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## In Focus

# Selected educational differentiation principles and Tomlinson’s model adapted to RFL teaching

In an increasingly heterogenic and individualized world, it has become indispensable to transmit this societal diversity into the classroom (cf. Haß, 2017, 45). The construct of differentiation and/or individualization, although praised to be the ideal way of dealing with heterogeneity, however, is often misunderstood or seen as too difficult to realize at school. Meeting the needs of a multitude of students can be overwhelming and difficult to assess, thereby often crippling its implementation (cf. Lavania & Nor, 2020). The following article attempts to provide clarity and practicality through an overview of selected principles behind differentiation and ideas as to how to concretely apply them to the Russian as a foreign language (RFL) classroom.

Since the beginning of the discourse on heterogeneity, differentiation, and individualization, there have been several theories and models of the construct, albeit most of all in education rather than didactics (cf. Doff, 2016, 1). Before differentiation can take place, certain conditions must be met. As Haß (2017, 45) points out, the creation of a pleasant learning atmosphere in which students are appreciated, recognized, and supported, is crucial. The teacher’s psychological equilibrium as well as methodological competence additionally contribute towards creating the basis for a differentiated classroom (cf. *ibid.*). In foreign language didactics, there is agreement on the fact that learners can differ in terms of personality, intellectual performance, experience, social and cultural background, native or non-native linguistic ability, interests and needs, work ethic, and self-concept (cf. Haß, 2017, 45, quoted in Mehlhorn, 2019, 209; see also Caspari, 2017, 44). In general, a classroom sensitive to learner differences promotes learner autonomy, includes forms of open teaching, e.g., project or station work, differentiated tasks to foster the same area of competence, complex tasks, tasks that allow for a holistic or creative approach, and computer-assisted foreign language learning (cf. Caspari, 2017, 46). Individualization should not mean providing each learner with individually focused tasks (cf. Wolff, 2010, quoted in Rymarczyk, 2017, 267), but rather a combination of different approaches.

In the English educational literature, Tomlinson’s comprehensive model (2014) enjoys a high level of recognition. According to her, differentiation (and individualization) is to be understood as the philosophical fundament for instruction. Differentiated instruction, thereby, “is a way of thinking about teaching [...] concerned with developing not only content mastery but also student efficacy and ownership of learning” (2008, 5) with the goal “for teachers to maximize the potential of all learners by proactively designing learning experiences in response to individual needs” (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012, 310). This shows the profound interconnectedness between differentiation and individualization, the latter denoting the ability of teachers to give



every student the chance to comprehensively develop their motoric, intellectual, emotional, and social potential (cf. Meyer, 2007, 97, quoted in Haß, 2017, 45).

According to Tomlinson’s model, which was conceptualized for elementary school, but can be applied to the RFL classroom due to its versatility, differentiation can occur across several variables. She divides it into curriculum-based elements and categories of student need. The former contains content, process, product, and affect, while the latter includes readiness, interest, and learning profile. Content can be understood as the knowledge and the skills teachers want students to learn, process is how the students make sense of the content, product is how they show what they have learnt, and affect is the influence of students’ emotions on their learning. Readiness denotes the students’ temporary and ever-changing ability to learn something. Interest is what sparks students’ curiosity and keeps them motivated. The learning profile of the students is shaped by their learning and intelligence preferences, their gender, and their culture (Tomlinson, 2014, 15–17). The two main divisions intersect each other, meaning that content, e.g., can be differentiated according to readiness, interest, and learning profile. Combining these variables with each other, there are various ways of differentiation. Based on Tomlinson’s model, (cf. 2014, 18 – Figure 1.1) and adapted for the RFL classroom, these ideas have been collected in the table below.

		Categories of Student Need		
		Readiness	Interest	Learning Profile
Curriculum-Based Elements	Content (What?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• varying difficulty of texts, videos, and other sources</li> <li>• tasks assigned by proficiency</li> <li>• varying presentation methods (books, <i>PowerPoint</i> presentations, websites, posters, mind maps)</li> <li>• targeted small group instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• range of materials that cover various interests</li> <li>• teacher presentations designed to link to student interests</li> <li>• incorporating real-world material (e.g., real clothes/images of clothes when talking about that topic in the RFL classroom)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• varied teaching modes (verbal, visual, auditory, multi-modal...)</li> <li>• heritage speakers presenting content to other students</li> <li>• offering the option to study with music, while moving around, in a quiet place, etc.</li> <li>• exploring gender-based patterns of learning and responding to them</li> </ul>
	Process (How?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tiered activities (e.g. according to language proficiency)</li> <li>• mini-workshops</li> <li>• flexible use of time</li> <li>• learning contracts</li> <li>• varied homework assignments, e.g. by providing choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• expert groups (also doable with heritage speakers)</li> <li>• supplementary material based on student interests (polled via online surveys, e.g.)</li> <li>• jigsaw with different topics or different skills for one large topic</li> <li>• allowing students to study independently as opposed to plenary instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• choice of working conditions (alone, with one partner, with two partners, as a whole group)</li> <li>• tasks designed around various types of intelligence preferences<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• blogs, vlogs, or online communities to share ideas (e.g., <i>ВКонтакте</i>, <i>vchate</i>)</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> i.e., verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, practical, creative, etc. (quoted in Tomlinson, 2014, 17)

Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tiered products</li> <li>• personal goal-setting</li> <li>• varied resource options</li> <li>• providing samples of good/bad student work at varied levels of complexity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of student interests in designing products</li> <li>• use of contemporary technologies and (social) media for student expression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• varied formats for expressing key content</li> <li>• varied working arrangements</li> <li>• varied modes for expressing learning (podcast, video, presentation, text, etc.)</li> </ul>
Affect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creating a pleasant learning atmosphere (e.g., by using candles, Russian music, occasionally bringing Russian food to class, etc.)</li> <li>• using praise to increase students' readiness (e.g., <i>Молодец! Умница!</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual comments and personal feedback on homework and other tasks (e.g. <i>Дорогой ...! Мне хотелось бы обратить твоё внимание на то, что...</i>) (cf. Mehlhorn, 2019, 227)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• asking/surveying students what would help them to study better</li> <li>• in the presence of heritage speakers: asking them to talk about their personal experiences, impressions, lives, etc.</li> </ul>

Table 1: Tomlinson's model of differentiated instruction applied to the RFL classroom.

In summary, although Tomlinson's model is only one of many ways to differentiate, its comprehensiveness can provide useful and systematic guidelines when it comes to finding concrete ways of dealing with heterogeneity in the Russian language classroom. Using the six different variables according to which differentiation can take place while planning and realizing Russian lessons can contribute to fostering an RFL classroom representative of our diverse society, in which learners' needs are met and potentials realized.

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