategy is creating interest centers where students who finish their assignments earlier can come and work either independently or in a group and pursue certain areas which are of special interest to them and therefore expand their knowledge and work on meaningful and challenging tasks. It allows students choice, gives them the freedom

when it comes to their learning, encourages them and the activities can be of personal interest to the students which will help them retain information better.

Another strategy which is not often used, according to research, is "curriculum compacting" (Adlam, 2007, Rodriguez, 2011). The reason why it is not often used is that it requires a lot if preparation time from the teacher and it is especially difficult to exercise when it comes to large classrooms. This strategy involves a three-step process during which a teacher asses a student, determines what they have already mastered, what needs to be mastered and plans an enriched study program to be done during the freed-up time (Tomlinson, 2001). This strategy is important because it actually acknowledges the student's previous skills and they don't have to go through endless practice and drills of content which they have mastered. Therefore, they are provided with additional time to acquire new content and skills and also given the freedom to choose other valuable topics.

Teachers can also use the strategy of "Independent projects" (Tomlinson, 2001, pg. 99) which allows the students to identify a topic of his or her interest and together with the teacher make plans for how to investigate the topic and show the finished product. This strategy can be seen as valuable for increasing student interest and motivation, giving them independence in their own learning and teaching them the importance of self-improvement.

While these strategies are not commonly practices in our classrooms today, research has shown that teacher who differentiate instruction, most commonly use strategies such as "Varying questions" and "Flexible grouping" since they are considered low-preparation strategies (Adlam, 2007, Rodriguzer, 2011).

Flexible grouping has been previously mentioned and it is a strategy where teachers create small groups based on either skills or interest. Groups can be homogenous or heterogeneous when it comes to selected students and their readiness level and that is why the grouping is

‘’flexible’’(Tomlinson, 2001). The teacher sometimes even allows the students to form their own groups or even lets them do the work alone if that is how they work best. This strategy is very easily implemented but at the same time encourages collaborative work, allows students to try out the groups that fit them best, gives them the opportunity to work with many of their peers and see what they can learn from each other.

The “varying questions” strategy also requires very little preparation since it is based on teachers posing different questions to students, forming them according to a particular student’s interest, readiness and learning style (Tomlinson, 2001, pg. 104). The teacher adjusts the complexity level, time needed for a response and abstractness while posing a question, but also allows for the students to build a discussion with each other.

Gardner (1993) also suggested a strategy based on his multiple intelligences theory, and that is using entry points which would provide students to explore a topic through various channels, for example, using numbers, using their hands or body, writing a story, presenting it and other.

Corley (2005, pg.2) also suggests “chunkin” or ‘’breaking assignments and activities into smaller, more manageable parts, and providing more structured directions for each part".

We can see that there are truly various practical ways to use differentiated instruction in the classroom effectively, and teachers can find even more through their work if they are given enough training to enable them to start implementing it.

3.6.Previous research

Research on the topic of the effects of differentiated instruction is not easily found. The reason could be that it requires a long period of time to conduct due to the fact that one should monitor the progress of children throughout the process of learning and developing. Therefore, the theory of differentiated instruction is mostly based on individual theories and child development models and then developed into practice (reference).

As Carol Ann Tomlinson was one of the first people to propose the idea of differentiated instruction in 1999., she also conducted a research which supports the idea of enhanced learning through differentiation (Tomlinson, 1999).

But a thorough investigation into effectiveness of differentiated instruction led me to a research paper presented by the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement published in 2011. The research compares an experimental group of students in an elementary school setting who have received differentiated instruction to a control group who has not. It had three main aims: to substantiate the effectiveness of differentiated instruction; to establish the characteristics of effective differentiated instruction; evaluating the equity and quality dimension of differentiated instruction (Valiande, Kyriakides, Koutselini, 2011). As defined by the authors of the research paper, "equity is the opportunity all groups of students have in a mixed ability classroom, in achieving the maximum concerning the goals of the curriculum, according to personal abilities and competences of each student ensuring equal access to knowledge." (Valiande, Kyriakides, Koutselini, 2011, pg. 5). Quality, on the other hand, refers to the quality of instruction, which would subsequently lead to the equity dimension in education.

The control group consisted of teachers who have received no training on the subjected, not implemented differentiated instruction. And teachers in the experimental group

received training on the main aspects of differentiation, help with transforming this theory into practice and taught to conduct a lesson plan appropriate for all students but also improvise as needed when certain unexpected issues arise during class. The students in the experimental group have shown higher achievement rates than students in the control group. Therefore the results of the study provided empirical data to the theory of differentiated instruction as it has been shown during the experiment that it increases results for all students in the classroom thereby confirming what we know theoretically of differentiated instruction being an effective method for dealing with a mixed ability classroom. This study has also shown that the key to its success is providing teachers with substantial training and support.

Precisely this particular part of the research that focuses on the importance of a teacher's role led me to seek out the attitude of Croatian teachers towards differentiated instruction and mixed ability classrooms in general. Many authors have previously focused on the same topic in their home countries.

As her doctoral dissertation, Alexa Rodriguez, conducted a research that investigated the knowledge teacher's posses about differentiated instruction, how often do they actually use it in specific subjects and which factors can actually help or hinder thus process (Rodriguez, 2012). The participants were elementary and middle school teachers from Midwestern USA. The results have shown that while teachers are familiar with many strategies for using differentiated instruction, they are not using most of them in practice. The reason for this is lack of planning time to prepare differentiated instruction and lack of time to fully implement it in the classroom. One of the author's suggestions was that principals and superintendents provide the teachers with extended planning time, additional resources and support to educate themselves on differentiated instruction strategies (Rodriguez, 2012).

Rodriguez modeled her study after a similar research conducted by Elizabeth Adlam (2007) in Essex, Ontario. It was done on 72 elementary school teachers and again, it has three questions: a) how knowledgeable are teachers with differentiated instruction, b) how often are they using it and c) which factors hinder them from using it? The results were also quite consistent. Even if teachers are familiar with a certain strategy, it does not mean that they will use it in the classroom. What they mostly use are low-preparation strategies, strategies with plenty of resources and also those that they are most confident in. In addition to this, they listed lack of time and lack of materials as one of the things that negatively affect their use of differentiated instruction the most.

Another interesting research was one conducted by Jamie Danzi, Kelly Reul and Dana Smith in 2008. The purpose was to investigate the increase in student motivation in mixed-ability classrooms using differentiated instruction. The participants of the study were students, their parents as well as observers who filled out an Observation Checklist. The results they received show that students feel frustrated in the classroom mainly due to various distractions, boredom and lack of appropriate challenges. The data they collected has also shown that an overwhelming amount of students want to have a choice when it comes to choosing activities and in their own learning. Boredom can have a detrimental effect on student success since previous research (Crump, 1995) has shown that it increases drop-out rates and reduces achievement. It also leads to lower motivation, issue with discipline and overall behavior and an overall negative classroom atmosphere. In this particular research, the authors intervened with the implementation of differentiated instruction and monitored whether there would be a positive change in the amount of classroom disruptions. While the results were not as visible as they had hoped, they did notice a decrease in behaviors such as talking during class and students were better in selecting their free-time activities (Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008).

Another important research area that needs to be mentioned was the education of gifted students in the regular classroom. Daniel Caldwell has conducted a study in 2012 based on identifying the factors which indicate that a teacher would be more likely to differentiate instruction for their advanced students. Prior to his study he had found out that most early research has shown that teachers only slightly modify instruction for their gifted students (Caldwell, 2012).

4. The present study

4.1.Aims

The aim of this study was to determine; how common mixed-level classrooms are in Croatian EFL education; what kind of training did Croatian EFL teachers have on dealing with mixed-ability classrooms; what are some of the factors that hinder teachers from using differentiated instruction; what are the opinions of Croatian EFL teachers on mixed-level classes and differentiating instruction; are Croatian EFL teachers more likely to differentiate instruction with weaker students; are the needs of advanced students neglected in mixed-ability classrooms.

4.2.Research questions:

This purpose of the study was to answer the following questions:

1) How often Croatian EFL teachers encounter mixed-level classrooms?

2) How often do Croatian EFL teachers differentiate instruction?

3) How familiar are Croatian EFL teachers with strategies used to differentiate instruction?

4) What are some of the challenges of Croatian EFL teachers when it comes to practicing differentiated instruction?

4.3.Participants and context

The sample consists of 40 teachers who teach English as a foreign language in Croatian primary and secondary schools, as well as some who teach in private foreign language schools. Out of all the participants, 87% of them were female and 13% of them were male, but it comes as no surprise since in Croatia, teaching is for the most part a female dominated profession.Out of all the EFL teachers who filled out the survey, most of them work in primary schools (66%), while only 29% of participants work in secondary school and 5% in private foreign language schools. As mentioned, admission into secondary school is partly based on children's academic achievements in which English plays a major part. Therefore, at that point classroomsbecome much less mixed when it comes to students' abilities. Foreign language schools mostly sorts their students based on their level and performance so mixed abilities are even less of a problem for them. However, the issue still exists in these institutions and every classroom deals with different abilities, interests and personalities among its students which will be corroborated later on.

The majority of participants had between 5 and 15 years of teaching experience (47%), many of them were young teachers who had less than 5 years (26%), 21% of them were between 15 and 25 years and only 5% over 25 years.

In Croatian education system, all children start learning English as a foreign language from 1st grade when they are approximately 6 or 7 years old, 3 times a week, making it one of

the subjects with most hours per year. Since English is very highly regarded and becoming more and more necessary for any future education and career, many parents are even sending children for additional classes in private foreign language schools. At the end of 8th grade, age 14, children choose their secondary education based on personal preferences but also their past academic performance.

In the public school sector, ELT is driven by common core standards developed to give national consistency (rather than individual diversity). English is also a mandatory subject on the National School-leaving Examination for Secondary Education and in 2014, 31,590 students took the foreign language, and the majority (29,394) opted for English.

4.4.Research method

The survey was created and distributed online, at first via social media and then later on it was sent via e-mail to a random sample of about 50 primary and secondary school teachers. Another 5 participants filled out the questionnaire in person and the final sample had 40 teachers. It took them approximately 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The survey consisted of four parts. The first part comprised three general information questions on the background of the participant; their gender, their work experience and the type of institution where they teach.

The second part consisted of a list of 24 statements which the participants had to rate on a Likert scale in terms of agreement. This part was designed to determine how often teachers encounter differences among their students, whether they practice differentiated instruction and which groups of students are most likely to receive differentiated instruction and more of their attention.

The next part, comprising of 9 statements, focuses on various differentiated instruction strategies. The strategies listed, taken from Carol Ann Tomlinson's work (2001), are considered to be the most effective and meet the necessary criteria for successful differentiation in the classroom. The participants had to rate on a Likert scale between 1 and 5 how familiar are they with the strategies listed.

The last part consisted of 8 open-ended questions which went deeper into the personal thoughts and experiences of teachers on differentiated instruction and mixed ability classes in the Croatian EFL context. The aim was to gain insight into differentiation strategies most commonly used by teachers, the kind of training our teachers received that enabled them to deal with mixed ability classrooms effectively, which students benefited most from differentiated instruction according to their experience, their opinion on the cause of mixed-ability classrooms and what could be some of the implications that derive from children being taught in such an environment.

4.5.The results

When it comes to one the aims and main questions of this research, how often EFL teachers in Croatian schools even encounter mixed-ability classrooms, an overwhelming majority of 87.5% participants admit that they always or often notice that students in their classroom greatly vary in their ability to use English. The remaining 12.5% of them sometimes encounter this situation while none of the participants said that they rarely or never deal with this issue. Further on, expanding on the differences they encounter among their students, once again the majority state that they always or often notice differences in learning styles (72.5%), preferred activities (90%) and preferred learning materials (80%).

When asked whether they generally differentiate instruction when it comes to mixed abilities among their students, 80% answered either always or often, 12.5% sometimes practice it and 3% either rarely or never. Questioning further into the concept of using differentiated instruction and its form revealed that the differences in ability among students play a part with the majority of teachers when planning an activity; 75% always or often take it into account, 20% sometimes take it into account and 5% rarely. However, when asked whether they plan different activities to accommodate the students' different needs and abilities a lesser percentage was noticed; 65% of them answered often or always, while 27.5% sometimes and 7.5% rarely or never. This will be discussed further on with the claims of many of the participants about not having enough preparation time to plan different activities.

The following results mostly deal with what kind of differentiated instruction is practiced and whether teachers are most likely to differentiate in the case of a weaker student or a more advanced student. It also questions whether the EFL classroom is mostly designed for the average student who can keep up with the curriculum. 37.5% of participants stated that they always or often set the complexity level of an activity to be appropriate for the weaker students in the classroom, while only 25% of them did the same for advanced students. As expected the complexity level of an activity is always or often set for the majority of students in the classroom in an overwhelming majority of cases (97.5%).

Similarly, when asked whether they planned different activities for their weaker students 50% of them replied always or often, 42.5% sometimes and 7.5% rarely or never. When asked whether they did the same thing for their advanced students 45% said always or often, 37.5% sometimes and 17.5% rarely or never plan different activities for their advanced students.

These differences between how teachers perceive weaker and stronger students is also noticeable when it comes to delivery of content and assessment; 20% of participants rarely or never differentiate during the process of delivering content to their advanced students in

contrast to the 7.5% who rarely or never differentiate during delivering content to their weaker students. Furthermore, 30% rarely or never differentiate during assessment of their advanced students, while 20% of them rarely or never differentiate during assessment of their weaker learners.

As it was previously explained that differentiated instruction should be based on quality rather than quantity, I wanted to explore -how much Croatian EFL teachers practice such an approach when it comes to EFL classrooms. Therefore, they were asked whether they gave their students more or less assignments based on their level and whether they give students assignments which are more or less complex depending on their level. It does turn out that most EFL teachers do practice a more qualitative approach and 52.5% of participants responded that they do indeed often or always give their more advanced students assignments which are more complex in comparison to the 37.5% of participants who simply give them more assignments. Similar results were gotten when questioning the same practices with weaker students – 57.5% of teachers always or often give them assignments which are less complex and 40% give them fewer assignments.

Next, the results have shown that 72.5% of teachers are confident that when they plan an activity, it is appropriate for the developmental level of every student. However, later on 62.5%, the majority, claim that their more advanced students are sometimes bored with the assignments they hand out to the class and that exact same percentage claim that their weaker students are sometimes lost with those assignments..

Lastly, the teachers were asked about how often they give their students a choice when it comes to choosing activities and materials, the results were quite divided; 27.5% of participants never or rarely practice this, 30% does it often or always and the majority (42.5%) sometimes does this.

In the next part of the survey teachers rated on a Likert scale their familiarity with a specific differentiated instruction strategydefined by from Tomlinson (2001).

The one strategy that was rated by most teachers as very or extremely familiar with (85%) was pre-testing students before the beginning of the school year and basing instruction on the results. Interestingly, a similar strategy, one where a teacher pre-tests students at the beginning of the school year and eliminates instruction in areas where students have demonstrated high competence, was rated as being very or extremely familiar by the smallest number of teachers (42.5%) and as not very familiar and not at all familiar by the highest number of teachers (22.5%).

The ‘’tiered assignments’’ strategy, teachers providing students with multiple assignments that are related in concept, but differ in complexity, has been rated consistently with the previous section of the survey, 55% of the teachers responded that they were extremely or very familiar with it, which is just about the same number who claim they do indeed give their students assignments which are more or less complex, depending on their level. On the other hand, 70% of teachers are extremely or very familiar with the strategy of giving their “early finishers’’ additional assignments of the same type.

Another strategy which was rated by teachers as being extremely or very familiarwas the grouping of students (62.5%) and is the one most frequently employed, according to the qualitative section later on in the survey.

The following strategies were rated by the majority of teachers (55% to 65%) as extremely or vary familiar: „varying the sorts of questions posed to learners, both in discussion and on tests that vary according to their ability, readiness level, interests and learning styles“ (63%); „using materials that vary according to their ability, readiness level, interest and learning styles“ (61%); „independent investigations of a students’ topic of

interest“ (65,9%); „agreements between a student and teacher where certain freedoms are put in place for completing work“ (53,6%).

The last part of the survey consisted of 8 open-ended question which gave the teachers a chance to express their own opinion and share their own experiences of teachingmixed-ability classrooms and using differentiated instruction.

The first question asked them to list three differentiated instruction strategies that they most commonly used in mixed-ability EFL classrooms.Since answering the question was not obligatory, 54% of the participants answered the question, and stated that they used some sort of group work as a differentiated instruction strategy, making it the most commonly used strategy. However, even though varying the sorts of question posed to learners is also a low preparation strategy, only 27% of participants claimed that they used it in various forms such as different oral assessment, simplified language and ‘’chunking the tasks into more digestible steps’’. What was unexpected from my perspective was that the second most commonly used strategy was using different assignments and materials according to students’ abilities, 45% teachers listed it as one of their three most used differentiated instruction strategies. Other strategies most often listed by the participants were initial tests (36%), additional assignments for stronger students (31%) and pairing stronger and weaker students so that the former help the latter (36%). The strategies listed by the smallest number of teachers were agreements between students and their teacher where certain freedoms are put in place for completing work (4.5%), varying material according to students’ interest, learning style and readiness (9%) and independent investigation of students’ topic of interest (9%).

Furthermore, 36% of the participants answered that they paired stronger students with weaker ones for mentorship and help or that their early finishers become teaching assistants.

’’…pairing weaker students with fast finishers who then become my teaching assistants’’

''Mix better students with those that have less abilities.''

''Pairing students of different abilities so the stronger help the weaker.''

''Assigning students tasks in which they take over the roles of mentor/students…''

''…fast finishers helping weaker students''

''…I put them in pairs so one student can help the other.''

Also, more teachers describe how they help their weaker learners in class and how they differentiate instruction when it comes to them:

''standing next to a child who needs help (in any respect) and teaching from wherever that child may be in the classroom''

''Allowing weaker students to use the textbook or the notebook''

''preparing worksheets for weaker students''

''Lowering expectations for lower level students''

''…I sometimes simplify test exercises for weaker students…''

''Additional turuing of weaker students''

''Same tasks – more time for weaker students and extra tasks for stronger students''

One of the participants even admits to focusing more on the weaker students when it comes to using differentiated instruction strategies:

''Unfortunately I usually focus only on the weaker students, because the stronger ones are usually the more autonomous learners.''

Nevertheless some of the participants did respond that they use certain strategies which describe challenging their more advanced students, giving them a choice of a more advanced

textbook or learning material and generally giving students a chance to investigate their own topic of interest and give a presentation.

"All students pick a topic/problem they want to talk/discuss about, and then they research about it and prepare a presentation or a speech and deliver it in front of everyone (this is done throughout the year, so they can do it whenever they're ready)"

"I give different (more complex) material to more capable students when working on a project"

"To early finishers I try giving extra tasks that are a bit more complex"

However, a higher number did list the following strategies:

''additional assignments''

''additional work for advanced students''

''Providing additional assignments for better students, obligatory or not''

''Additional material''

''...extra tasks for stronger students''

''...give additional tasks to certain students...''

''Extra work for advanced students''

This mostly falls under the category of giving advanced students more work and thus making differentiated instruction more about the quantity.

The next question for the participants was ‘"Which challenges do you face when using differentiated instruction in the EFL classroom?'' Of the participants who responded, 38% listed various time constraints as being the main factor hindering them from using

differentiated instruction. In this particular research, in addition to planning time, participants also complained of the duration of one class, 45 minutes, as being too short to actually divide time efficiently between various groups of students.

''1. Not enough time in the classroom 2. Time-consuming preparations''

''It takes a lot of time to plan these classes. I have to prepare for the whole afternoon, so I don't use it as much as I would like to.''

''Preparation is often time consuming, 45 minutes too short…''

''Giving enough time and energy to each group (stronger and weaker) sometimes one of them gets neglected because of insufficient time.''

Not surprisingly, 15% of teachers listed pre-planned curriculum and constrains placed by standardized education. While it may not seem like a significant number, it is the second most listed one. The participants gave interesting personal views on this and it does seem like it is a struggle for them to balance the requirements of the curriculum with monitoring the progress of both their weaker and stronger students.

''Because our exams are standardized for a certain level, it is hard to assess the progress students have made and usually the weaker students always get low grades even though the progress is clearly visible. My worry is that they'll lose motivation because as hard as they may try, the final grade is always a 'D'.''

''…the demand for fairness and law-adherence often forces the teacher to think more about the paperwork than the child,''

''The syllabus – everyone is expected to do the same tasks and assignments.''

When it comes to students loosing motivation, many teachers actually worry about this and some even claim that they do not feel comfortable differentiating instruction precisely

because they fear that labeling their students as ‘’weaker’’ or even ‘’average’’ will lead them to become less confident and motivated to learn. On the other hand, they claim stronger students also lose motivation due to becoming bored with helping weaker students, waiting for them to finish their assignments, slowing down to not get additional work, feeling left out when a teacher has to help a weaker student etc.

‘’What sometimes happens is that stronger students become bored is a teacher must spend more time with weaker students or weaker students become demotivated due to the idea:’Oh, I’ll never be as good as XY why should I even try harder?’ It’s a constant struggle.’’

‘’Hurting my students’ feeling and self-esteem by ‘labelling’ them as ‘weaker’…’’

‘’That stronger students will get bored helping weaker students or will slow down do they don’t get extra tasks.’’

After examining the challenges teachers face when using differentiated instruction, the following question set out to explore whether they had any training any training on dealing with a mixed-level EFL classroom since they obtained their diploma. Out of the 40 participants, the majority, 58% answered negatively and 18 teachers further expanded on this subject. Many of them who did explore the topic further initiated it by themselves, so we get a general idea that it depends on the teachers own desire for personal development and education.

‘’No, I do it myself because I always have to adjust the strategies to students.’’

‘’ No, not yet, but I am investing in my personal development by reading a lot of papers and articles online and attending free webinars.’’

A number of teachers also remarked that they attended seminars or that the topic was brought up on various teacher conferences. However, they did not receive actual practical

advice so as to be able to use strategies in the classroom, which leads us to believe that the topic may be covered in more theoretical sense, instead of actual examples and displays on how a differentiated instruction EFL classroom works and how a teacher can organize it.

''The seminars I attended did not systematically address this topic,''

''No specific focus is given to this area.''

''Not a proper training. The issue has been mentioned oftentimes at various teachers' conferences. It has been discussed about but I can't remember receiving any practical advice or guidelines as to how to deal with this issue.''

''I haven't had any particular training, I went through some course on methodology of foreign languages, but it was not directly related to dealing with a mixed-level classroom.''

''I've been to a number of seminars organized by AZOO with speakers from other countries. However, I cannot say that what they use in their classroom is always transferrable to ours.''

One concept which is very common in Croatian public schools and EFL classrooms are diagnostic tests at the beginning of the school year. However, what I was interested in is how the results of these tests are used when it comes to planning a lesson and instruction. When asked whether the results of these tests impact their teaching, 82% answered affirmatively and 28 teachers chose to further expand on their answer. Almost half of all teachers who answered this question say that the initial test helps them notice certain areas which need more work in class.

''Deciding on the level of help/extra work they need.''

''The results of diagnostic tests help me to pay more attention to the contents which were poorly done.''

''If I decide that some things need revision, I usually spend more time revising before going on with new things.''

''In a way, yes because I know what I have to revise more during the school year.''

They also do not mention eliminating instruction in certain areas of proficiency, but rather focus mostly on the areas which were done poorly. Therefore, it presents the question of whether they use these diagnostic tests to help them to actually differentiate instruction in the classroom. Some teachers even claim that it helped them determine the level of the class and the level of the majority of students.

''I adapt my classes to the majority of students (be it average, advanced or weaker).''

''I know where to start – what level of vocab to use How to explain grammar, basics or not…''

'' I get a general picture/impression of a class as well as of individual students and I know what I can expect.''

''I adjust the exercises and teaching pace depending on how strong the class is.''

''I get an idea of what I might expect for the class and adapt my teaching accordingly.''

A smaller number of participants were upfront with the fact that even though they do diagnostic tests, there is no use of them since classes are not formed based on the results, such as perhaps in some private language schools, and they have to follow the curriculum. From the way the formulated the answers, it is obvious that teachers feel powerless against the restraints of the educational system which is set up too rigidly.

''Yes, but there is no use of them in public schools because we do not form classes according to them.''

''I'm not glad but the honest answer is no – because we have to follow the curriculum.''

''Maybe. I might spend some more time explaining something they didn't know but we have to follow the syllabus and cannot fall behind.''

Further, I set out to explore what Croatian EFL teachers say about who benefits more from differentiated instruction. 57.9% of participants believe that the weakest students benefit the most from differentiated instruction, additional 31.6% responded that it is the average students and only 10.5% were in favor of the strongest students.

15 teachers chose to explain their answer further. For the most part they gave their opinion as to why differentiated instruction applies more to weaker students.

''Adjustments are always made so that [weaker students] manage to complete the class, so they don't fail, so they improve. The good students cause no concern.''

''Strongesst are bored, it would be great to have separate classes.''

''In my experience, teachers usually spend way more energy on trying to provide weaker students with support so they can bridge the gaps in their language and knowledge skills. Advanced learners are often, unfortunately, neglected.''

''Weaker students get more time and assistance from their peers while the average students do not.''

Some of the teachers did acknowledge that differentiated instruction can and should be applied to all students and that is when it becomes the most beneficial.

''They all benefit if done correctly.''

''I think that differentiated instruction is necessary for all groups of students as they benefit more from this type of learning.''

In the following question, they had the chance to give their opinion on what could be the main cause of such differences in students' abilities. The question was answered by 30 of the participants and 56% of them believe that is because of differences in motivationand 66%of them cite ''prior knowledge'' as the cause.

''Prior knowledge is a problem and we know when students have had a bad teacher in elementary school.''

''Combination of motivation and prior knowledge.''

''Prior knowledge and motivation. Students sometimes form an opinion about their ability to learn a language based on their prior knowledge and past experience and that frequently affects their motivation. If they believe that they are not good at English, they tend to put less effort into learning.''

Around 30% of teachers listed ''intelligence'' as one of the factors which influence a child's ability to acquire a foreign language but all of them do agree that only intelligence cannot be the sole influencing factor and it was almost exclusively listed in combination with other social, behavioral and psychological factors.

''Mixed factors – intelligence, prior knowledge, motivation.''

''Intelligence important with more complex exercises or situations. Motivation party. Prior knowledge also very important.''

''In fact, it is a combination of causes, most important being the background, motivation and intelligence.''

Some of the other contributing factors were *''Kids' families''*, *''complex socio-economic factors''*, *''language aptitude''*, *''Exposure to L2''*, *''work habits''* and *''learning strategies''*.

Teachers were also asked of their opinion of what they believed could be some of the possible implications mixed-ability classes could have on teaching English as a foreign language.

''stronger students learn less and weaker students suffer''

''If you don't deal with it the weaker students get stuch, especially after a few years of learning the language.''

Weaker students hold back the rest of the class.''

''It could result in a more limited language learning and drop of motivation for more advanced learners. And vice-versa for weaker students.''

''Less time for creative activities and projects, more sticking to syllabus and working out what's in a textbook/workbook.''

''To make everybody average, which is horrible.''

Some teachers expressed the need for further research and development of techniques which would help them to better handle mixed-ability classrooms. They also do want to be trained in the matter and receive more practical advice.

''...teachers need adequate skills and training. They shouldn't rely on their intuition.''

''Development of teaching methods and techniques.''

''Most classes are mixed-level, so best practice researchers could prove valuable in pointing out certain practical techniques of teaching.''

Lastly, certain teachers believe that mixed-level classrooms can in fact, while challenging, be an ''enriching'' part of learning a foreign language.

''...advanced students can help the weaker ones and this creates a positive environment and cohesion of the group.''

''Make them more interesting and help each other''.

4.6. Discussion of the results

The answers of the participants have shown that the great majority of them have experienced that their students vary greatly in their ability to use English as well as when it comes to their preferred activities, learning materials and learning styles. Considering the relatively high number of teachers who, on a daily basis, teach in a mixed ability classroom, one can say that this is a vital issue in EFL methodology (Tomlison, 2001). From their answers, it seems that teachers use certain forms of differentiated instruction; however, going deeper into their practice, it is evident that they need further instruction on the benefits and implementation of differentiated instruction on a day-to-day basis.

What was noticed were certain inconsistencies in some of the results which can make us consider the possibility of the participants responding with desirable answers. The reason being is that the results show72.5% of them are confident that the activity is appropriate for the developmental level of every student while planning it. However, later on 62.5%, the majority, admit that their more advanced students are sometimes bored with the assignments they hand out to the class and that exact same percentage claim that their weaker students are sometimes lost with those assignments. It could be that when they plan an activity they think that it would be appropriate for every student, butwhen actually handed out to the students it is proven different. However, it could also mean that they responded with what they had considered to be an appropriate answer in the first question. What was also surprising in this question was the large number of teachers who claim to be confident that one activity is

appropriate for the developmental level of every student when it was established earlier that their students vary significantly in their ability to use English, therefore one activity cannot possibly be appropriate for every one of them (Gregory & Chapman, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014).

In the qualitative section of the research, teachers again mentioned that the majority of classes are mixed-level.Once that is established, one can assume that overcoming the challenge of teaching in such a setting is an important part of their job and teachers should be adequately trained in it. However, once again the majority of them claim that theyhave not received any training on the topic since they graduated, and those who did have mostly initiated it themselves. It can be concluded that this is an area that is quite neglected when it comes to educating EFL teachers and future teachers. Nevertheless, when their familiarity with various differentiated instruction strategies was questioned, a majority of them has shown that they are quite knowledgeable on them, what I believe they need is more training on their usage and implementation in the classroom as well as more support from their superiors.

Previous research has shown that teachers mostly use low preparation strategies (Adlam, 2003) such as varying questions and flexible grouping. Therefore, similar results were expected this time as well. As we have seen from the analysis of the results, over half of them are familiar with the strategy of "tiered assignments" or giving their students assignments which vary in complexity, however, according to the open-ended portion many of them did not list it as one of their three most used strategies, but they did list ''additional assignments'' for early-finishers. Furthermore, the teachers have shown that while most of them are familiar with pre-testing students, a surprisingly low number of them are familiar with using this strategy to eliminate instruction in areas where the students have demonstrated high competence. These are some of the examples which show us that teachers can be familiar with a certain teaching strategy but not be adequately trained in using it in the classroom or using it efficiently.

In addition to this, one of the purposes of the study was to question how often did teachers use differentiated instruction in Croatian EFL classrooms and in the first portion the majority of participants did respond that they taught differently to different level students. However, as already mentioned, when further questioned whether their stronger students felt bored or their weaker students feel lost, over half of them responded that that is sometimes the case. Once again, we are left wondering how often and how efficiently they differentiate instruction, especially when we take a look at the fact that almost all of them claim that they, for the most part, choose activities that are appropriate for the majority of students in their classroom. This could be related to teachers finding the use of differentiated instruction challenging due to certain factors which are beyond their control. For example, many of them claim that time, or rather lack of it, hinders them from using it as much as they would like to. The preparation is time-consuming, 45 minute classes are too short to dedicate themselves to various students' needs and they face up to 20-30 children in one classroom which overextends them greatly. They have also described our system as being too standardized and rigid which is certainly a problem if we want differentiated instruction to be successfully implemented. It stresses out the importance of additional support from the superiors and also providing teachers with the designated time to plan these activities and lessons. Since previous research (Adlam, 2007; Rodriguez, 2011) has also shown the same challenges, they recommended that administrators assign specific times, possibly through weekly meetings, where teachers can learn more about the topic, share experiences and plan their lessons, so that it is not expected of them during their off-work time (Rodriguez, 2011).

Another important question that was investigated during this research was whether advanced students' needs are being met in the Croatian EFL system. They are often considered "the teacher's pet" but in addition to being indulged and praised for their work, they also need to be properly challenged so that they can develop their skills. When the

participants were asked about when and how they differentiated instruction, in both the case of delivering content and assessing the students, teachers tend to differentiatewith their weaker learners more often than with their advanced learners. Previous research has also shown that when it comes to educating gifted students, only minor modifications are being made by teachers in the regular classroom (Caldwell, 2012). This is somewhat consistent with the results of this study considering the fact that during the open-ended part, only a few of the teachers mentioned that they had raised the complexity level for advanced students. Most of them occasionally gives them additional tasks or uses them to help and tutor weaker students since those are the ones who take up the most of teacher's time and effort. One of the open ended questions was set up to explore precisely what Croatian EFL teachers say on this topic and who did they believe benefits more from differentiated instruction. 57.9% of participants believe that the weakest students benefit the most from differentiated instruction, additional 31.6% responded that it is the average students and only 10.5% were in favor of the strongest students. 15 teachers chose to explain their answer further. What was expected and what did prove to be the main idea behind the majority of their answers is that teachers put more effort into helping the weakest student get a passing grade. They are the ones who usually need a lot of help from the teacher or their peers, while the more advanced students are very autonomous and require little help, especially if the assignments which are given are below their level. Some teachers even admitted that advanced students are ''neglected'' or ''bored''. One concept which is very common in Croatian public schools and EFL classrooms are diagnostic tests at the beginning of the school year. However, what I was interested in is how the results of these tests are used when it comes to planning a lesson and instruction. When asked whether the results of these tests impact their teaching, 82% answered affirmatively and 28 teachers chose to further expand on their answer. What I expected was that these results would be mostly used to identify the areas which need more revising and this did indeed

prove to be the most common purpose of them. Almost half of all teachers who answered this question say that the initial test helps them notice certain areas which need more work in class. Also, the one strategy that was rated by most teachers to be very or extremely familiar with (85%) was pre-testing students before the beginning of the school year and basing instruction on the results. Interestingly, a similar strategy, one where a teacher pre-tests students at the beginning of the school year and eliminates instruction in areas where students have demonstrated high competence, was rated as being very or extremely familiar by the smallest number of teachers (42.5%) and as not very familiar and not at all familiar by the highest number of teachers (22.5%). While the strategies are similar, this once again shows that teachers are not as likely to focus and differentiate instruction when it comes to more advanced learners. Going through these results, one gets the impression that, based on the results, EFL teachers identify the level of the majority of the class and then plan their instruction. They also do not mention eliminating instruction in certain areas of proficiency, but rather focus mostly on the areas which were done poorly. Hence, we can conclude that teachers for the most part do not use these tests to identify different levels of students so they can more easily adapt to their different needs, but rather to get a picture of the class as a whole. This makes it so that they are in fact ”teaching to the middle” with both weaker and stronger students being sacrificed in the process (Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008). From this research it seems as though the teachers had noticedthis, since some of their comments give away that they are not happy with having to follow the curriculum and not having the time to actually devote themselves to the individual needs of their students. Some of the comments also suggest that they think mixed-level classrooms are going to make *''everybody average''* or that *'''it would be great to have separate classes''* which comes to show that they can also be frustrated with the situation.

In the following questions, the participants had the chance to give their opinion on what could be the main cause of such differences in students' abilities. 30 participants answered this question and 17 of them believe that is because of differences in motivation and 20 of them cite ''prior knowledge'' as the cause. It almost seems as though these two factors are quite connected in fact. If a child had trouble during the first few years of studying a foreign language and they ended up falling behind even further, once they enter higher grades they have very low self-esteem which effects their motivation to learn at all (Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008).

What was particularly interesting was that the majority of teachers find that motivation is one of the main causes for mixed-level classes. When in fact, if used correctly, differentiated instruction is an efficient tool for improving student motivation(Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008). However, many teachers even claim that they do not feel comfortable differentiating instruction precisely because they fear that labeling their students as ''weaker'' or even ''average'' will lead them to become less confident and motivated to learn. On the other hand, they claim stronger students also lose motivation due to becoming bored with helping weaker students, waiting for them to finish with their assignments, slowing down to not get additional work, feeling left out when a teacher has to help a weaker student etc. If we look at the research and literature on mixed-ability classrooms, we can see that more often than not alack of motivation stems precisely from boredom as well as ''lack of educational success'' (Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008). Therefore, when students are not completing tasks or keeping up with their peers who easily and quickly finish that same work, they lose their motivation for any future work and the subject in general. Then, those same motivational problems are what further perpetuate the differences between the students. This is why it is important that teachers plan activities which are interesting to their students but also adapted to their level and which they can actually successfully complete (Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008).

The literature also suggests that each child has a Zone of Proximal Development, a zone where a student is comfortable with challenging work with the right support. This is where scaffolding takes place and where they can develop the most (Morlock& Morrison, 1999 in Danzi, Reul, Smith, 2008). Not only does their learning expand, but they also feel successful when they manage to complete the task and it subsequently increases their motivation.

What was not explored in this research was the connection between teachers' familiarity with the strategies and the frequency of use. I did notice that teachers who have had training on differentiated instruction do tend to be more familiar with the strategies in the second portion of the survey and some of them do practice differentiated instruction in a more qualitative and efficient ways, giving students more freedom when it comes to learning. They also seem more likely to recognize that differentiated instruction benefits all groups of students, not just the weaker. However, since the open-ended question were not mandatory, there is no clear picture of how training would affect teachers'perspectives of mixed-level classroom. Previous research (Adlam, 2007, Rodriguez, 2011) has shown that while teachers may be familiar with a certain strategy does not mean that they will actually use it. It could be due to not feeling confident enough or because of all the factors that hinder them from implementing differentiated instruction. Therefore further research should be done to explore the connection between receiving training on the subject and the effective strategy use in the classroom. Also, while the teachers do list factors which prevent them from using differentiated instruction, I would suggest any future studies also focus on factors which would help them implement it effectively.

Teachers were also asked of their opinion of what they believe could be some of the possible implications mixed-ability classes could have on teaching English as a foreign language. I find this question to be of extreme importance due to the fact that many Croatian children only have the opportunity to learnEnglish throughout their 12-yeareducation. Do

Croatian EFL teachers believe that because of mixed-ability classrooms, learning English through the public school system is low quality or even hinders some children from reaching proficiency? It does seem like some teachers might agree with this sentiment judging by the statements they made. This is a concerning fact when we consider that English has a status of a global language and hasbecomea global lingua franca (Crystal, 2003), therefore being vital for future careers, higher education and traveling. The responsibility for them reaching their maximum lies entirely in the hands of educators and school administrators, who need to understand that every student is an individual with their own unique set of needs that should be met.

4.7.Concluding remarks

It seems as though teachers do need additional training to help them deal with mixed-ability classrooms in a way that neither weaker nor stronger students lose their motivation and differences between them are not stressed or perpetuated, which to me at this point seems like a major concern and struggle for them. If Croatian EFL teachers were to receive adequate training in differentiated instruction and were given the right support and freedom to actually practice it, it could enable them to see that mixed-level classrooms don't have to be a negative thing and there is a solution to the challenges they bring.

One of the limitations of this study was that ithad a relatively small sample of participants which perhaps doesn't provide us with a whole picture of the Croatian educational system. However, the experiences of the 40 teachers who participated do say a lot about how they view differentiated instruction and how much teacher education programs have prepared themfor the reality of a mixed-ability classroom. And while I do recommend further research which could potentially explore the positive effects of receiving training on differentiated

instruction on its implementation in the classroom and the success of students, I believe that even a small study such as this one shows as that the area has been neglected by TEFL training programs, and public education in general. Hopefully, these findings could contribute towards designing more relevant curricula for MA in TEFL programmes and in-service teacher training and development programs in our country, which should dedicate more time to the topic of differentiated instruction.

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