

Text alternative for episode “Differentiation in foreign language didactics”, in the podcast series “21st century competences in foreign language (teacher) education in Europe”

[upbeat minimalistic music]

Intro: This podcast series discusses 21st century competences in foreign language teacher education in seven European universities. The series is funded under the Erasmus+ program, and it is part of the project ConnEcTEd which stands for Coherence in European Teacher Education: Creating transnational communities of practice through virtual scenarios. Each episode in this podcast series focuses on one 21st Century competence in the local context of one or two of the seven partner universities across Europe.

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Miira: Welcome to this podcast where we'll discuss differentiation in foreign language education. This podcast is part of the resources that are created in the Erasmus+ Project ConnEcTEd. My name is Miira Häkkinen and I work as a Project researcher at the University of Turku, Finland, and with me today, I have University lecturer Anssi Roiha, also from the University of Turku. Please, Anssi, would you still introduce yourself and tell about your professional background.

Anssi: Yes, first of all, thank you for inviting me. My name is Anssi Roiha and I work as a University lecturer in foreign language didactics at the University of Turku, in the Department of teacher education. Before my career in tertiary education, I actually worked as a teacher, first five years in Finland, as a special class teacher, and then two years in the Netherlands, as an IB school teacher.

Miira: Very interesting, welcome, Anssi. Thank you for joining me here today and our topic is differentiation in foreign language didactics. But, what is differentiation; how would you define it?

Anssi: Yeah, that that is an excellent question and first of all, there isn't like one single definition of differentiation, there are different schools of thought. And it can be approached in a more narrow way, which is often the case, and in that case it is associated with ability levels, or then it is just assumed to be this kind of mechanical teaching practices, or then it's considered to be a reactive approach where you start to differentiate only when challenges emerge. But if you look at it in a more holistic way, then it is sort of defined as this kind of a holistic teaching approach that transcends all teaching and informs your whole planning and how you implement the teaching and also assessment. Approaching it that way, it also extends to people's interests and learning styles. It is also a proactive approach, so you preemptively think of people's characteristics and you plan your teaching in a way that the kind of learning challenges wouldn't manifest in the learning.

Miira: I see, sounds very interesting, first of all... rather complex but also really important. Then on to another concept, and this is particularly important for the ConnEcTEd project, namely coherence in education. How would you describe this coherence in your field, in foreign language didactics?

Anssi: Yes, thank you that is also a very good question and similar to differentiation, I think coherence is also a concept that can be approached through different perspectives. One is this conceptual coherence, which means that, for example, there is an appropriate combination of theory and practice, which we aim to do at our University, when we educate future language teachers. We look at theories and always connected to practice. So, if we take differentiation as an example, we first go through the theoretical notions that underpin differentiation, and then we really focus on how we can actually implement that in practice. Another approach to coherence is this interdisciplinarity, where you look at different phenomena through different disciplines. I think this is very easy to do in foreign language education, since it relies on different disciplines already inherently, for instance applied linguistics and educational sciences.

Miira: Excellent. Really research-informed teacher education then, very good. Now, returning to the theme of differentiation; why would you say differentiation is important in foreign language education?

Anssi: Yeah, it has been studied quite a lot, quite extensively, particularly in recent years. There are several meta-analysis that support its use, that have found that it's beneficial to learners, first of all, in regard to their learning, but also there are studies that indicate that it's also beneficial approach for the students' motivation or this kind of self-concept - these affective features, in a sense.

Miira: Oh yes, I now understand the importance. You have worked on differentiation for over 10 years and you have developed this five-dimensional model of differentiation. That's quite interesting. How would you describe this model, its different dimensions?

Anssi: In the model are: teaching arrangements, learning environment, teaching methods, support materials, and assessment. The idea is that it progresses from general to specific. First, it starts with the teaching arrangements and the learning environment, which are more macro-level differentiation dimensions, then it proceeds to more micro-level dimensions, which are teaching methods and materials. The 5D model is based on the idea that assessment can only be done reliably when the differentiation is in place in all the above dimensions. So only, when the student learning is supported with appropriate teaching methods or support materials, they can be assessed in a reliable way, with a variety of means, differentiated means, as well. One feature of the 5D model is the importance of knowing one's students, so that's the basis of all differentiation. So each dimension in the model is always informed by the students' individual features, for instance personality, motivation, history, their preferences and interests.

Miira: Hmm, very interesting and multidimensional, indeed. Now, on the micro level, more so, would you say that differentiation is easy or difficult?

Anssi: Well, it's not an easy task to differentiate, I give you that. I think teachers around the world feel that differentiation is challenging. The main challenges often cited are large class sizes and time constraints, so teachers feel that there are too many students to differentiate for each teacher and also that there isn't enough time to differentiate.

Miira: So some challenges there, all right. Well, how would you be approached differentiation in practice? What could be some examples that teachers could do to differentiate their teaching?

Anssi: I guess it's important that teachers rely on the broad approach of differentiation where differentiation forms the basis of all their teaching, so it's not just something that they add on to their normal teaching or regular teaching, but it's already sort of the basis of all their planning. It is quite challenging to tailor teaching for each individual in the classroom but that's not really the point of differentiation and this relates to also to the group level differentiation where you use certain teaching methods already that lend themselves to differentiation, so for instance the project work or presentation are a few examples. Pupils can do those at their own levels. Some can produce very advanced products, whereas others remain on a more superficial level. Another way to differentiate is also to offer options to pupils. Instead of giving individual work for everyone, teacher can create three learning paths with different content and let the pupils choose which they want to complete. In those paths, the level of difficulty but also the topics and working styles can vary. I think this kind of approach also activates the learners and engages them in the learning process and feeds into self-assessment, which is highly emphasized in the Finnish context.

Miira: Thank you. Okay, Anssi, approaching the end of our discussion today; what would be your main message to current and future foreign language teachers?

Anssi: Well, even if differentiation isn't easy, it is highly important to differentiate. I guess we can all agree that we don't all learn the same way, so then we can't teach with just one way, relying on this one-size-fits-all approach. For instance in the Finnish educational context, differentiation is considered to be this pedagogical point of departure for all instruction which means that every teacher should always keep differentiation in mind. Differentiation is also a mindset, a way of looking at things, so if you embrace the idea, then you'll also find the way. It is context specific as well, so different practices work in different contexts and every teacher needs to find the ways that work in their context for their pupils. I guess it is also good to start small. If it's a new approach to you, maybe just start first with one dimension and then gradually build up from there. You can also consult your colleagues, share ideas and good practices, and get support.

It is also important to mention that differentiation needs resources as well and this is an important message to all the policymakers so, first of all, it's easier to differentiate, if you have human resources or material resources that support differentiation. Maybe finally I could say that differentiations is also a whole-school approach, so if it's something that is valued also at the management level, then it's easier to differentiate as a whole school. One good way is to make differentiation a part of every school's mission statements and curricula, and define what are the ways that each school approaches differentiation.

Miira: Excellent. I love the way you put it, that it's a mindset. That's very describing. Thank you very much, Anssi, for your very interesting and really, really important research, first of all, and your professional experiences leading to this discussion today. To summarize what you have told us, differentiation seems to be a rather complex phenomenon but at the same time something that really should be present at all times. So thank you for your wise words...

Anssi: You're welcome.

Miira: ...and we have learned a lot. Thank you all for joining us.

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