Differentiated instruction in English language teaching: Insights into the implementation of Raza's teaching adaptation model in Canadian ESL

By Kashif Raza, Qatar University, Qatar

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to discuss the teaching adaptation model proposed by Raza (2018). This will be done with the support of fresh explanations and examples that show how different strategies suggested by the model can be utilized to develop and implement materials that can assist in adapting teaching strategies to English language learners' needs in Canadian ESL classrooms. Driving their roots from significant language teaching and learning theories, the strategies included in the model are specifically relevant to language classrooms that comprise students from multilingual, multiethnic and multi-educational backgrounds. Starting with a brief introduction to the model, the article discusses the strategies in detail with the support of tasks and activities that can be used in Canadian ESL contexts to facilitate the language learning experience of diverse student population.
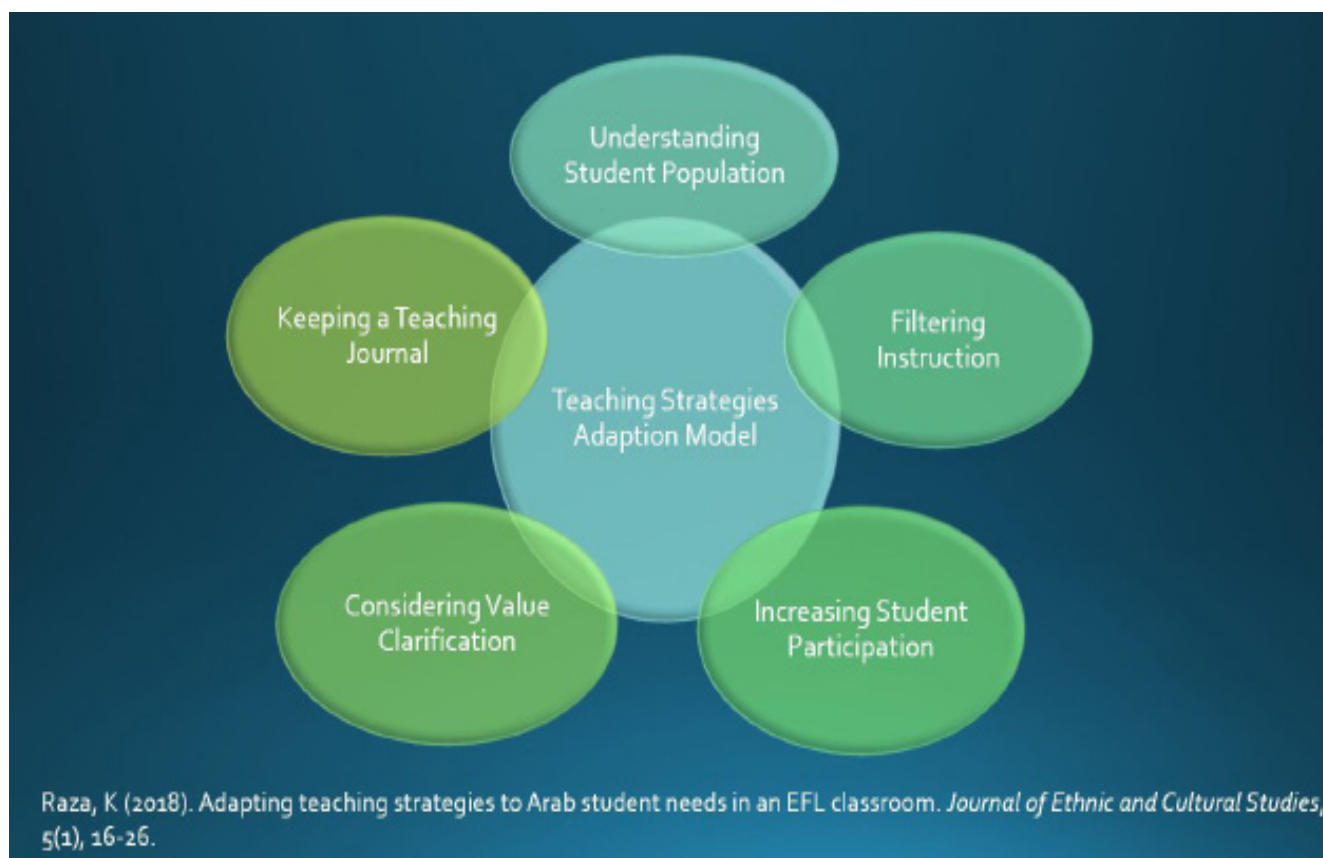
Introduction

With the advancement of English as a lingua franca, increase in the number of non-native speakers of English, recognition attempts for different versions of English, known as World Englishes, and surge in migration and globalization, the field of English language teaching (ELT) has become highly diverse. Today,

English language classrooms comprise students with multiple linguistic, educational, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to growing diversity in the classroom, factors like these also challenge language teachers on daily basis to delineate teaching strategies that can continuously help them facilitate language-learning experiences of diverse student populations effectively. This culminates the one-size-fits-all approach that is often followed in the development of textbooks, supplementary materials, and educational technologies that aim to cover broader markets.

Instead, we are in need of principles and guidelines that are informed by the theories of language teaching and learning and can assist in adapting teaching strategies to specific student populations and their language needs. The teaching adaptation model (TAM) proposed by Raza (2018) is an attempt to provide guiding principles for English language teachers to modify instructional strategies to the needs of their students in particular contexts. In the next part of this article, we will discuss the TAM, its characteristics and fresh examples and tasks informed by one or more of the strategies suggested by the model.

Raza, K (2018). Adapting teaching strategies to Arab student needs in an EFL classroom. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies,* 5(1), 16-26.

An Overview of the Teaching Adaptation Model

The TAM comprises five adaptation strategies: understanding student population, keeping a teaching journal, increasing student participation, considering value clarification, and filtering instruction. There are two points that are necessary to understand about these strategies: First, the five strategies do not follow any recommended sequence; a teacher can decide to start with any of the strategies in the model and then work on the next one. Secondly, although the five strategies share common principles of adaptation, are inter-connected in multiple ways, and can produce better results when used all together, they are not a tied set of rules that are inseparable. Like sequence, the number of strategies will also depend upon the needs of learners and teachers.

Three principles inform the construction of the TAM. The first principle is based upon the argument that the needs of one group of students differ from others (Harper & Jong, 2004; Tomlinson, 2001) and efforts need to be made to address these differing needs through specifically designed instructional techniques (Raza, 2018). Ellis' (2004) discussion on individual differences in second language learning confutes the claim that all learners are the same and clarifies that learner differences not only exist in L1 but also in L2, and even the nature of these differences within L1 or L2 is not always the same. The second principle, differences in learning, derives its roots from the work of Harper and Jong (2004) that disapprove the conception that the learning process of every language learner follows the same pattern and pace. This is because the socio-cultural differences and L1 interference differentiate the language development processes of learners. The last principle is informed by the findings of Raza (2019) that the expectations of teachers and students about their roles in a language classroom do not always align. In order to ensure a successful learning process, there is a need to cultivate mutual understanding between teachers and learners so that both are aware of each other's expectations about their roles. This can help design productive literacy instruction, develop academic and non-academic coordination, and assist in the modification of teaching strategies.

1. Keeping a teaching journal

Reflective teaching theory gives a lot of importance to self-reflection. The main assumptions associated with reflective teaching are that it allows teachers to refine their practices based upon the self-evaluation of their instruction, materials and strategies. The experience reflective teachers gain during this process is far more effective and useful than other sources of professional development. One of the ways teachers can reflect upon the usefulness and effectiveness of their teaching is through keeping a reflective teaching journal. It allows them to self-observe their teaching styles, material creation and usage, lecture delivery, and success in student engagement and collaboration (Raza, 2018).

There are multiple ways teachers can create and manage a teaching journal and use it for self-evaluation. According to Pollard (2014), the four skills that can be helpful in this process are consulting existing literature, collecting fresh information, examining available data, and evaluating outcomes. A review of the existing research allows teachers to learn from the relevant research in the field and see if their teaching practices align with the findings of others. Gathering new information involves a critical observation of the classroom atmosphere to collect objective and subjective data. While objective data allows teachers to observe student performance, subjective data helps understand perceptions and feelings about a teacher's teaching. Raza's (2018) suggestion of collecting information about the repeated errors of learners in a second language writing (SLW) course and converting them into a lesson for the entire class is a practical example of this skill. Teachers can also have their classes observed by a peer or a supervisor for professional development and continuous improvement (Raza, 2019a). Similarly, data analysis assists in the interpretation of classroom challenges and evaluation involves understanding the outcomes of activities and tasks and delineating future policies and practices.

2. Understanding student population

One of the outcomes of globalization and increasing migration is that today's English language classes, like others, have become highly diverse (Dudley, 2019) and thus comparatively more challenging. This is true for many countries like Canada where immigrants are welcomed at government as well as social levels, and efforts are being made to integrate them into Canadian socio-academic contexts. Van Viegen et al., (2019) highlight the sociolinguistic landscape of Canadian institutions and observe that the Canadian classrooms are no longer monolingual (English or French only) or bilingual (English and French), but multilingual. This requires a reconceptualization of teaching strategies and practices to see how they can shift their focus from addressing the language needs of monolingual or bilingual student populations to diverse and multilingual learners. Since students come with different language resources and socio-cultural backgrounds to the classroom, teachers can collect information about these resources and utilize them to make use of a student's prior language knowledge, increase student interest in the language learning process, and promote a sense of belonging among students.

Similar understanding can be developed about the challenges of learners in the language learning process. This allows a teacher to identify the difficulties their students are facing, understand the reasons or causes behind these difficulties, and then brainstorm strategies to address these challenges. For instance, Raza (2017) observed that his Arab students were facing some recurring challenges in EAP classes. Using a reflective approach, he decided to develop an understanding of these challenges and delineate possible solutions through individual conferences and classroom discussions with students.

Table 1 lists these challenges and the potential reasons behind them. It also shows the solutions that were used to solve these challenges.

Table 1: Recurring challenges in EAP classrooms

#	Challenge	Potential Reason	Solution
1	Understanding the curriculum and remembering upcoming deadlines	Too much information shared in week 1	- Breaking down the information into smaller parts - Using L1 for low proficiency students
2	Spelling issues	Different alphabets in English and Arabic	- Highlighting the differences between English and Arabic alphabets - Emphasizing letters of the alphabets that are frequently misused, e.g., difference between p, b and d
3	Google translation	Lack of confidence and previous habits of relying too much on translation	- Encouraging students to try using the target language instead of jumping to other sources - Involving students in activities that require spontaneous thinking and language production - Encouraging translanguaging
4	Lack of motivation in writing tasks	Culture and orality: Arab culture is an oral culture (Ong, 2002)	- Including integrated tasks that encourage writing and speaking - Choosing topics that are of interest for the majority of students
5	Errors in language use	Performance errors vs. competence errors (Touchie, 1986)	- Treating errors as a part of learning - Drawing student attention towards recurring errors

3. Increasing student participation

The third strategy in the TAM asks for involving students as active participants. Driving its roots from Paulo Freire's participatory teaching approach (1968; 2005), this strategy views teaching beyond sharing information and controlling student behavior. Rather it argues for student inclusion in decision-making at a micro level, such as deciding the types of activities to be used, the amount of emphasis on a specific language topic, setting deadlines for assignments and homework, as well as at macro level like assessment, curriculum design, teaching styles, and classroom management issues. According to Richard-Amato (2003), when teachers and students share powers, it "enables students to reach academic goals and enables both students and teachers to explore together issues that affect their lives" (p. 71).

There are multiple ways teachers can involve students in classroom administration and content development and delivery. Tomlinson (2000) suggests five strategies, which are "conversations with individuals, classroom discussions, student work, observation, and formal assessment" (p. 5). I have been using these sources to promote participatory teaching and learning but with a different approach. The first two are combined together to formulate an informal survey that is given to students three times in a semester. The questionnaire typically comprises items about the aims and objective(s) of learning English, their bigger and smaller challenges in language development, what they would like the teacher to pay more attention to, and the types of activities that they find entertaining and effective. After collecting baseline data from individual students, the results are discussed in class to understand the responses, clarify strategies, and prioritize actions to address students' needs through collective efforts. This not only helps understand students' perspectives but also gives me the opportunity to share my expectations of the course and the students, and thus develop a mutual understanding from the onset of the semester that Raza (2019a) calls a teacher-student learning contract. This activity is repeated in the middle and towards the end of the semester to revisit strategies and possibly reprioritize course content and teaching practices.

For the remaining three sources on Tomlinson's (2000) list, students are given a diagnostic test (e.g., a writing task, a discussion activity, or a mini-monologue prompt) to assess their proficiency in English. Additionally, student performance during in-class practice, homework, and formative assessments is observed to collect information about their learning challenges and use this objective data to create supporting materials and tasks to facilitate their language development.

4. Considering value clarification in teaching

Value clarification theory, distancing itself from traditional moral education that focuses on the inculcation of moral values through modelling, emphasizes on the awareness and correction of values that students hold. Unlike traditional methods, the focus here is the *clarification* of values through reasoning, explanation, and analysis (Kirschenbaum, 1992) that involves enhancing critical thinking skills, learner independence, use of authentic language, problem solving skills, and motivation (Raza, 2018). By providing an explanation and rationale for holding specific moral values, students develop confidence in their values, especially when they are compared to others.

4.1 Sample project promoting value clarification

Appendix 1 is a peer project that involves two students where they work as "Young Future Leaders" and select a social or educational issue of significance, develop an understanding of the issue and its causes, and then brainstorm possible solutions to solve the issue. With the objective of clarifying students' values

about socio-educational challenges that they may encounter in the future, the project also aims to develop leadership skills and encourages students to be involved in communicative, critical thinking, problem solving, and public speaking activities. Appendix 2 is a lesson plan.

5. Filtering instruction

This strategy is based upon culturally responsive teaching and differentiated instruction approaches (Tomlinson, 2001) and argues that the instructional strategy that works for one group/type of students may not work for others. Language classrooms that comprise stu\dents from diverse cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, like most Canadian ESL classrooms, would require teachers to consider the differences of learners before deciding an instructional method for effective learning to happen.

Harper and Jong (2004) highlighted four misconceptions about English language learners that promote a one-size-fits-all approach:

1. Exposure and interaction will result in English-language learning.

2. All ELLs learn English in the same way and at the same rate.

3. Good teaching for native English speakers is good teaching for ELLs.

4. Effective instruction means nonverbal support.

They contend that these misconceptions are based upon two assumptions, which argue that "the needs of ELLs do not differ significantly from those of other diverse learners" and the field of ESL "is primarily a menu for pedagogical adaptations appropriate for a variety of diverse learners" (p. 152).

Based upon my teaching experience, there are three successful differentiation techniques that English language teachers can adapt to address the diverse needs of their learners. The first technique asks for identifying learner differences, categorizing them into groups based upon their commonality, significance, and severity, and then delineating strategies to address them through common lessons and/or individual lesson plans. As discussed earlier, teachers can use subjective and objective data collection methods to gather such information or conduct classroom-based action research. An example of this is Raza's (2019b) study that investigated learner preference for teacher corrective feedback in a Second Language Writing (SLW) course to see what type and amount of feedback students find useful and effective. The study found that Arab students prefer handwritten feedback over computer and oral feedback and are motivated when their errors are identified and explained to them. A forthcoming study will investigate how the provision of student-preferred teacher corrective feedback—handwritten feedback—may enhance their motivation and

performance in SLW tasks. Raza's study also discussed the usefulness of group tasks in addressing diverse student needs through common lessons. Students are asked to work on a writing portfolio where they first write an essay, which is reviewed by a peer to identify major issues with meaning, structure, and language. Reflecting upon peer feedback, students revise their essay and produce the second draft, which is reviewed by the classroom teacher for providing extensive feedback and is revised by the student to develop a final draft. This activity allows students to not only learn from their peers but also receive feedback from their teachers.

The second technique asks for developing a culturally responsive curriculum that includes topics which are culturally appropriate, interesting, and motivating. It is important for teachers to be neutral on these topics and play the role of an interviewer who mainly concentrates on asking clarification questions rather than sharing their point of view.

The final technique is linking learning to students' practical lives. Students feel motivated when the task they are working on will help them develop language that they can use beyond a classroom setting. In addition to extrinsic motivation to learn English for grades and task completion, students feel intrinsically motivated to participate in activities and exercises. This can be done through multiple ways such as asking students to use a semi-structured survey questionnaire to interview someone in the family about a topic and then share the interview results with the entire class. This helps them practice their language skills outside the classroom and often utilize L1 if they choose to interview someone who does not speak English. A use of multiple language resources, called translanguaging, in discourse allows students to create a connection between their pervious and future language experiences as well as enhance their ability to make meaning by connecting "the social, cultural, community and linguistic domains of their lives" (Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p. 112).

Conclusion

Globalization and immigration have transformed contemporary Canadian ESL classrooms from mainly monolingual or bilingual to multilingual and multicultural. This requires a reconceptualization of teaching strategies, curriculum, assessment, and classroom management policies that were designed specifically for student population with similar linguistic and socio-cultural experiences. This shift will allow us to accommodate student needs that are diverse and dissimilar. However, as we revise these areas, we need to develop strategies and frameworks, instead of materials and textbooks, which can work as guiding principles for language teachers when they decide to adapt their teaching practices to their diverse learner needs. The TAM discussed here is a similar endeavor. It includes five strategies that can assist language teachers in understanding their student population, collaborating with them to identify challenges and

devise solutions, enhancing student motivation in language learning by increasing relevance of materials to their socio-politico-economic lives, and reflecting upon their teaching practices for improvement and betterment. The sample activities discussed under each strategy are ideas for how teachers can implement them for material development, manipulation, and revision as they attempt to differentiate instruction for multilingual and multicultural student population in their language classrooms.

References

Creese, A., & Blackedge, A. (2010). Translanguaging in the bilingual classroom: A pedagogy for learning and teaching? *The Modern Language Journal, 94*(1), 103–115.

Ellis, R. (2004). Individual differences in second language learning. In A. Davies & C. Elder (Eds.), *The handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 525–551). Oxford: Blackwell.

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published 1968)

Harper, C. & Jong, E. D. (2004). Misconceptions about teaching English-language learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*(2), 152–162.

Kirschenbaum, H. (1992). A comprehensive model for values education and moral education. *Phi Delta Kappan, 73*(10), 77–176.

Pollard, A. (2014). *Reflective teaching in schools* (4th ed.). New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Raza, K. (2017, March). *Adapting Teaching Strategies to Arab Student Needs*. Paper presented at the 23th TESOL Arabia International Conference 2017 in Dubai, UAE.

Raza, K. (2018). Adapting teaching strategies to Arab student needs in an EFL classroom. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies, 5*(1), 16–26.

Raza, K. (2019a). Student-teacher responsibilities in English studies: An empirical analysis of Arab student and English faculty perceptions. *Arab World English Journal, 10*(2), 307–322.

Raza, K. (2019b). Learner preferences for teacher corrective feedback: A survey study of Arab students from Qatar. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly, 11*, 43–53.

Reynolds, D. (2019). *Language policy in globalized contexts*. Appeared as part of the 2019 WISE Research Series. Doha: World Innovation Summit for Education. http://www.wise-qatar.org/2017-wise-research

Richard-Amato, P. A. (2003). *Making it happen. From interactive to participatory language teaching: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson Education.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2000, August). *Differentiation of instruction in the elementary grades.* ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.

Van Viegen, S., Wernicke, M., & Zappa-Hollman, S. (2019). On reconceptualizing linguistic and cultural boundaries in Canadian universities. *TESL Canada Journal/ Revue TESL du Canada, 36*(1), vi-xxi.

Author Bio.

Kashif Raza is a lecturer in English and a co-lead for English for Communication II course at Qatar University's Foundation Program. He has been serving as a faculty senator since 2018. He designed an ESP Law Course for the Foundation Program in 2015 and received Excellence in Teaching Award from the same program in June 2018. His research interests include language education policy, second language teaching, teacher corrective feedback, legal English, English to Urdu translation, and educational leadership.