EXPLORING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS: INSIGHTS FROM NOVICE EFL TEACHERS DURING THEIR INDUCTION PERIOD

(Research article)

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of newly graduated English language and literature teachers in Montenegro during their induction period in primary and secondary schools, focusing on the implementation of differentiated teaching to develop specific language skills. Twelve novice teachers were divided into four groups, each targeting a different skill—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—working across different education levels and regions. Novice teachers collaborated with experienced mentors who provided support in planning and executing differentiated tasks. Data was collected through a questionnaire, highlighting both the challenges and benefits of differentiated instruction and its impact on student achievement. Research shows that differentiated teaching, when backed by comprehensive mentoring programs, can significantly improve students' language skills and support teachers' professional development. This method enables educators to customize their instructional strategies to meet each student's individual needs, although a consistent lack of time and insufficient resources obstruct its effective implementation. Mentoring was identified as essential, offering guidance, practical strategies, and emotional support to novice teachers. The study further emphasizes the need for improved university training, especially regarding practical techniques and mentoring strategies, as well as the integration of modern technologies into the teaching process. Tools like Moodle, Padlet, Kahoot, and Google Classroom offer opportunities for flexible grouping, real-time feedback, and differentiated tasks, yet further research is needed to explore their application across education levels. It is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted to track the long-term effects of differentiated teaching and that stronger university-school cooperation be established to create real-life practice conditions and promote the sharing of best practices and materials for diverse language learning contexts.

*Keywords***:** Differentiated teaching, language skills, novice teachers, mentoring

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has occupied a key place in the education system of Montenegro for the last few decades, which is the result of the ever-greater significance of English as a global means of communication. As a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools, English is learned within formal education with the aim of developing pupils' language competencies, which will enable them the possibility of further education, professional development and cultural exchange. However, given that pupils have different levels of previous knowledge, different learning styles and motivation, the need arises to apply innovative and inclusive approaches, such as differentiated teaching.

Differentiated teaching, as a pedagogical approach which recognises and responds to pupils' individual needs, is a challenge, but is also essential in the context of foreign language teaching. This approach requires the tailoring of the teaching methods, lesson contents and learning outcomes to each pupil, endeavouring to maximise their abilities and to improve their engagement in the process of learning (Tomlinson, 2014). In the teaching context of Montenegro, differentiated teaching has special significance because of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the pupils, as well as because of growing initiatives, such as the introduction of bilingual teaching according to the CLIL methodology, which has been implemented in primary schools across the country since the 2024/25 academic year.

Besides the challenges that experienced teachers face in applying differentiated teaching, it is particularly meaningful to examine the experiences of novices – recent English language and literature graduates – who during their induction period deal with transitioning from a theoretical to a practical framework. The induction period is a crucial phase in teachers' professional development, offering them the opportunity to test the theoretical knowledge they acquired at university in real-life teaching situations (Richards & Farrell, 2011). During this period, novices develop professional competencies, face the challenges of planning and realising lessons, as well as the specificities of applying differentiated methods in developing language skills.

This paper focuses on the experiences of 12 novice teachers of English language and literature in Montenegro, who during their induction period worked on developing one of the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) using differentiated teaching. Through cooperation with their mentors – experienced English teachers – and analysis of their teaching practices, the research attempts to offer an insight into the challenges, advantages and key aspects of differentiated instruction in the EFL context in Montenegro. In addition to this, the study examines the role of university-based preparation and mentoring in equipping novice teachers to successfully face complex teaching contexts.

The results of this research not only contribute to an understanding of the application of differentiated instruction in the EFL context but also highlight the significance of continuous support in teachers' professional development, providing a basis for the improvement of teaching practice and the encouragement of quality English language teaching in Montenegro.

2. **Theoretical Framework**

   2.1. Differentiated Teaching: Definition, Principles and Significance in Teaching Language Skills

Differentiated teaching is a pedagogical approach which attempts to respond to the various needs of pupils by adapting the lesson contents, processes, environments and outcomes of learning. The aim is to enable every pupil to realise their full potential, taking into account their individual differences in abilities, interests and learning styles (Tomlinson (2014). Recent studies, such as Khan and Khan (2023), have shown that differentiated instruction significantly improves language acquisition in mixed-ability TEFL classrooms, highlighting its effectiveness in diverse educational contexts.

The basic principles of differentiated instruction include:

- **Flexible grouping**: Pupils, from time to time, are put into different groups depending on the task or the level of knowledge or interest, which enables dynamic interaction and learning.
- **Continuous assessment**: Teachers regularly monitor the improvement of pupils through formal and informal methods of evaluation, adapting their teaching based on the gathered data.
- **Modification of lesson contents and processes**: Materials and activities are modified so as to be appropriate to different levels of pupil preparedness and interest.
- **Diverse ways of expression**: Pupils are offered the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge in different ways, according to their preferences and strengths.

In the context of teaching language skills, differentiated instruction enables teachers to tailor activities, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking, to the pupils' different levels of language competency. For example, during listening exercises, the teacher can use audio materials of different difficulty levels or enable pupils to select between several subjects they are interested in. Such an approach not only increases pupils' engagement levels but also improves their learning effectiveness.

   2.2. Specific Nature of Teaching Language Skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing)

Teaching language skills demands the understanding of the specific characteristics of each skill and the modification of teaching strategies to achieve the optimum learning outcomes. Tajik, Noor and Golzar (2024) emphasize that integrating technology and collaborative learning strategies into differentiated instruction frameworks can effectively address the diverse needs of learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This approach should also be considered when planning differentiated strategies for language skills activities in the classroom.

- **Listening**: As a receptive skill, listening requires the pupil to understand and interpret spoken language. Effective teaching strategies include the use of authentic audio materials, exercises focused on recognising key information and the development of critical listening skills.

- **Speaking**: The development of speaking skills involves encouraging pupils to actively use language through discussions, presentations and simulations of real-life situations. Teachers can use techniques such as role-playing or debate activities to increase pupils' self-confidence in speaking.
- **Reading**: The teaching of reading includes the development of skills of decoding, understanding and analysing a text. Strategies such as content prediction, identification of the main ideas and critical evaluation can help pupils to improve their reading abilities.
- **Writing**: Writing requires pupils to organise their thoughts and express them coherently. The process of writing can be supported through the phases of planning, drafting, revision and editing, with constructive feedback given by the teacher.

Understanding these specificities enables teachers to plan and realise teaching more effectively, adapting it to the needs and abilities of their pupils.

2.3. The Role of Mentors in Training Novice Teachers

Mentoring is a crucial component of novice teachers' professional development, offering them support, guidelines and feedback during their initial period of teaching. Mentors, as experienced teachers, help novices to bridge the gap between theory and practice, making it easier for them to adapt to the school environment and teaching obligations.

According to research by Mijušković (2024), effective mentoring contributes to the development of novices' professional competencies, especially in areas such as lesson planning, classroom management and applying differentiated teaching strategies. The author states that "quality support from a mentor enables novices to develop reflective practices and a critical approach to their own work", which is vitally important for their professional growth.

Mentors' key roles include the following:

- **Modelling**: Demonstration of effective teaching practices and professional behaviour.
- **Observation and feedback**: Monitoring the work of novices and offering constructive suggestions for improvement.
- **Support in planning**: Help in creating lesson plans and materials tailored to the different needs of pupils.
- **Emotional support**: Offering encouragement and help in dealing with stress and the challenges of the teaching profession.

2.4. Practical Application of the Theory of Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom

Differentiated instruction in the classroom is the process of modifying teaching strategies and materials to respond to the diverse needs of pupils. This approach enables teachers to cover the diversity of knowledge levels, learning styles, interests and aims of the pupils, increasing engagement and achieving better learning outcomes. Khan, Ayub and khan (2020) discovered that implementing differentiated instruction in English writing tasks particularly enhances student autonomy, enabling learners to make more independent choices in their writing processes. This aligns with the potential for increased independence across all language skills, as the differentiated

instruction model is applicable to all areas of language learning, not just writing (Mijušković, 2024).

In practice, differentiated teaching can be applied in the following ways:

- **Modification of teaching contents:** Teachers can provide various types of texts and audio and video materials, which are appropriate to the interests and knowledge levels of the pupils. For example, in a reading lesson, pupils can select texts which vary in terms of difficulty level, subject or genre, encouraging their motivation and development of skills.
- **Flexible grouping:** A classroom organised according to the principles of differentiated instruction often involves group activities. Groups can be formed based on competency level, interest or specific tasks. For example, in speaking lessons, pupils with a higher level of language competency can practise more complex scenarios, such as giving interviews, while pupils with a lower level of skill can work on basic communication.
- **Different paths to learning goals:** Teachers give the pupils freedom to choose how to demonstrate their knowledge. For example, within writing exercises, some pupils can write essays, while others can make digital presentations or write a blog. Such flexibility increases pupils' autonomy and enables personalisation of teaching.
- **Use of technology:** Digital platforms offer the opportunity to additionally modify lessons, enabling pupils to work on activities at their own tempo. Online quizzes, applications for language practice and video lessons modified to individual needs contribute to the integration of theory into practice.

A study by Mijušković (2024) points out that differentiated instruction is being successfully implemented in classrooms in Montenegro, but emphasises the importance of training teachers to be able to plan and implement this approach. In addition, research studies, such as those carried out by Tomlinson (2014) and Gregory & Chapman (2013), confirm that this approach is being particularly effectively applied in the development of language skills, because it enables pupils of different levels of competency to improve in line with their potential.

Introducing the theory of differentiated instruction in the classroom requires not only training of the teachers, but also continuous evaluation of its effect on pupils. Monitoring the progress of pupils by means of formative assessment, teacher reflection and cooperation with colleagues are key elements for successful application of this approach. In this way, differentiated instruction not only improves the process of learning, but also creates a classroom in which each pupil has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

3. Method

3.1. Research Aim

The goal of this research is to assess the effectiveness of the application of differentiated teaching in the development of language skills among primary and secondary school pupils in Montenegro. The research will offer an insight into how novice teachers are applying strategies of differentiated teaching by analysing how these approaches affect the achievements of pupils in

four key language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This aim of the research is to identify the challenges and advantages that teachers encounter in the implementation of a differentiated approach, as well as the effect it has on pupils' engagement and language competency. According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiated instruction has the aim of responding to the different learning styles and needs of students, which is particularly important in the context of foreign language teaching. A differentiated approach does not mean only tailoring the tasks to pupils with different levels of knowledge, but also includes changing the approach to motivation, subjects and learning strategies.

3.2. Participants

The research was carried out with 12 novice teachers divided into four groups, with each group working on the development of one of the four language skills, using differentiated teaching. The participants were students of English language and literature who had graduated from the Faculty of Philology of the University of Montenegro, and they were arranged into four different education contexts.

Each of the groups worked on specific language skills and was arranged into different regions and education cycles of learning English language:

- **Group 1**: Northern region, primary school, first cycle – focus on developing listening skills.
- **Group 2**: Fourth grade of general secondary school (gymnasium) – focus on speaking and developing verbal communication abilities.
- **Group 3**: Southern region, primary school, second cycle – focus on reading and analysis of written texts.
- **Group 4**: Central region, primary school, third cycle – focus on writing and developing skills of expression in writing.

This arrangement of participants enables analysis of the specific problems and advantages of differentiated teaching in different education cycles and language contexts. As stated in Brown (2007), the specific characteristics of each education level and type of language skill requires modified methods and techniques in teaching. In primary schools, for example, pupils are usually in the phase of developing basic language skills, while those in general secondary schools (gymnasiums) often are developing deeper language abilities which include more complex syntax and vocabulary.

3.3. Research Instruments

For gathering data about the application of differentiated teaching and its effect on the language skills of pupils, the research used two main instruments: a questionnaire for novice teachers; and a mentoring report.

3.3.1. Questionnaire for novice teachers

The questionnaire was designed to gather data about the experiences of novice teachers in implementing differentiated teaching. The questionnaire contains questions about lesson planning, challenges faced during application of differentiated strategies, as well as the perception of teachers regarding the effects of these methods on the pupils.

The questionnaire for novice teachers was designed to gather information about the experiences of teachers during the application of differentiated teaching in classrooms. This instrument contains four main sections, each with specific questions relating to different aspects of implementing a differentiated approach in teaching. In the following text there is a detailed analysis of each section of the questionnaire, its aims and the types of questions which are asked.

The first section of the questionnaire contains basic demographic information which enables the researcher to gain an insight into the context in which the novice teachers have been implementing differentiated teaching. This section consists of four questions relating to basic demographic data about the context in which the teachers completed their induction. The question related to the region enables analysis of how regional specificities, such as education resources and socio-cultural characteristics, affect the implementation of differentiated teaching. Also, the question about the type of school enables us to have a look at how different levels of education, from primary to secondary school, can demand different approaches in the application of the methodology. For example, working with primary and secondary schoolchildren can differ significantly because of the different language skills and needs of pupils.

The question regarding the grade the teachers were working with enables precise location of the education cycle and enables us to follow the way differentiated strategies are applied for different levels of knowledge and skills. Also, the question about the number of pupils in the group helps us analyse how group size affects the application of differentiated methods, because larger groups can require a specific approach in organising lessons and allocating tasks. These facts are crucial to understanding how various factors, such as region, type of school, grade and number of pupils, can shape the implementation of differentiated teaching.

The second section of the questionnaire focuses on the actual techniques teachers applied in the classroom, as well as the challenges they faced. The first question examines which specific techniques of differentiated teaching the teachers used, including group work, individualised tasks, selection of the task's difficulty level by the pupil and the use of different materials. This question helps the researcher to identify which strategies are most often applied and which have proven to be most effective in different educational environments. Also, it enables analysis of how application of these techniques affects the level of engagement and achievement of the pupils.

The second question asks the teachers to explain how they modified the tasks for pupils with different language levels, which enables more detailed understanding of how the theory of differentiated teaching is being applied in practice. The third question examines the challenges the teachers faced, such as problems with classroom dynamics, a lack of materials and planning time, offering an insight into the obstacles that make application of differentiated methods more difficult. The final question focuses on support from the mentor, researching to what extent

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mentoring helped teachers in applying differentiated teaching, which is crucial for successful implementation of new approaches in teaching. This section of the questionnaire had the goal of gathering data about the techniques used by the teachers, the challenges they faced, as well as the support they had from their mentors.

Section 3 of the questionnaire is directed at assessing the effect of differentiated teaching on the pupils' achievements, with the goal of researching how different teaching strategies affect the pupils. The first question asks the teachers to assess the effect of differentiated teaching on the pupils' achievements in the selected language skill.

The second question enables the teachers to assess whether the pupils mastered the specific language skill (listening, speaking, reading, writing) better after application of differentiated teaching. Based on their responses, the researcher is able to analyse the effects of differentiated strategies in the context of actual language skills. The third question focuses on changes in the behaviour and engagement of the pupils, such as their motivation, activity in class and mastery of the lesson content. These questions help understanding of how differentiated approaches affect pupils' engagement, which is crucial for evaluation of the success of the methodology. The overall goal of this section of the questionnaire is to gather detailed assessments from the teachers about the effect of differentiated teaching on pupils and changes in their behaviour and engagement.

The final section of the questionnaire focuses on cooperation with the mentor, which is crucial for successful implementation of differentiated teaching. The first question asks the teachers to describe how their mentor supported their work in the classroom. These responses enable analysis of the role of mentors in their training and in the implementation of the methodology. The second question gives teachers the opportunity to provide suggestions on how to improve mentoring support, which can contribute to the strengthening of mentoring in future training.

The goal of this section of the questionnaire is to gather data about the effectiveness of mentoring support in the application of differentiated teaching and to identify the areas in which the mentor might be able to additionally help novice teachers.

3.3.2. Mentors' reports

Mentors – experienced English teachers – submitted reports about the progress of their novices and the effectiveness of differentiated teaching in the classroom. The mentors monitored the way the novices applied strategies, but also the way the pupils reacted to the modified tasks. These reports provide useful feedback about the actual challenges in implementing a differentiated approach and can help in the further training of future teachers. In accordance with Brewster & Ellis (2010), mentors' reports can serve as a valuable source of data for analysis of the effectiveness of teaching and how it can be further improved.

A mentor's report, as a research instrument, has a crucial role in analysing the experiences of novice teachers in implementing differentiated teaching. The aim of this report is to provide a detailed insight into how the novice has applied differentiated teaching, to identify the challenges they faced and to assess the effect of these methods on pupils' performances. Given the importance

of mentoring within the process of professional development, the report serves as a means for assessing the progress of the novice, but also as a tool of further improvement of their teaching skills. To assure a high quality of the mentor's report, it is important to use guidelines and approaches which have proven to be effective in the literature, such as those provided by Tomlinson (2001) regarding differentiated teaching and by Borko and Putnam (1996) regarding the role of the mentor in teachers' professional development.

In the report, several key aspects are analysed, such as the type of tasks the novice set for the pupils, the application of differentiated teaching, the challenges the novice faced, as well as the effect on pupils' performance. This instrument enables the gathering of information about how the novice applied techniques such as group work, individualised tasks, use of different materials and the tailoring of the tasks according to the language levels of the pupils (Tomlinson, 2001). Through assessing the effect of differentiated teaching, the mentor can provide feedback which will help identify the strengths and weaknesses of the novices, which is essentially important for their further professional development – this is confirmed by Borko and Putnam (1996), who emphasise the crucial role of mentors in professional development.

Based on the mentor's report, the mentor can formulate recommendations for the novice's further professional development, which includes improving the application of differentiated teaching and directing the novice towards identifying challenges. Recommendations can include tangible support in applying specific methods or recommendations for improving teaching in the future, bearing in mind the specific needs of pupils and the education context (Topping & Ehly, 1998). Alongside all this, the report enables mentors to suggest further work with the novices and to develop their competencies in working with differentiated approaches, as stated in the literature dealing with effective practices of mentoring and professional development (Allen, T. D., & Eby, L. T. (Eds.). (2007).

3.4. Analysis of Gathered Data

The information gathered from the questionnaire and the mentors' reports is analysed qualitatively. Qualitative analysis enables deeper understanding of how and why certain strategies of differentiated teaching function in certain education contexts. The method of thematic analysis is used, which involves identification of the key themes and patterns in the responses of teachers and mentors.

Thematic analysis is used to cover the different perspectives of participants and to analyse:

- Problems in implementing differentiated teaching in different language skills.
- Advantages that teachers observed regarding pupil engagement through the modified tasks.
- Differences in the learning methods used in different education cycles and regions.

Qualitative analysis enables the researcher to observe nuances in the data and to identify the specific challenges the teachers faced in practice. In education research, according to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2018), qualitative data provides rich information that is not available through quantitative analysis. This approach enables the researchers to more deeply research interaction between teaching methods and pupils' reactions.

The methodology of this research enables detailed examination of the application of differentiated teaching in the education contexts of Montenegro. The combination of questionnaires and mentors' reports as instruments for gathering data provides a comprehensive insight into the practices of novice teachers. Qualitative analysis enables deeper understanding of the challenges and advantages of applying differentiated strategies in English language teaching.

4. Results

In this section we present the results of research directed towards analysis of the experiences of novice teachers in applying differentiated teaching, the challenges they faced, the success in developing the selected language skill, the effect of mentoring on their professional development and the effect on pupils' achievements according to the teachers' feedback.

4.1. Analysis of the Novice Teachers' Responses

By analysing the responses of novice teachers to the questionnaire about differentiated teaching, it was established that the most frequently applied techniques included group work, individualised tasks, selection of text difficulty by the pupil, and then the use of different materials, such as audio-visual contents and texts of different difficulty levels. These strategies enabled the teaching to be adapted to the different needs of pupils, which was crucial for successful implementation of differentiated teaching.

The teachers also spoke about the challenges they faced during application of differentiated teaching. The greatest challenges were difficulties in managing classroom dynamics, a lack of appropriate materials, a lack of time for planning and then difficulties in assessing pupils' achievements. These challenges point to a need for additional support and resources to make implementation of differentiated teaching easier.

4.2. Challenges in Applying Differentiated Teaching

The challenges in applying differentiated teaching cover several crucial areas. According to research studies, a lack of appropriate materials and time for planning are often cited as obstacles in applying differentiated teaching. These challenges can negatively affect the quality of teaching and require additional support and resources for them to be overcome. Additionally, research studies show that, for successful implementation of differentiated teaching, continuous professional development of the teachers is crucial. The teachers who participate in programmes of professional development are better prepared to face challenges in teaching and to apply differentiated strategies more effectively.

4.3. Success in Development of the Selected Language Skill

According to feedback from teachers, application of differentiated teaching had a positive effect on the development of the selected language skill in the pupils. Teachers observed progress in mastering language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. These improvements

point to the effectiveness of differentiated teaching in adapting teaching to the needs of pupils and encouraging development of their language abilities.

However, it must be mentioned that the results varied depending on the conditions that existed in the classroom, such as group size, the resources available to the teachers and previous experience in applying differentiated teaching.

4.4. The Effect of Mentoring on Novice Teachers' Professional Development

Mentoring has a crucial importance in novice teachers' professional development. According to available sources, mentoring enables novices to gain practical experience, develop their teaching skills and receive feedback that is crucial for their professional development. Mentors provide support in lesson planning, classroom management and application of different teaching strategies, including differentiated teaching. This support helps novices face challenges in teaching and develop their professional competencies.

4.5. Pupils' Achievements and the Study's Limitations

According to feedback from the teachers, application of differentiated teaching had a positive effect on pupils' achievements. The teachers noticed increased motivation in pupils, greater activity in class and better mastery of the lesson contents. These results indicate the effectiveness of differentiated teaching in encouraging pupil engagement and improving their academic achievements. The study provides valuable insights, but it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, the small sample size of twelve novice teachers limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused specifically on the education system in Montenegro, which may differ from other regional or international contexts. Furthermore, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires and mentor reports, both of which may be influenced by personal bias or subjective perceptions. Moreover, the research did not include direct observations of classroom practices or student assessments, which could have offered a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of differentiated teaching. Despite these limitations, the results remain valuable, especially considering the widespread distribution of novice teachers across various schools and regions. This research should be viewed as a pilot study that highlights both the strengths and challenges of implementing differentiated instruction. It sets the stage for future, more comprehensive investigations, potentially at the regional project level. Future research should aim to expand the sample size, employ mixed methods, and include longitudinal follow-ups to better understand the long-term effects of differentiated instruction on language skill development. However, it is necessary to carry out new research to understand in more detail the specific factors influencing the effect that differentiated teaching has on pupils' achievements, including teacher competencies, school resources and pupils' specific needs.

In conclusion, the research results highlight the positive aspects of the application of differentiated teaching, but also the challenges that teachers face. Further research and professional development of teachers are crucial for overcoming these challenges and improving the quality of teaching.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In comparison with existing research studies, the results of this study highlight how differentiated teaching is applied in classrooms, but with different levels of success in developing pupils' language skills. The research carried out in different regions and education cycles, including primary and secondary schools in Montenegro, has confirmed that strategies of differentiated teaching are mainly being applied in line with international trends. Similar studies in countries such as Croatia (Pajalić, 2015) and Serbia (Ninković, Knežević-Florić & Đorđić, 2022) have also demonstrated the positive effects of differentiated teaching on pupils. However, even though the results in all these research studies are positive, challenges have also been identified in implementation, which mainly relate to unequal resources, a lack of timeframes and professional training of teachers.

The key factors in the success of differentiated teaching in the development of language skills, according to the results of this research, include the application of flexible grouping, use of different materials and technology, as well as constant adaptation of tasks to pupils with different language abilities. The key findings are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Key Findings on the Implementation of Differentiated Teaching

Focus Area	Key Findings	Questionnaire Section
Applied Strategies	Novice teachers often utilize group work, individualized tasks, flexible grouping, and various materials to address the diverse needs of their students.	Section 2: Techniques and Challenges
Main Challenges	Teachers reported a lack of time, challenges in classroom management, limited resources, and difficulties in assessing pupils' achievements.	Section 2: Techniques and Challenges
Success in Language Skill Development	Differentiated teaching enhances motivation, engagement, and proficiency in language skills.	Section 3: Effect on Pupils' Achievements
Role of Mentoring	Mentors played a crucial role in offering support for planning, implementing strategies, and developing skills.	Section 4: Cooperation with Mentor
Professional Development Needs	Effective implementation is crucial for continuous training, as it provides practical examples and offers mentor support.	Sections 2 & 4: Challenges & Mentoring

We can see similar findings in research papers which deal with the effectiveness of differentiated teaching (Tomlinson, 2001; Wiliam, 2011). Although flexibility in the tasks and in the grouping of pupils contributes to an increase in pupils' engagement and motivation, many teachers state that the success of these methods depends largely on mentoring support and quality training.

The role of university-based training and mentoring in teachers' professional development is crucial for the implementation of differentiated teaching. In Montenegro, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport emphasises the importance of mentoring and continuous professional development of teachers, which is reflected within the "Strategic Framework for the Development of Education 2021–2027" (Ministarstvo prosvjete Crne Gore, 2021). This document highlights the need for the upgrading of teaching staff through professional training, which includes mentoring as a key component, as well as the application of innovative teaching methods, including differentiation. According to the data from the research, most novices had useful support from their mentor during the implementation of differentiated teaching, which significantly impacted their professional development. Mentoring is often highlighted as a key factor in overcoming the challenges that teachers face in applying new methods.

Given this fact, teachers need additional professional mentoring instructions and opportunities for the exchange of experiences to improve even further the application of differentiated teaching in the classroom. To offer a clearer overview of the research design and data analysis, thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data gathered from questionnaires completed by novice teachers and feedback from their mentors. This approach enabled the identification of key themes and codes that reflect the teachers' experiences with differentiated teaching.

Table 2 outlines the key themes, specific codes, theme description and example statements from participants, illustrating how the data were analyzed and reinforcing the findings discussed above.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis

Theme	Codes	Theme Description	Sample Statements
Applied Differentiation Strategies	Group work; Individualized tasks; Task adaptation; Use of visual and digital materials; Peer learning.	Teachers utilise various strategies to meet pupils' individual learning needs, including grouping, scaffolding, task differentiation, and the use of technology and visual aids.	"I frequently use group work to accommodate varying skill levels, assigning simpler tasks to some and more challenging ones to others." (Teacher 4) "I prepare two or three versions of the same task depending on the pupils' language competence." (Teacher 1)

Implementation Challenges	Time constraints; Lack of resources; Overcrowded classrooms; Assessment difficulties; Limited institutional support	Challenges are most often related to practical barriers, such as a lack of time for preparation, insufficient teaching materials, or difficulty tracking pupils' progress.	"It is challenging to find sufficient time to plan various tasks for all groups." (Teacher 6) "With over 25 students, I struggle to organise differentiated activities." (Teacher 10) "Sometimes I don't have access to technology that would help." (Teacher 12)
Effects on Pupils' Language Skills	Increased motivation; Higher engagement; Improved comprehension and fluency; Greater autonomy.	Differentiated teaching makes a significant contribution to pupils' development, particularly in terms of motivation, active participation, and the ability to work independently.	"Students are more motivated and engage more actively when given differentiated tasks." (Teacher 9) "When I use visual materials and adjust tasks, they understand better and are more confident to speak." (Teacher 11)
Mentoring Support	Feedback and guidance; Planning assistance; Emotional support; Sharing good practices.	Mentors assist new teachers in utilizing differentiation techniques. They provide feedback, observe classrooms, and plan collaboratively.	"My mentor helped me plan tasks and gave feedback on what worked." (Teacher 2) "Without the mentor's advice, I would not know how to implement differentiation properly." (Teacher 5)
Professional Development Needs	More workshops; Exchange of experiences; Observation opportunities; Practice-oriented training.	Teachers expressed a need for more practical and ongoing professional development opportunities that allow them to share examples, observe others, and receive concrete guidance.	"I would benefit from more workshops where teachers can share examples and discuss how to apply differentiation effectively." (Teacher 5) "We need more training that focuses on real classroom situations, not just theory." (Teacher 3)
Role of University-Based Training	Theoretical foundation; Limited classroom application; Need for practice integration.	University training helps introduce concepts, but it is inadequate for preparing students for real-life applications without additional mentoring.	"University courses introduced the concept, but I only really understood how to implement it during mentoring." (Teacher 8) "The theoretical part was clear, but I lacked classroom-based practice." (Teacher 6)

An inductive coding approach identified six key themes:

1. Applied Differentiation Strategies: Teachers employed various methods to adapt lessons for students with diverse language levels, including group work and individualised tasks. They often combined these strategies spontaneously to improve learning accessibility.

2. Implementation Challenges: Participants identified several barriers to consistent differentiation, including limited preparation time, insufficient resources, overcrowded classrooms, and difficulties in assessing individual progress.

3. Effects on Pupils' Language Skills: Teachers observed positive outcomes for students, noting enhanced motivation, engagement, and language abilities. They discovered that tailored tasks increased students' confidence and participation.

4. Mentoring Support: Effective differentiation was closely linked to the support from mentors, who offered essential planning assistance, feedback, and classroom management strategies.

5. Professional Development Needs: Teachers expressed a desire for more practical training opportunities, including workshops and peer observations, to improve their skills in differentiated instruction.

6. Role of University-Based Training: While university courses offered theoretical knowledge, many participants felt unprepared for real classroom implementation due to a lack of methodology courses and insufficient practical guidance from mentors.

Overall, the analysis highlights that although novice teachers recognize the importance of differentiated teaching, its successful application relies mainly on mentoring support and continuous professional development.

Research shows that differentiated teaching, when backed by comprehensive mentoring programs, can significantly improve students' language skills and support teachers' professional development. This method is especially useful for addressing the varied linguistic abilities within a classroom, as it enables educators to customize their instructional strategies to meet each student's individual needs. However, challenges such as a consistent lack of time and insufficient resources often obstruct its effective implementation.

Novice teachers, in particular, understand the transformative benefits of differentiated instruction, especially when they are in classrooms with students who have varying levels of language proficiency. Mentoring has become a crucial component in effectively implementing differentiated teaching practices. It provides novice educators with guidance, practical strategies, and emotional support as they navigate the complexities of their roles.

Moreover, the research emphasizes the need for improved educator training, enhanced preparation within university programs, and the integration of modern technologies into the

teaching process. These elements are recognized as crucial priorities for achieving effective differentiation.

To advance this field further, it is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted to track the progress and outcomes associated with differentiated instruction over time. Additionally, strengthening collaboration between universities and schools is essential for creating an environment where differentiated approaches can be effectively applied across various educational contexts. This partnership could lead to the development of tailored curriculum resources, the sharing of best practices, and ongoing professional development opportunities, ultimately enhancing both teaching and learning experiences.

6. Implications for Education and Teaching

Based on the research carried out, it is clear that applying differentiated teaching in the classroom, with appropriate mentoring, is crucial for improving pupils' language skills. The results of the research show that novice teachers, despite certain challenges, recognise the value of differentiated teaching, especially in the context of adapting tasks to pupils of different language levels. The use of flexible strategies, such as group work, individualised tasks and the use of different materials, had a positive effect on pupil engagement and motivation (Hattie, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014). However, teachers face challenges such as a lack of time for detailed planning and unpreparedness regarding materials that are appropriate for all levels of pupils. According to research by the Ministry of Education of Montenegro (Ministarstvo prosvjete Crne Gore, 2020), these problems often appear in the context of large differences in language skills and a lack of resources.

In the context of professional development, mentoring proved to be essential. Teachers who had continuous support from a mentor announced that they overcame challenges during application of differentiated teaching more easily. Mentoring – which includes tangible examples of tasks, feedback on pupils' achievements and help in organising lessons – significantly contributed to strengthening teachers' professional competencies. However, there is still room for improvement in this area, acknowledging the need for additional training and resources which will help in overcoming the specific challenges that novice teachers face, especially those related to managing classroom dynamics and the application of new technologies (Ministarstvo prosvjete Crne Gore, 2021).

Based on the results of the research, it is recommended that university training for future-generation teachers should be better adapted to the needs of teachers who work in classrooms with different language levels. This involves the introduction of courses and seminars that will be focused on practical techniques of differentiated teaching, as well as providing a larger volume of teaching materials that can be used in different education contexts (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Universities should offer training in mentoring, so that mentors would be better prepared for supporting novices, with an emphasis on the development of skills of evaluating pupils' achievements and providing constructive feedback. Within the mentoring programme, it is important to increase the intensity of feedback and ensure better support regarding the challenges

that arise when implementing differentiated teaching. Mentors should have access to specific tools and strategies for training novices in managing classroom dynamics and applying technology. Also, an increase in cooperation between universities and schools is recommended to create better conditions for practice, including use of real-life classroom situations and technology that would make differentiated teaching easier (Hattie, 2009).

Although the research points to the positive effects of applying differentiated teaching, there is a need for further research that would focus on the long-term effects of these methods on pupils' achievements, as well as on the development of teachers' professional skills. It is recommended to carry out longitudinal studies which would monitor the progress of pupils over several years, to determine more precisely the long-term effects of differentiated approaches on the pupils' language skills (Tomlinson, 2014).

In addition, further work should examine how technology can be effectively integrated into differentiated teaching. For example, research of the effect of digital tools and platforms on the differentiation of tasks and pupils' learning can provide valuable insights. Educational technologies, such as learning management systems (e.g., Moodle, Google Classroom), adaptive learning platforms (e.g., Edmodo, Khan Academy), and interactive tools (e.g., Quizizz, Kahoot, Padlet), enable teachers to customize instruction to meet the individual needs, readiness levels, and learning preferences of their students. For instance, teachers can use Kahoot to create quizzes with varying difficulty levels, or they can use Padlet to let students demonstrate their understanding through different media formats, such as text, audio, or images, based on their strengths. These tools promote flexible grouping, provide real-time feedback, and allow students to progress at their own pace.

Research should also focus on how these strategies can be applied at different education levels, from primary school to general secondary school (gymnasium), bearing in mind the specific challenges and needs that each group of pupils has (Ministarstvo prosvjete Crne Gore, 2021).

Finally, to improve the overall quality of teaching and to yield even better results, it is important to continue with research that integrates different aspects of the professional development of teachers, to create the optimum conditions for applying differentiated teaching in schools (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

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Appendices

A. Questionnaire for novice teachers

1. Region in which you completed your induction:
- o Northern
- o Southern
- o Central

2. Type of school in which you completed your induction:
- o Primary school
- o Secondary school

3. Grade with which you worked:
- o First cycle
- o Second cycle
- o Third cycle
- o General secondary school (gymnasium)

4. Number of pupils you worked with:

5. Which differentiated teaching techniques did you use in your teaching? (Please circle all that apply):
- o Group work
- o Individualised tasks
- o Pupils selected the level of difficulty of the tasks
- o Use of different materials (audio-visual materials, texts of different difficulty level)
- o Other (please specify)

6. In what way did you adapt the tasks to pupils of different language levels? (Please explain):

7. What were the greatest challenges in applying differentiated teaching in your classroom?
- o Difficulties in managing classroom dynamics
- o A lack of appropriate materials
- o A lack of time for planning
- o Other (please specify)

8. Did you have support from a mentor during application of differentiated teaching? If so, how did your mentor help you?

9. How would you assess the effect of differentiated teaching on the achievements of pupils in the selected language skill?
- o Very positive
- o Positive
- o Neutral

      ○ Negative

10. Based on your observations, did the pupils master the language skill (listening/ speaking/reading/writing) better after application of differentiated teaching?
- ○ Yes, to a large extent
- ○ Yes, to a lesser extent
- ○ No, there was no significant effect

11. Which changes in pupil behaviour and engagement did you notice during application of differentiated teaching?
- ○ Increased motivation
- ○ Greater activity in class
- ○ Better mastery of lesson contents
- ○ No significant changes

12. How did the mentoring programme help in implementation of differentiated teaching?
- ○ It provided concrete examples of tasks and materials
- ○ It gave feedback on pupils' achievements
- ○ It helped with the organising of classroom-based work
- ○ It reviewed the challenges and advantages of a differentiated approach

13. What would you like your mentor to do to further help with implementation of differentiated teaching?

B. Mentor's report on the novice

Short description of the novice's role in teaching:
- A detailed description of the novice's responsibilities and tasks during their induction. Which areas of teaching were covered by their work (e.g. lesson planning, implementation of specific language skills, help with classroom work)?
- A description of the dynamics of working with pupils, the way in which the novice engaged the pupils, how they cooperated with their mentor and other relevant information about their role in teaching.

Type of task the teachers implemented with pupils:
- List the actual tasks and activities the novice applied during teaching (e.g. group work, individualised tasks, use of technology, application of various materials).
- Specify how the tasks were connected to the language skills that were being focused on (listening, speaking, reading, writing).

Positive aspects of the application of differentiated teaching:
- Describe the advantages that arose from the application of differentiated teaching. Were the pupils more engaged? Did they demonstrate better results in learning?
- Which techniques or methods were successful (e.g. group work, use of different materials, individualisation of tasks)?

Challenges the novice had during application:
- Which challenges did novice teachers encounter in applying differentiated teaching? Were there problems in organising lessons, use of materials, adapting the tasks to pupils of different levels?
- Describe the specific difficulties in classroom dynamics, time limits or other factors which made application of differentiated teaching difficult.

Effects on pupils' performance:
- Describe how the application of differentiated teaching affected pupils' performance, especially in the context of achievements in the selected language skill.
- Did the pupils show any progress in learning? If so, in what form (increased motivation, better engagement, progress in a particular language skill)?

Help with further application of differentiated teaching:
- In what way can you support the novice in their further application of differentiated teaching? Are there specific areas in which they should do more work (e.g. extra training in the use of technology, more effective grouping of pupils)?

Recommendations for improvement of teaching in the future:
- Do you have any recommendations for improving teaching and applying differentiated teaching in the future? Is there any additional strategy, tool or method which might improve the teaching process?
- Advice for the further professional development of novices to improve their pedagogical skills and better adapt the teaching to the needs of pupils.

Date of report:
Name of mentor:
Signature of mentor:
Name of novice:
Area of work: (e.g. first cycle, general secondary (gymnasium), particular language task)