

CUSTOMIZATION MODE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The article deals with the issue of accommodating individual differences among learners of English as a foreign language in the same classroom. It is widely acknowledged that there are many problematic issues when it comes to teaching learners with the same learning objectives but different abilities, interests, prior knowledge, learning styles, motivation, etc. There is a lot of research on how to instruct students with a completely different range of learning preferences. A widely held view is that a teacher working in a heterogeneous class should differentiate instruction across content, process, and product within whole-class interaction, group work, team project, and pair work. The article has offered one suggestion related to the implementation of a differentiated instruction strategy in heterogeneous classes. It is a customization mode as a self-regulated learning strategy that calls for the learner's ability and readiness to actively tailor learning according to individual specifications. With differentiation, teachers differentiate how students learn, while with customization, students customize their learning so that it best suits their requirements and capabilities. In practice, customization mode means providing students with optional tasks and adjustable activities to choose from assignments or lesson plans prescribed by the curriculum. In this paper, the author provides practical examples of affordable strategies to implement customization modes in academic settings.

The article presents findings from a qualitative study investigating students' learning autonomy within a regular course of English for Academic Purposes at Kharkiv I. P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts as well as the author's reflection on her own teaching experience. Findings indicate that the customization mode leads to greater success in the academic performance of foreign language learners since it 1) promotes autonomy in learning by motivating students to make decisions about their learning; 2) keeps learners satisfied and elevated by allowing them the freedom to experiment; 3) establishes positive attitude to learning by caring about individual differences; 4) supports uniqueness by enabling learners to express their own identity and bring multiple insights into a classroom.

The paper tries to put some recommendations together for further consideration while designing a learner-autonomous English for Academic Purposes syllabus.

Key words: autonomous learning, customization mode, differentiated instruction, English as a foreign language, individual differences.

Problem statement. A flexible curriculum is a measurable plan and structure for delivering quality education. It identifies the learning outcomes, standards, and core competencies but it doesn't consider individual differences. We know that each class has its own unique culture and each individual in your class has a different set of interests, strengths, weaknesses, goals, learning needs, and abilities. Traditional curricula and prescribed instructional techniques are not always optimal for students with a different set of learning modalities. If you want to deliver quality education and help students achieve significant learning, you have to be responsive to a broad range of learners with a variety of individual differences and tune into what learners are doing and then figure out how you can offer something more specific to them. That's when you need to take the curriculum you've created, and start adapting it to the actual learners' specifications. Curriculum adaptation refers to improvements and amendments in methods of teaching (the way that the instruction is structured and managed) with the aim of accommodating all learners in class. This can be accomplished in several ways. Regardless of the terms and definitions, educators and theorists agree that the most effective way to appeal to and engage every diverse learner in a heterogeneous classroom is through differentiated instruction. Although the concept of differentiated instruction has gained a lot of attention in practice and research, teachers find it difficult to grasp how differentiated instruction should be implemented in their classrooms. Clearly, more information about effective practices is needed, since the situation in which teachers teach heterogeneous groups in post-graduate education is rather different in nature compared to high education. Based on the assumption that differentiated instruction positively impacts student learning if properly implemented, the following research question guided the study: how can a teacher implement differentiated instruction in a heterogeneous classroom of advanced learners within a controlled academic setting.

Analysis of current research. The term "differentiation" refers to presenting knowledge and instructions differently. Carol Ann Tomlinson – a researcher on the effectiveness of differentiation – states

that teacher is differentiating content – the knowledge and skills students need to master; process – the activities students use to master the content; product – the method students use to demonstrate learning [5]. Carol Ann Tomlinson and Marcia B. Imbeau in their book “Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom” tackle the issue of how to address student differences thoughtfully and proactively. James R. Delisle an educational consultant and a former university professor, one of the differentiated instruction’s foremost opponents, in his article appeared in the January 07, 2015 edition of Education Week (an independent news organization) states that differentiation in the classroom does not work. Teachers who attempted to differentiate instruction found it hard to implement and ended up simply dumbing down their instruction, depriving gifted students of quality and complete educational services [7]. The question is not whether differentiated learning is effective or not effective, but how to implement it properly.

The purpose of the study was to explore customization mode as a practical implementation of differentiated instruction in a heterogeneous classroom.

Specifically, **the study sought to:** define customization mode in foreign language learning; find out the necessary conditions for the application of customization mode; explore the effectiveness of customization mode in accommodating individual differences of language learners.

Presentation of the main material. Every student you teach has a diverse set of individual differences that can be defined as personal characteristics that distinguish learners from each other in the learning processes and might determine learning outcomes. Learner characteristics include anxiety, beliefs, cognitive abilities, motivation, strengths, weaknesses, talents, values, prior experience, successes, failures, attitudes, skills, learning modalities, interests, personal desires, confidence, self-encouragement, willingness to communicate. Each learner has a “style” of learning that should and could be maximized in all learning situations. The diverse learning characteristics displayed by students in the post-graduate course make it necessary for teachers to differentiate instruction to give the learner an ultimate, personalized experience in learning. Klymenova O., a teacher at Dnepropetrovsk State University of Internal Affairs in her article “Trends of development of modern education: the basic principles of andragogy in teaching foreign languages” states that the heterogeneity of adult

learning groups by age, intellectual level, level of education and work experience, and emotional and psychological state must be taken into account when choosing teaching methods [2: 89]. We strongly believe that an effective and productive learning-teaching process can be achieved by capitalizing on learners' individuality which is to use differences in students' preferences to their advantage. Why not consider students' diversity and variance in learning characteristics and respond to it in some way. For instance, let's legitimize individuality in learning by allowing choice and offering more flexible learning options available to learners and "give them greater control over their learning through a variety of learning modes and interactions. It is not an alternative mode of education but an overarching driving force that provides learners greater choice" [10: 1]. Anishhenko I., a teacher at Khmelnytsky Humanitarian and Pedagogical Academy in her article "Organization of the students' self-study activities in a Higher Pedagogical Institution" states that independent work allows maximizing the individual approach to students with different levels of knowledge [1: 90]. This work suggests a customization mode that allows learners to personalise learning by offering more than one way for them to learn. Customization refers in the context of education to a teaching-learning transaction that involves negotiation between the teacher and students. From the teacher's side customization is an instructional strategy that typically allows learners to have activities that are customized to their specifications. From the learners' perspective customization is a process of appropriately modifying or building learning according to individual or personal specifications or preferences to satisfy their needs. The purpose of customization is to provide each student with affordable and available options to make their performance better.

Differentiation and customization are often thought to be synonymous, but that isn't the case. The difference between customization and differentiation is who adapts the learning: the teacher or the student. When it comes to differentiation, it means adaptation of educational methods and techniques so that the learning process is better suited for each learner, with their unique learning style, background, needs, and previous experiences. Thereby, differentiation is about what the teacher can do to fit a particular learner's needs, while customization is about what the learner can do to fit his individual preferences in learning. Likewise, customization and personalization

aren't actually interchangeable. Personalized learning centers around the task of connecting a learner's previous knowledge, experiences, and abilities with training materials that will link that understanding with new information. Customized learning is centered around the idea of learners tailoring their activities to their unique preferences in language learning. Learners' learning styles shouldn't be considered an insignificant component in the learning process. Each student's learning initiative in the classroom should be customized by the learners themselves. Making learning content slightly customized will make a difference, for example, removing material that is unnecessary while highlighting the training that will help the learner most; replacing or modifying the task, adjusting it for the learner to demonstrate what they do better, or training new skills. Thus, differentiation is implemented through customization mode – a self-instruction strategy by which students self-tutor and self-monitor themselves, and manage themselves as learners while learning in the way most convenient for them. But their learning plans still keep them on track to meet the standards for a university diploma.

There are three conditions for the customization mode to be applied:

1) students must be able to manage the autonomous aspects of the study. It takes as its starting point the idea that students are capable of self-direction and can develop an independent, proactive approach to their studies. The success of a customization mode in the heterogeneous class depends first of all on the ability of each learner for self-monitoring, self-instruction, self-reinforcement throughout the course; willingness to take learning responsibilities, self-confidence to learn autonomously, motivation to learn English, capacity to learn autonomously. Accordingly, customization mode is primarily applied in postsecondary and adult education programs in which it ranges from being a subsidiary component of traditional teacher-directed learning programs to being the guiding principle of the curriculum;

2) students must have access to an assortment of resources suitable for autonomous learning. Access to Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) is essential to self-directed language learning. SIM are specifically designed to enable learners to study partly or wholly by themselves and have been described as "Tutorial-In-Print", which not only provides information but also defines what is to be learnt, gives examples, explains, makes questions, sets learning tasks, answers learners questions, allows learners to do self-assessment, gives study advice;

3) teachers still have a primary responsibility to handle students' variance by offering the option to change what and how they learn, based on their individual abilities. Unlike self-education (also self-learning and self-teaching), which is education without the guidance of masters (such as teachers and professors) or institutions (such as schools and universities), customization mode is an instructional strategy where teachers play an active supporting role in learner customized activity since the students with guidance from the teacher decide what and how they will learn. The teacher should plan their adaptive instruction and consistently balance individual students and course content and "make room" for student variance.

So how does the customization mode operate in action? Let's look at three strategies to implement customization mode in class:

1) build an option list. To achieve customization a teacher must focus on developing an option list that includes some variations or "tiers" to a learning task, to which students are assigned based on their abilities. The choice of activity can be completely up to the student, giving them the freedom to pick whichever type of learning activity works best for them;

2) ask learners to select a few assignments from a list of options or modify assignments according to individual specifications or preferences. Generally, learner's customization mode refers to individualized curriculum alterations that allow a student to learn the same material, and complete the same assignments as other students without altering the content of assignments but in a different way, with some variation in time, format, setting, and/or presentation. Any assignment can be customized through different options at the learner's discretion (make an assignment easier so the student is not doing the same level of work as other students, add details in an assignment). Common customization options accepted in academic settings for the advanced level of ELL students include the following: vary the length of time a student may take to complete a task; generate the content of the assignments as long as the assignments contain required elements; select the most convenient and efficient strategies for the task accomplishment; alter the way tasks are presented and mastery (skills and abilities) is demonstrated; redesign the space, time and resources in the classroom; adjust social organization of learning (face-to-face, group, individual); indicate the moments of assessment; select learning materials and learning resources to be used during the course; change the sequence of different parts of a course; work on different skills at different paces or work on several

competencies at the same time; modify assessment and completion requirements (pass/no pass grading option); choose participation in various aspects of the course; adapt the difficulty and size of a student's workload; test in a different setting (on-line, off-line; in paper or electronic formats); have extra time to do homework or complete projects or examination; adapt assignments, test materials, homework to the students' skill levels; do cooperative learning in alternative formats and so forth;

3) give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their mastery over a certain topic. While standard test results should never be overlooked, giving students optional ways to show their understanding of topics helps them to overcome shyness, uncertainty, doubts, fears, etc.

In this way, customization is a sequenced series of optional practices that virtually any learner can understand and develop. That doesn't mean the university will let a student fall far behind. The teacher makes sure learning options match up with academic standards. And they check to see if students are demonstrating the skills they're expected to learn as they progress through their education.

Customization is not a replacement for a one-size-fits-all education system. It's an approach to general education that can work with an individualized education program (IEP) or other specialized intervention programs.

The potential of customization mode.

Customization offers greater control of highly personalized learning and in this way empowers learners to strengthen their autonomy. Autonomous learning is also used by some authors to denote independent learning, self-directed learning, self-instructed learning, or self-study [6]. Phil Benson, an Associate Professor in English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education in his book "Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning" argues that "There is a difference between autodidaxy, where learning is done by the learner on their own, and autonomy, where learning is controlled by the learner whether with a teacher or not" [4: 187]. In autonomous learning, learners are not controlled by others or by outside forces; they are independent, and they have the power to regulate their learning activities within a controlled academic setting [6]. Such capability and responsibility to tailor their study to their own needs is not an inborn characteristic of human beings but the result of a process related to

growth and personal life experience. According to David Little, autonomy is viewed as an ability or capacity acquired and developed naturally as the result of developmental and experiential learning [8]. The authors Tsvyd-Hrom O., Nosenko M., Rieznik V., and Bonkovskiy O. argue in the article “Organization of self-study in distance learning of foreign languages in higher educational institutions” that the effective planning of students’ independent work includes creating conditions for students’ independence in their academic activities [3:238]. Agreeing with the above authors, we believe that a strategy such as customization moves students in the direction of autonomy and maturity as learners since it offers them greater control of their learning. They are autonomous in the sense that they actively seek out learning opportunities, are willing to try new things, have more independence in the use of time and materials, modify, regulate, initiate their learning activities, and make important decisions about the what, when, where and how of learning.

Customization as a personalized learning experience keeps your learners satisfied and elevated, as it gives them ownership of their learning. Exercising control over their own experience can increase their happiness and their engagement. Customization as highly personalized learning that is uniquely relevant to students enables learners to be more inventive, and more creative. People like feeling special, they like personalized experiences that often leads to innovation, and definitely increases job satisfaction. Learning tailored specifically for each learner and based on their unique traits removes stress and allows students to present their completed assignments using tools and strategies that highlight their abilities rather than illuminate their disabilities. Personalized teaching demonstrates to learners you care about them individually. It stimulates a better connection with the teacher. Positive student relationships are fundamental to success. When students feel supported, they're more likely to engage in learning and have loyalty toward the instructor.

Studies show learners are more likely to succeed academically if they have an option to personalize their learning i.e. have learning that resonates with them and meets their desires [11]. Students would be willing to work hard and perform better for a customized task modified to fit their capabilities. The option to customize the exact class work or homework assignment as they want to make learners more independent, more satisfied, more productive, and more creative.

Customized learning isn't widely used in universities yet. Many aspects still need to be explored, starting with whether students will make good choices. Then there is the question of fairness, which is deepened by students' tendency to look for the easy options [9]. However, this approach has the potential to help reduce the stigma of a one-size-fits-all education system.

Conclusions. Students differ as learners in terms of interests, prior learning, learning style, capability and ability to self-regulate their study, speed of learning, support systems for learning, self-awareness as a learner, confidence as a learner, independence as a learner, levels of motivation, and a host of other ways. The diverse learning characteristics displayed by students in the post-graduate course make it necessary for teachers to differentiate instruction to contribute to the effective teaching of the target language.

To accommodate individual differences of EFL students in a way that lifts up their academic performance, the current study considers a customization mode as a self-monitoring strategy in English instruction that allows students to adjust their learning for themselves. Customization mode refers to using the same curriculum material for all learners, but adjusting the depth of content, the learning activity process, and/or the type of product developed by the student to students' readiness, interest, or learning style. Customized learning mode will function properly when 1) students are ready to be more independent, make choices about their learning and apply self-directed learning skills; 2) teachers fully understand the process, methods, assessments, tech, goals involved, and design of creative assignments that challenge learners to be more independent and to make choices about their learning. The first step in implementing a customized learning program is offering them a breadth of opportunities, resources, and options to personalize learning to fit their individual preferences. Second, let learners make choices and decisions about their completing a particular assignment following their imagination and interests. Third, allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and execute tasks in unique and innovative ways.

When given the chance to customize the exact classwork or homework assignment as they want, students are more motivated to take ownership of their learning and substantially improved their test scores. For example, Kharkiv I. P. Kotlyarevsky National University of Arts has implemented a personalized learning program that helps

students to develop self-directed learning skills. As a result, students attending this course made gains in English.

Prospects of further research. Overall, from the empirical findings of the current study, we can conclude that a customized learning experience results in better academic performance since it stimulates autonomy in learning and makes learners more satisfied. Although these empirical findings give some indication of the possible benefits of a customized learning environment, they also point out that there are still severe knowledge gaps that open new perspectives for further research on the implementation of customization mode and its effectiveness for postgraduate classes in ESL and EFL. Before drawing convincing conclusions, more research is needed regarding barriers to self-customized learning in postgraduate formal settings. Thus far, future research ought to mainly be focused on internal and external, contextual and personal factors determining the implementation of customization modes that inhibit or enhance the effects of within-class differentiated instruction. Further research is necessary to explore how learners of English as a second language customize their learning outside of the formal classroom through the use of practices that potentially advance their English language proficiency. We still have much to accomplish to know how the examination and assessment of the self-customized learning practices of adult language learners can be operationalized.

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РЕЖИМ КАСТОМІЗАЦІЇ ПРИ ВИВЧЕННІ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

Юлія Лептінова

канд. філос. наук, старший викладач каф. іноземних мов Харківського національного університету мистецтв ім. І.П. Котляревського (61003,

Стаття розглядає питання врахування особистісних характеристик студентів, які вивчають англійську як іноземну. Постає багато проблемних питань, коли мова йде про навчання учнів з однаковими навчальними цілями, але різними здібностями, інтересами, знаннями, стилями навчання, мотивацією тощо. Чимало досліджень аналізують, як навчати студентів із різним діапазоном уподобань у навчанні. Широко поширена думка, що викладач, який працює в неоднорідному класі, повинен диференціювати навчання за змістом, процесом, продуктом у рамках взаємодії всього класу, групової роботи, командного проекту, роботи в парах. У статті запропоновано альтернативну стратегію щодо реалізації диференційованого навчання в гетерогенних групах учнів. Це режим кастомізації – така стратегія навчання, яка вимагає від студента здібності та готовності активно налаштовувати навчання під індивідуальні вимоги та вподобання. Якщо диференційоване навчання вимагає від викладача підбирати методи та форми відповідно до особистісних характеристик студентів, режим кастомізації вимагає від самого студента налаштовувати своє навчання таким чином, щоб воно щонайкраще відповідало його вимогам, здібностям, інтересам тощо. На практиці режим кастомізації означає надання студентам права вільного вибору завдань із запропонованого переліку у межах, передбачених навчальним планом. Робота пропонує практичні стратегії впровадження режиму кастомізації в академічних умовах.

У роботі представлено результати дослідження, що вивчає самостійне навчання студентів у рамках курсу «Англійська мова для академічних цілей» у Харківському національному університеті мистецтв імені І. П. Котляревського, а також роздуми автора про власний досвід викладання. Результати показали, що режим кастомізації призводить до більшого успіху в навчанні іноземної мови в гетерогенних класах, оскільки: 1) сприяє автономії у навчанні, тому що тренує студентів керувати процесом навчання; 2) викликає зацікавленість у навчанні, тому що дає свободу експериментувати; 3) формує в студентів позитивне ставлення до навчання, тому що враховує їхні особистісні характеристики, побажання та прагнення; 4) підтримує унікальність кожного, тому що дає змогу проявити власну індивідуальність і привнести в клас різні ідеї та позиції.

У статті автор ставить питання для подальшого розгляду під час розробки навчальної програми курсу «Англійська мова для академічних цілей».

Ключові слова: автономне навчання, англійська мова як іноземна, диференційоване навчання, особистісні характеристики, режим кастомізації.

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