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Responding to Student Variability in the English Classroom: A Case Study of Teachers' Differentiation Strategies and Decision Making in a Private Bilingual School in the Metropolitan District of Quito

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Responding to Student Variability in the English Classroom: A Case Study of Teachers' Differentiation Strategies and Decision Making in a Private Bilingual School in the Metropolitan District of Quito

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DEDICATION

A mi mamá, Beatriz Benavides, mi motor, mi inspiración y mi mayor ejemplo de amor, valentía y sacrificio. Gracias por ser madre y padre, por sostenerme en cada caída, por enseñarme a luchar con el corazón y por ser mi refugio en cada tormenta. Este logro también es tuyo, porque cada paso que doy está lleno de tu esfuerzo y de tu amor incondicional.

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RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga cómo los profesores de un colegio privado bilingüe del Distrito Metropolitano de Quito responden a la variabilidad del alumno en el aula de inglés. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo de estudio de caso, basado en entrevistas y observación, se exploran las estrategias de diferenciación utilizadas por los docentes, así como los factores que influyen en su toma de decisiones. El objetivo es comprender cómo estas prácticas permiten adaptar la enseñanza al ritmo, estilo y nivel de los alumnos para atender sus diversas necesidades. Sin embargo, se identifican importantes desafíos, como la carga de trabajo, el tiempo limitado y la diversidad del alumnado, que dificultan la implementación constante de todo tipo de diferenciación. Las conclusiones apuntan a la importancia de valorar y respaldar las decisiones de los profesores, y también aportan valor práctico y aplicable en el uso de estrategias concretas que ayuden a mejorar la planificación, la evaluación y la gestión del aula de inglés, lo cual beneficia tanto a los profesores como a la institución, pero sobre todo a los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Variabilidad del alumno, Diferenciación, Segunda Legua, Educación, Ecuador.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how teachers at a private bilingual school in the Metropolitan District of Quito respond to student variability in the English classroom. Using a qualitative case study approach, based on interviews and observation, the differentiation strategies used by teachers are explored, as well as the factors that influence their decision making. The objective is to understand how these practices allow adapting teaching to the pace, style and level of the students to meet their diverse needs. However, significant challenges are identified, such as workload, limited time and student diversity, which make it difficult to consistently implement all types of differentiation. The findings point to the importance of valuing and supporting teachers' decisions, and also provide practical and applicable value in the use of concrete strategies that help improve English classroom planning, assessment, and management, which benefits both teachers and institution, but most importantly students.

Key words: Student Variability, Differentiation, Second Language, Education, Ecuador.

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INTRODUCTION

English language learning in bilingual schools where English is a foreign language represents significant challenges related to the diversity of students in terms of abilities, backgrounds and learning styles. In a private bilingual school in the Metropolitan District of Quito, teachers face daily the need to adapt their teaching to respond to this variability in the classroom. The present research explores teachers' decision-making processes and the differentiation strategies they use to address this diversity in teaching English. Understanding these strategies is essential to improve equity and effectiveness, ensuring that all students are adequately supported in their learning process.

The concept of learner variability has been widely discussed in the educational literature and refers to individual differences in prior knowledge, cognitive skills, learning styles, and particular needs, among other factors. In bilingual settings, this diversity is amplified, as students may have varying levels of English proficiency, requiring flexible and adaptive instruction. Moreover, external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these differences, creating gaps in educational access and language proficiency development. In this context, the design of differentiated pedagogical strategies has become even more important as it can mitigate these inequalities and ensure that every student has meaningful learning opportunities.

Theoretically, this study is supported by the framework of differentiated instruction proposed by Tomlinson (2000), who argues that teachers must modify their methodology, content, and assessments to respond to diversity in the classroom. Differentiated instruction is based on the assumption that students learn differently and, because of this, it is necessary to apply pedagogical strategies that suit their individual characteristics. Previous research has shown the importance of differentiation, but has

also identified barriers to its implementation, such as lack of teacher training, time limitations, and standardized curricular requirements.

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language in bilingual environments, the implementation of differentiated strategies is essential to promote students' success. Teachers must make constant pedagogical decisions to adjust their teaching according to the particular needs of each student, which requires a process of continuous assessment and adaptation. However, decision-making in the classroom is not always a structured process, but often responds to experience, intuition and the conditions of the educational context. It is therefore essential to analyze how teachers describe their differentiation practices and what factors influence their decisions.

This study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the actual implementation of differentiation strategies in an Ecuadorian bilingual context, identifying both successful practices and the challenges associated with their application. The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to the field of bilingual education and the teaching of English as a foreign language, providing key information for the design of teacher training programs and the development of more inclusive educational policies in similar contexts. The study also aims to suggest practical tools to optimize the teaching of English in bilingual contexts, promoting equitable and effective learning that responds to the diversity of the student population.

Research Question and Objectives

This research seeks to answer the following question: How do teachers apply differentiation strategies to address student diversity in a private bilingual school in the Metropolitan District of Quito? This question is based on an understanding that teachers use differentiated strategies in their teaching of English and that their decision-making is influenced by factors such as teacher training, time, and institutional policies.

The general objective of this study is to analyze the differentiation strategies used by English teachers in a private bilingual school to address student variability. To this end, the following specific objectives are proposed:

1. To identify the differentiation strategies implemented by teachers to respond to diversity in the English classroom.
2. To examine the factors that influence teachers' decision-making when implementing differentiation strategies.
3. To analyze successful practices that can contribute to the improvement of English language learning in bilingual contexts.

Context of the Study

The present research is a qualitative case study. The data collection was done through interviews and observations with teachers from the selected private bilingual school in Quito. The sample of this research was made up of nine English teachers from both primary and secondary school, which provided a broad understanding of the strategies applied in the classroom. Likewise, the data analysis followed an interpretive perspective, looking for patterns and trends in the implementation of these strategies.

The analysis of student variability and the implementation of differentiation strategies in English language teaching in bilingual contexts requires a solid theoretical framework to understand teachers' pedagogical decisions. Differentiated instruction, along with other methodological approaches, provides essential tools for addressing diversity in the classroom and ensuring that each student receives appropriate support for his or her linguistic and academic development. To gain an in-depth understanding of how these principles are applied in practice, it is necessary to review the existing literature on instructional differentiation, teacher decision-making, and English language instruction in bilingual settings. The following section presents a detailed analysis of

previous studies that have addressed these issues, identifying the major theories, approaches, and relevant findings.

This study is organized in five chapters that address the student variability in bilingual English classrooms. The first chapter provides context and explains the importance of the topic within bilingual education settings. The second chapter reviews the literature on key concepts related to differentiated instruction and the decision-making processes of teachers. The third chapter describes the qualitative methodology used, based on interviews and classroom observations. The results and analysis present how teachers adapt their instruction through various differentiation strategies, often in response to immediate classroom needs. Finally, the conclusions demonstrate how differentiation, often applied intuitively, is essential in creating more inclusive and effective learning environments. This research provides a grounded, real-life perspective at how teachers experience and respond to the everyday challenges and opportunities of differentiation in bilingual classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the area of education, it is fundamental for effective teaching practices to know about learner variability, as it recognizes the differences between students and how these differences influence how they learn. However, school systems continue to use a one-size-fits-all model that does not benefit all students, as this type of model does not address their individual needs (Pape, 2018). This study of how teachers in a private bilingual school in Ecuador manage student variability in language classrooms, what differentiation strategies they use and what guides their decision-making, is situated in the context of differentiated instruction, building on the work of Tomlinson (2000).

As emphasized by Tomlinson (2001), “kids of the same age aren’t all alike when it, comes to learning... What we share in common makes us human. How we differ makes us individuals” (p. 1). This acknowledgment emphasizes the importance of addressing the diverse needs, abilities, and background of students in order to help them develop their full potential in the classroom. Regarding this, Gardner (1993) and his theory of multiple intelligence offers important insights saying that every person might possess different intellectual strengths and therefore, learn in multiple ways. Moreover, learners should not be limited to one way of learning and these intelligences can be increased with practice. That is one of the main reasons why teachers might improve their teaching by recognizing the differences among students and making changes as needed after analyzing the particularities of each classroom (Carillo & López, 2014).

Types of Learner Variability

Learner variability refers to a diversity in the strengths, needs, and preferences of individuals into the learning process. To reach effective education, it is necessary to understand and make the needed changes so every student can acquire, process and

demonstrate knowledge. There are different types of learner variability that are relevant depending on how the individual is engaged with the educational content.

Cognitive variability encompasses differences in cognitive abilities such as attention, memory, processing speed and these affect learning preferences and processing strengths (Tomlinson, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). *Learning styles variability* refers to the individual preferences on how the information is presented and processed, noting that individuals have different preferences for visual, auditory or kinesthetic modes of learning. It also includes the preference for organization, pace, and social interaction (Gardner, 1983). Recognizing and accommodating these preferences is crucial for effective teaching and learning experiences.

In addition, *socio-emotional factors* play a central role in shaping learning outcomes. Learners have different levels of motivation and self-regulation and different cultural backgrounds that influence their engagement and achievement in educational settings (Goleman, 1995; Gardner, 1993). Learners with high levels of intrinsic motivation may be more likely to persist with challenging tasks, whereas those with low self-efficacy may require additional support and encouragement. The importance of *variability of background and experience* is also clear, as it highlights how learners' diverse cultural backgrounds and prior experiences shape their perspectives and interactions with educational content (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Freire, 1970). This variability underlines the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and personalized teaching approaches to meet the unique needs of all learners.

Furthermore, *developmental variability* emphasizes that individuals progress through developmental stages at different rates, resulting in varied cognitive development (Piaget, 1952; Montessori, 1949). Understanding these developmental differences is key to designing instructional strategies that address learners' evolving cognitive abilities.

Finally, Grandin (2010) advocates for the recognition of *neurodiversity* as a natural variation in neurological functioning. Accommodating neurodiverse learners promotes inclusive learning environments that embrace the strengths and challenges associated with different learning profiles.

Influence of COVID-19 on Learner Variability

Although this study does not focus on how teaching changed after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to recognize how this global event intensified the attention to the concept of learner variability. Even though the concept of variability is not new in education, pandemic profoundly disrupted education systems worldwide and accelerated the adoption of remote learning (Hoofman and Secord, 2021). This situation not only highlighted the critical need to address learner variability in digital learning environments, exacerbating inequalities in education (van de Werfhorst et al., 2022), but also forced teachers to come out of their traditional methods of teaching and accommodate the different needs of students (Hodges et al., 2020). The pandemic reinforced the necessity of flexible and adaptive instruction that could be able to function with different learning styles, preferences, modalities (Hoofman and Secord, 2021) and increased the importance for teachers to be prepared to pivot between different learning models, always having students as the central point (OECD, 2021).

Differentiation

In response to learner variability, differentiation emerges as a promising pedagogical approach as it recognizes the diversity of learners in terms of language proficiency levels, learning styles, abilities, needs, and cultural backgrounds. On this regard, Tomlinson (2001) explains that differentiation “provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (p. 1). Gregory and Chapman (2012) also

highlight the importance of differentiation in the classroom by saying that “students do not all learn the same thing in the same way on the same day... It meets learners where they are and offers challenging, appropriate options for them in order to achieve success” (p. 6).

Differentiation should not be mistaken for individualization, as differentiation does not assume a distinct level for each learner, but instead, it tries to develop engaging, relevant and interesting learning experiences for all the students in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et all, 2003).

In the context of private bilingual schools, where students may have varying degrees of proficiency in both languages of instruction, differentiated instruction becomes a relevant framework for understanding how teachers adapt their approaches to meet the unique needs of varied learners (Tomlinson, 2000; Griffiths, 2013; Geletu and Mihiretie, 2022). This perspective suggests that teachers are decision-makers who can employ a variety of instructional strategies, assessments and classroom management techniques to adapt to the linguistic diversity inherent in the variability of learners in language classrooms (Griffiths, 2013; Ortega et al., 2018).

The importance of differentiated instruction in classrooms to accommodate students' different needs and learning styles is agreed upon. However, researchers have found limited evidence that this approach actually occurs in classrooms, as it has many barriers to implementation (Ashton, 2017; Geletu and Mihiretie 2022; Tomlinson and Moon, 2013). Consequently, it becomes essential for educators to deepen their understanding of the various forms and dimensions that differentiation can take within instructional practices.

By embracing differentiation, educators aim to create learning environments that foster engagement, promote academic growth, and recognize the individual strengths of

each learner. (Morgan, 2014; Borja et al., 2015). This approach involves tailoring content, processes, and assessment methods, as well as fostering supportive classroom dynamics, to ensure equitable access and meaningful educational experiences. Therefore, differentiation operates not just as a teaching strategy but also promotes equity, inclusion, and student-centered learning (Shareefa et al., 2019; Merchan et al., 2016; Ortega et al., 2018, Tomlinson 2008).

Types of Differentiation

Differentiated instruction can be implemented in various ways, but it is commonly organized into three main categories: content, process, and product differentiation. These categories refer to what students learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their understanding, respectively. The following sections will explore each type in detail, drawing on existing literature.

Content Differentiation

Content differentiation involves tailoring instructional content to students' preparedness, interests, strengths, and learning profiles (Tomlison, 2008; Goyibova et al., 2025; Reis and Renzulli, 2018) This approach recognizes that learners have unique strengths and challenges and that educators need to provide multiple entry points and pathways to access the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2001). Similarly, it focuses on adapting instructional methods and strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences (Tomlinson, 2014; Goyibova et al., 2025).

Process Differentiation

Process differentiation in education refers to the strategic adaptation of teaching and learning processes to meet the diverse needs of students (Reis and Renzulli, 2018). One aspect of process differentiation involves adapting instructional methods, materials, and strategies to enhance different learning styles, preferences, and abilities (Reis and Renzulli,

2018; Lindner and Schwab, 2020, Tomlinson 2001). Educators may employ a variety of teaching approaches, such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, or project-based learning, to engage students and support their learning needs (Tomlinson, 2014).

Additionally, process differentiation can involve providing students with choices and opportunities for self-directed learning. By offering flexibility in how students demonstrate their understanding and mastery of concepts, educators empower learners to take ownership of their learning journey (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Furthermore, technology can play a significant role in process differentiation by enabling personalized learning experiences and adaptive instruction. Educational platforms and tools can provide tailored learning pathways, adaptive assessments, and real-time feedback, allowing educators to customize instruction based on individual student needs (Means et al., 2009; Reis and Renzulli, 2018).

Tomlinson distinguishes between process and learning environment, noting that the latter is important for students to feel welcome and safe, and to grow both academically and emotionally (Tomlinson, 2001). For teachers, this is related to process differentiation as both try to respond to the diversity in the classroom. In this case, when teachers make pedagogical decisions, they focus not only on teaching and learning, but also on promoting an emotionally safe environment to learning.

In this sense, differentiated learning environments involve the intentional design and adaptation of the physical, social, and technological aspects of the classroom to meet the different needs, interests, and learning styles of students (Tomlinson, 2014). Creating areas set aside for collaboration, independent work, or quiet reflection allows students to choose the environment that best suits their needs (Lindner and Schwab, 2020). In addition, teachers can foster a positive classroom culture by promoting respect, empathy, and inclusion among students. Strategies such as cooperative learning and peer coaching

contribute to students' social-emotional well-being and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

The use of Spanish in the English class also takes part of the process differentiation as "it can be a facilitative tool that will improve the language proficiency of students" (Pan and Pan, 2010, p.88). It is stated that there are teachers who strongly believed that the L1 has to be suppressed in order to correctly develop the L2 as it can lead to language transfer (Yavuz, 2012; Kerr, 2019) making them having errors. However, there are also teachers who consider that the L1 "breaks the psychological barriers before the teaching begins and that the use of the L1 creates a low anxiety atmosphere for both the learners and the teachers" (Yavuz, 2012, p.4339). There are different studies that consider L1 as an effective tool because it eases comprehension and give more confidence to students (Pan and Pan, 2010). Kerr (2019) explained that at the end, teachers are the ones who can tell how much, when, and in which ways L1 has to be used for each student.

Product Differentiation

Product differentiation in education refers to the strategic adaptation of assessment methods, formats, and criteria to accommodate the diverse needs, abilities, and preferences of students (Tomlinson, 2014). Educators can offer a variety of assessment options, such as written tests, oral presentations, projects, portfolios, or performance-based assessments, allowing students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that best suit their abilities and preferences (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson 2017; Reis and Renzulli, 2018). Educators can offer additional time, breaks, or alternative testing environments for students with disabilities or other special needs (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Reis and Renzulli, 2018). Adapted assessments ensure that students are

challenged appropriately and receive personalized support to improve their understanding (National Research Council, 2001).

Decision-Making

Reis and Renzulli (2018) mentioned that “differentiation is about the decisions and choices that teachers make about how to differentiate curriculum for a diverse group of students”. Weick and Shaughnessy (2023) examined the impact of institutional guidelines and standardized tests on English teachers' decision-making. They found that while teachers often strive to customize their instructional methods, external pressures such as curriculum standards and testing requirements can significantly limit their ability to implement innovative teaching practices. The importance of teacher autonomy in decision-making is highlighted in a study by Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010), who argue that teachers' professional judgment plays a vital role in adapting teaching methods to the diverse needs of learners. Furthermore, Maffea (2020) explore how resource availability influences decision-making, as limited access to teaching materials and technology can restrict teachers' choices, particularly in under-resourced schools.

The Situation in Ecuador

Ecuador's English instruction follows the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and students are required to reach a B1 level of English (Borja et al., 2015). English must be taught in every school in the country (Cifuentes et al, 2019). However, some authors consider that schools do not include the learning of English in an effective way, mainly because of teachers' lack of preparation and motivation (Cáneppa et al, 2018; Ponce et al, 2019), students' lack of opportunities to use the language outside the classroom (Cifuentes et al, 2019), or because it does not take into account the implications of special educational needs (Macías & Villafuerte, 2020). Despite various curriculum reforms over the years that have prioritized English, Ecuador

continues to have the lowest level of English proficiency in Latin America (La Hora, 2023). These challenges also extend to higher education, where students are required to pass English courses in order to graduate (Ponce et al, 2019).

In a comprehensive study, Newman and Gibson (2023) analyzed English language teaching in Ecuador, focusing on teachers' perceptions of the national curriculum and their application of communicative methodologies. The study found that although teachers report using communicative strategies, they also frequently employ objective-based approaches. While the research highlights teachers' concern regarding students' low performance, it mainly attributes these outcomes to external factors and does not propose meaningful changes in teaching practices. Notably, the study does not explore how teachers differentiate instruction to address student variability. This gap in the literature underscores the need to investigate differentiation strategies as a crucial component for effective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in the Ecuadorian context, which is the central focus of this research

Research by Marriot & Zambrano (2018) emphasizes the crucial role that differentiated instruction can play in education, especially since traditional instruction has shown to be unable to meet the needs of all students. Differentiation allows for the adaptation of teaching practices to the individual characteristic of each student improving their learning and therefore influencing the teaching of English. (Fabre et al, 2016).

Special Educational Needs

The National Disability Council (CONADIS) was created in 2011, in Ecuador to enhance awareness of people with disabilities. Macías and Villafuerte (2020) exposed the situation of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Ecuador saying that students with SEN are nowadays present in both public and private institutions. However, they face different

problems in the learning process such as impulsivity, disruptive behaviors, hyperactivity, deficit of attention, sensorial disabilities, among others.

The literature review highlighted how teaching strategies are both challenged and enriched by learner variability. This variability was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required teachers to adapt to new educational realities. In this context, differentiation emerges as a key approach to address students' individual needs through adaptations in content, process, and product. Teachers' decision-making involves the continuous analysis of classroom dynamics and the available resources to support learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This section describes the methodology of the study, including the site and participant selection, justification of the methodology and research tools, data collection, and data analysis procedure. A qualitative approach was used through a case study focused on a bilingual private school in Quito. The data was collected by interviews and observations. All procedures and instruments were reviewed and approved by the university's ethics committee before beginning the study.

Site Selection

The school was chosen as it met the parameters of the study, which is focused on the strategies used in a bilingual educational context to address student variability. This research site provided an appropriate setting to explore the teaching practices and decision-making process of English teachers. Furthermore, the school was open and willing to support the research process by granting the researcher access to both teachers and classroom observations. This collaboration made it a practical and suitable location to work and achieve the goals of the study.

Because the socioeconomic context of the school is of a medium-high level, the teachers have many educational resources that can help them with managing students' variability. This context is worth mentioning as it makes it possible to observe if there are resources and institutional support to facilitate the implementation of differentiation strategies. Additionally, all the students in this school share Spanish as their first language. This common linguistic background provides teachers with a shared point of reference to support students' understanding of English, whether through the strategic use of Spanish for clarification or through instructional approaches that build on students' existing language knowledge.

Justification of the Methodology and Research Tools

The present research seeks to answer the question of: How do teachers respond to students' variability in the English class? The research is based on exploring the differentiation strategies and decision-making factors in order to gain insight into effective educational practices adapted to the diverse needs of students, fostering a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. To achieve this, a qualitative case study was conducted in a private bilingual school in the Metropolitan District of Quito.

A qualitative approach was chosen because it emphasizes "the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). This approach enables capturing diverse perspectives and experiences of teachers within the specific context of the English class. As Yin (2003) explains, "case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed" (p. 1), aligning with the purpose of this research, which seeks to understand how teachers address student variability in the classroom. Additionally, Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that case studies are qualitative designs that allow for an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon. Given that this study focuses on a private bilingual school in Quito, a case study design provides a comprehensive view of the strategies and decisions teachers use to respond to the variability among students, offering insights into the specific approaches adopted in this educational context.

To gather the necessary data, this study employed semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they use a flexible set of guiding questions rather than a fixed list, allowing for open-ended responses that enable deeper exploration of the participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2002). Since this research aims to identify and analyze the strategies used by English teachers to address student variability, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews

allowed teachers to freely express their perceptions and experiences, facilitating a better understanding of how they perceive and manage diversity in the classroom.

In addition, observations provide what Merriam (2002) describes as a "firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account obtained in an interview" (p. 13). Observing teachers in action offers a view of the strategies they employ, the interactions they have with students, and how they handle unexpected situations in real-time. This method provides a unique opportunity to witness a typical class in a teacher's day, capturing authentic behaviors and responses that might not surface in an interview. Observations thus help to understand teachers' practices in a natural setting, free from potential biases that can arise in self-reported accounts.

Description of the Participants

The study includes English teachers from both primary and secondary levels currently working at the private bilingual school chosen for the research. The school has in total thirteen English teachers in both levels. However, only nine consented to participate in the study. The sample includes male and female teachers, between 25 to 65 years of age, and with a minimum of two years of experience teaching English. As the school is bilingual, each teacher teaches various English subjects such as Grammar, Reading and Writing, Oral Language, Phonics, Science, Social Studies, TOEFL, English B, Biology, among others. This provides the study a diverse group of English educators that implement differentiation strategies in different ways.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection for this study took place in 2024, after two academic years of remote and hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This recent return to face-to-face learning provided a relevant backdrop for observing how teachers addressed learner

variability in a post-pandemic context. The data collection was done in two phases: semi-structured interviews and observations.

Phase 1: Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were carried out in a private space inside the school to provide a safe and comfortable environment for the teachers. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. The set of guiding questions included questions about their personal information, their experience teaching English, their subjects, the differentiation strategies they use, the decision-making factors, and the challenges they have to overcome (see Annex A). The interviews were recorded with the previous consent of the teachers. They were carried out in Spanish as the L1 of the teachers is that language and, in that way, some specific details will not be lost. After getting the recordings, the transcriptions were done directly in English by listening to them and writing them down on an Excel document. The main researcher was in charge of doing the translation as accurate as possible.

Phase 2: Observations

Observations were conducted with each participating teacher. As they teach various subjects, they were the ones who decided which class they wanted to be observed. Each observation lasted 40 minutes, which is the time of a class in the school. During the observation, a guide was used to record the different strategies implemented by the teachers (see Annex B). Students' interaction was not taken into account as the study did not include their participation.

The observations were non-participatory, giving the researcher an exterior perspective of the different events happening in the class. The researcher was sitting in a corner table observing the class without interfering with the lesson's development.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data collected was carried out by thematic coding, based on the interview transcripts and the observation notes. This kind of coding was used as it helps to identify and analyze relevant patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data were coded based on three themes: the variability in the class, according to the teacher; the differentiation strategies used by teachers to adapt to student variability; and the considerations that influence teachers' choices in adapting teaching methods.

Method triangulation was used to compare the information obtained in the interviews with the observations conducted in the classroom. This kind of triangulation uses different methods of data collection to give a broader understanding of the phenomenon under study (Carter, 2014). During the analysis, the findings from both interviews and observations were compared to identify consistencies and discrepancies; when a topic appeared in both sources, a strong pattern was noted. However, elements that were mentioned in interviews but not observed in the classroom, as only one class observation was done, were also highlighted and discussed in the results.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected during the research, offering detailed insights into the strategies employed by English teachers to address student variability in a bilingual educational setting. The analysis builds upon the qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, organizing the findings into themes. The main themes are: learner variability considerations which mainly explores the English level of the students and what is the impact that have over their learning process; the situation with students with special needs and the efforts needed to support them; differentiation strategies and decision-making where teachers show the different strategies they use in class and how they make those decisions, and the challenges when implementing differentiation strategies.

The goal of this section is to provide an in-depth understanding of how teachers adapt their practices to meet the diverse needs of their students, drawing connections between the observed strategies and the interview insights.

Learner Variability Considerations

Students' English Level According to the Teachers

When describing variability in their classrooms, teachers chiefly talked about students' English level. The teachers interviewed emphasized that the overall English proficiency of students is generally strong. A key factor contributing to this is that the majority of students have been enrolled in the school from an early age, allowing them to develop and maintain a consistent level of English proficiency over time. This continuity has enabled students to progress steadily through the school's bilingual program, benefiting from a solid foundation in the language. Teachers noted that students who have been in the school for several years demonstrate a strong understanding of English, which

is evident in their ability to engage with academic content and actively participate in class discussions.

Despite the generally strong English proficiency, seven out of nine teachers also noted that approximately 20% of the students face challenges with English. This is especially true for those who transfer from schools with fewer English instruction hours. Daniela, a primary teacher, highlighted that “the main factor influencing student variability is coming from other schools where the language is not taught for many hours. This results in a significant gap in their knowledge compared to their peers.” Benjamin, a secondary teacher, similarly remarked, “It is clear that students who have been studying at the school since a young age, or those who join later, exhibit noticeable differences in their language proficiency.” Luis, a primary teacher, echoed these points, stating that “students from prior schools that do not offer sufficient English instruction, particularly in terms of weekly hours, often struggle to meet the required language level.” These insights reveal that learner variability in English proficiency is not only a matter of individual abilities, but also a reflection of unequal access to language instruction across different educational settings. Teachers recognize that limited exposure to the language in previous schools reinforce the need for differentiated strategies to bridge these gaps within the classroom.

Students from other schools often encounter difficulties in adapting to the school’s linguistic demands, particularly at the secondary level, where the academic requirements are more advanced. Conversely, the adaptation process tends to be smoother in primary school, as younger children are generally more adaptable to language acquisition and have more time to catch up with their peers. Teachers emphasized that support and differentiated instruction are crucial in helping these students overcome their challenges and successfully integrate into the school’s bilingual environment. In this regard, Rafaela,

primary and secondary teacher, mentioned that “some students need external English classes when the case is extreme and have many voids of information...differentiation is the solution, different material according to their level.” Benjamin, a secondary teacher, also mentioned that “if they come for the Bachillerato, they need to be open to catch up, to have the will to do it, or to be at the same level.” Emiliano, a secondary teacher, said that “it is important to have and create strategies so new students aren’t afraid of the subject in English...New students get used to the English environment and finish the school year well.”

Given that the study focused only on teachers’ actions, no information about the students’ linguistic antecedents was available from observation.³

Students with Special Educational Needs

When discussing the topic of varying learning abilities and levels, teachers frequently referenced students with special educational needs (NEE), which in Ecuador are categorized into three main groups. This classification framework is widely recognized in the country’s educational context and helps guide teaching strategies and accommodations. The teachers interviewed were aware of these categories and often connected their discussion of classroom variability to their experiences with NEE students, highlighting the importance of addressing diverse needs in a bilingual educational setting.

All nine of the teachers mentioned that their classes typically include two to three students with special educational needs. Considering that the average class size is around eighteen to twenty-three students, this represents approximately 10% to 15% of the student population per classroom. They emphasized the additional effort required to ensure these students can keep pace with their peers, particularly in a bilingual curriculum that demands strong language skills. Teachers also acknowledged that while these

students may face unique challenges, their progress is often supported by strategies such as differentiation, additional support, and collaboration with DECE (Departamento de Consejería Estudiantil). This further reinforces the importance of understanding variability in the classroom and tailoring teaching practices to meet diverse needs.

DECE plays a key role on this topic. Rafaela, primary and secondary teacher, noted “DECE helps us identifying the students who need differentiation and how to deal with them”. Javier, primary and secondary teacher, exposed “we work with DECE and I have to follow the recommendations and strategies assigned by this department. For example, differentiated exams, seats change”. As DECE plays such an important role, there were two teachers who consider than in order to make a better work, it is necessary to have more people working in that department.

Differentiation Strategies and Decision-making

Teachers address student variability in the classroom through the implementation of various differentiation strategies used to meet the diverse needs and abilities of their students. In this study, three primary types of differentiation were identified: content differentiation, where teachers adapt the materials and topics to align with the students' varying proficiency levels; process differentiation, which involves modifying teaching methods to cater to individual learning styles and paces; and assessment differentiation, offering students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning outcomes. These strategies highlight the teachers' efforts to create inclusive and flexible learning environments that address the unique challenges of student variability. The following subsections describe the strategies used and why teachers decided to use them.

Content Differentiation

During the interviews, it became evident that content differentiation is a strategy commonly employed by teachers to address the varying levels of their students. Teachers

explained that they adapt the materials and topics covered in their lessons based on the needs and abilities of their students. For instance, Rafaela, a primary teacher mentioned, "If the level is not acquired because of a special need, then differentiation is the solution, different material according to their level." This statement highlights the teacher's approach to tailoring instructional content to meet the varying needs of students. It suggests a flexible teaching strategy where the content is adjusted to ensure that all students can access the learning material in a manner that aligns with their individual abilities. This approach is critical in a bilingual setting where students come with diverse language proficiencies and learning styles. It emphasizes the importance of adapting materials to bridge gaps in learning and support all students in achieving success.

Benjamin, primary and secondary teacher, explained "students with 3rd grade NEE are provided with different materials, they use different books according to their level". This strategy contemplates the fact that some textbooks are more complex and can frustrate the student, so instead they receive materials adapted to their necessities. Luis, primary teacher, also said "with the ones who are not in the desired level of English, I differentiate classes, material, explanations."

Emilio, secondary teacher, added "the adaptations are made according to the necessity. If DECE asks it because there's any level of adaptation, we can change materials". On this regard, the importance of DECE is reemphasized as it is in charge of telling the teachers what kind of abilities and necessities the students have.

In some classes, teachers gave students different materials, like alternative books or customized worksheets, which shows how they use content differentiation. This helps teachers meet the different needs and levels of their students. When students get materials that fit their abilities, they feel more confident and engaged. Especially in bilingual

classrooms, where students have different levels of English, adapting materials like this helps make sure everyone can follow along and learn in a way that works for them.

Process Differentiation

Process differentiation played a significant role during the interviews. Many teachers emphasized the importance of group work and pair activities to provide students with diverse learning experiences. Collaborative learning strategies were widely favored, as they encourage interaction and mutual support among students. Daniela, primary teacher, highlighted this benefit, stating “group work promotes cooperation and learning between classmates.” Similarly, Benjamin, secondary teacher, supports the use of group activities but prefers to assign groups himself, explaining “I’m the one who choose the groups because I like to mix students so they can help each other and give peer feedback.” Following this idea, Luis, a primary teacher, pointed out that strategic grouping plays a key role in ensuring effective learning interactions. He stated “the teacher organizes the groups by making students help each other in groups with different levels of knowledge.” Karolina, a primary teacher who works with first graders stressed the importance of structured grouping in younger classrooms. She explained, “I have to choose the groups; otherwise, chaos takes over.”

On the other hand, Emiliano, a secondary teacher working with older students, believes that allowing students to form their own groups fosters autonomy and real-world collaboration skills. He explained “in the university, it happens that you have to make a group with different people from different majors.... when they only work in the same group, I tend to make different groups.”

Process differentiation is important because offering diverse activities gives students different ways to engage with the same content. Daniela, primary teacher, noted “In my classes, I always try to diversify the activities. For example, if we are working on

reading, the more advanced children can read aloud or help explain new words, while those at a lower level can participate in simpler activities, such as identifying key words.” This teacher’s strategy aims to keep all students engaged while addressing their individual learning needs. By adapting the difficulty and complexity of tasks, the teacher ensures that every student can participate meaningfully and at their own pace. This approach not only supports students’ academic progress but also helps in building confidence and motivation, particularly for those who may struggle in a typical classroom environment. Luis also exposed the use of a bunch of different activities by exposing “I use games, songs, English movies, summaries…writing or drawing instead of speaking”.

Karolina, a primary teacher, noted the importance to adapt the way content is taught depending on the student’s readiness level by saying “using different methodology, as you cannot do the same with a kid that has bases versus one who doesn’t understand anything.”. This acknowledges that students require different methods or strategies to process the same learning objectives, based on what they already know or are capable of doing.

An important aspect of process differentiation is providing students with the flexibility to learn in different environments. Seven out of nine teachers highlighted that they like students to work outside as they can be more relax, learn in a different way, do not have monotonous days, have a lot of movement, work in groups, and can have fresh air. Since there was only one observation, it was not a possible to evidence that students go outside to work.

The use of students’ native language, Spanish, emerged as a strategy linked to process differentiation. By incorporating Spanish, teachers provide students with a familiar linguistic tool that helps clarify complex ideas and instructions. This adaptation allows teachers to modify the learning process itself, how information is presented and

internalized, responding directly to the specific needs of learners who may struggle with English, making the learning experience more accessible and effective. However, this topic was the most controversial among participants, as teachers have different views regarding the use of Spanish in the English class.

The level of English required in the school's English classes is notably high, particularly in secondary school, where students are expected to tackle more demanding subjects entirely in English. Regarding this challenge, Emiliano, a secondary teacher, stated, "Science is hard, as some of the students are just learning English." Teachers highlighted during the interviews that this approach is intended to challenge students and prepare them for academic and professional settings where advanced English proficiency is essential. Additionally, the school fosters an immersive language environment by encouraging students to communicate exclusively in English during class. This practice begins in early grades, gradually helping students develop the habit of thinking, speaking, and engaging with the language naturally. Teachers believe that this strategy not only strengthens language proficiency but also boosts students' confidence in using English in diverse contexts. Daniela, a primary teacher, emphasized, "I work in a bilingual school, and it is essential that the students get into English all of the time."

Spanish use was a controversial way of differentiating. Four out of nine teachers stated that they definitely do not use Spanish in class, while the remaining five reported that approximately 75% of their instruction is in English, allowing for some Spanish usage when necessary. For example, Benjamin, a secondary teacher, expressed a strong position against using Spanish: "I'm totally against the use of Spanish. We can help students to familiarize with the L2... making them repeat is a good way." Similarly, Javier, another secondary teacher, stated:

I never use Spanish. Ninety-nine percent of my students talk to me in English... that one percent accounts for any eventuality, but I don't use Spanish because this is a bilingual school, and the authorities require it. Besides, I'm an English teacher, and if I start speaking in Spanish, students will get used to it and won't make the effort to speak in English. It is part of my professional and ethical duty to speak in English in class.

On the other hand, some teachers acknowledged that limited Spanish use can be beneficial in certain situations. Many of them choose to incorporate Spanish strategically to ensure that students fully understand difficult concepts, avoiding unnecessary frustration. They recognize that excessive confusion can lead to stress and disengagement, which is why they sometimes rely on students' native language to provide clarity and support. By doing so, they create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, allowing students to gradually build their confidence in English without feeling overwhelmed.

Cristina, who teaches both primary and secondary students, noted, "If the kid feels anxious and cannot find the words, I allow them to use Spanish to prevent frustration. It has a lot to do with their emotions." Supporting this perspective, Karolina, a primary teacher, stated, "If they don't understand even though you have used different ways to get to them, Spanish is used to explain... do not frustrate the kid." Barbara, primary teacher, also supported this by expressing that when kids are learning to read and write, English takes a second place limiting the use of only English at class. Similarly, Rafaela, who teaches both primary and secondary levels, explained, "At the beginning, it helps create a confident environment, and little by little, we push them to speak only in English." Finally, Emiliano, a secondary teacher, pointed out:

Sometimes I have to use Spanish because there are some concepts that can get confused... The etymology of some words helps them understand in a better way by giving them a Spanish translation. Not only Spanish is a good tool, but any language that can help you to understand any concept.

Observations of classroom practices confirmed these perspectives. Teachers who allowed some Spanish in class permitted students to ask questions or express themselves in Spanish when necessary. They also used Spanish selectively to explain complex concepts, give instructions, or regain students' attention when they were not following the lesson. However, they often required students to repeat what they had said in English afterward. Conversely, teachers who strictly adhered to an English-only policy conducted their lessons entirely in English and did not permit students to speak in any other language. This approach was especially evident in secondary school classrooms.

Product Differentiation

Product differentiation helps teachers adapt their assessments so that students can show what they have learned in different ways. Instead of making all students complete the same type of assignment, teachers offer choices that match their strengths and interests. This approach keeps students engaged and allows them to express their understanding in ways that work best for them. By giving different options, teachers make learning more inclusive and help students feel more confident in their abilities. Daniela (primary teacher) explained "I use short comprehension quizzes and interactive games where they can show what they have learnt." Daniela, primary teacher, also mentioned "I use small comprehension tests and interactive games where everyone can show what they have learnt." Similarly, Rafaela and Cristina (both primary and secondary teachers) agree on the use of feedback so students can understand their mistakes and then make them repeat the activity or assign a different one.

Because there was only one observation for this research, it was not possible to observe the use of product differentiation in the class.

Challenges When Implementing Differentiation Strategies

Teachers face a variety of challenges when implementing differentiation strategies in the English classroom. One significant challenge is the limited time available to address the diverse needs of all students. Teachers often work within a constrained class schedule that leaves little room for individualized attention. Rafaela, primary teacher, explained:

Time limitation is a huge problem. Regarding students with NEE, sometimes is really hard to give them the time they need...Regarding the ones who need extra help, the class is not enough to pay attention and care about every single student. It can be stressful because I want to help everyone.

Another challenge arises from the presence of students with special needs in the classroom. Teachers must adapt their differentiation strategies to accommodate these students, which often requires specialized knowledge and resources. In many cases, the school may not have sufficient resources or support staff to effectively address the unique needs of these students, adding to the teacher's workload. Furthermore, the diversity of learning needs, such as students with learning disabilities or those who require more time for language acquisition, complicates the planning and execution of differentiation strategies. For example, Daniela exposed “sometimes I feel that the school doesn't have the necessary support to manage diversity in the class, especially when talking about students with NEE.” Similarly, Cristina said that even though the school gave them a list of students with NEE, they do not have extra support and they are the ones who mainly decide what and how to do. Luis and Barbara agreed with this as they exposed that DECE

tells who are part of the list but it does not necessarily give them with specific details about what to do.

Benjamin, a secondary teacher, also agree that time is limited by saying “it is not possible to give all the time to the neurodivergent necessities...the time in the school is not enough”. Barbara corroborated “You have limited time as you can work with the others just for a short time if not the others get distracted” Finally, Javier said “because of time, sometimes I haven’t been able to finish some topics, so that is why I cannot continue to the next topic”.

Time limitation becomes even more pronounced when considering the large class sizes, which may include different learners at different proficiency levels. Although teachers did not mention this during the interviews, classroom observations revealed that some classes had limited physical space relative to the number of students. It could be observed that in the more crowded classes, teachers tended to use more Spanish and to make small interruptions in their classes to bring attention back, such as singing a song or calling their attention back. In addition, since the classes are 40 minutes long, when the alarm for the end of the class sounded, 6 out of 9 teachers paused the class without finishing it, while the other 3 finished 5 minutes earlier and did another activity until the alarm sounded.

The combination of time limitations, large class sizes, and the need to meet the requirements of students with special needs makes it difficult for teachers to implement differentiation strategies in a way that ensures every student receives the attention and instruction they need to succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study show that teachers in bilingual classrooms do engage in differentiated instruction, even if they are not always familiar with the term or theoretical framework. Through classroom observations and interviews, it became evident that teachers intuitively adjust their instruction, particularly in terms of process and product, guided by students' needs, interests, readiness, and classroom dynamics. This reinforces what the literature suggests: effective teaching in diverse settings often goes beyond formal theory and relies heavily on responsive, in-the-moment decision-making.

Despite facing numerous challenges, such as time constraints, curriculum demands, behavioral issues, and the need to support students with special educational needs, teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to meeting individual learner needs. Rather than limiting their practice, these challenges push them to seek flexible and creative strategies that adapt to the diversity present in their classrooms. Their work is grounded in empathy, professional judgment, and a desire to make learning meaningful and accessible for all students.

This study offers valuable insights into how differentiated instruction takes shape in Ecuadorian bilingual classrooms. The timing of the data collection, shortly after students returned to face-to-face learning following nearly two years of virtual education due to the COVID-19 pandemic, makes this context especially meaningful. The pandemic didn't just disrupt routines; it brought to light the many ways students learn differently, pushing teachers to rethink and adjust their daily practices. What this research shows is that differentiation isn't a rigid formula, but rather a flexible and evolving process, deeply rooted in the everyday realities teachers face. Acknowledging and supporting the choices teachers make to respond to student variability is vital, not only to improve teaching strategies, but also to foster classrooms that are more inclusive, fair, and responsive to

students' needs. When differentiation is applied thoughtfully, it has the power to enhance student engagement, boost academic success, and build learners' confidence, especially in contexts where students share a first language but have diverse levels of second language proficiency, as is the case in Ecuadorian bilingual schools.

Furthermore, the research presents real, context-based examples of how differentiation can be implemented successfully in English language classrooms. The strategies shared by both primary and secondary teachers in this study may be used as inspiration and guidance for others navigating similar challenges. For educational institutions, this highlights the importance of supporting teachers, not only through time and resources but also by offering professional development opportunities focused on differentiation.

Finally, this research opens the door for further studies in diverse educational contexts, contributing to the growing but still limited body of knowledge on differentiated instruction in Ecuador. By documenting and analyzing what teachers are already doing, this study hopes to strengthen the foundation for more informed, intentional, and student-centered teaching practices across the country.

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ANNEX A: CLASS OBSERVATION SHEET

Protocolo de entrevista para los profesores

Gracias por dedicar su tiempo a participar hoy en esta entrevista. El propósito de esta entrevista es recopilar información valiosa que contribuirá a mi investigación sobre la variabilidad del alumno en el aula de inglés. La entrevista durará aproximadamente entre 45 y 60 minutos. No obstante, siéntase libre de tomarse su tiempo para proporcionar respuestas meditadas. Quiero recordarle que no dude en no responder a ninguna pregunta y que puede finalizar la entrevista en cualquier momento. También quiero que sepa que grabaré esta entrevista para transcribirla y analizarla. Antes de empezar, ¿podría decir un seudónimo de su preferencia para poderlo identificar en este estudio y la fecha de hoy?

1. Información Personal

Muy bien. En primer lugar, quiero saber más sobre su experiencia como docente

- a. ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva enseñando en esta institución?
- b. ¿En qué grados enseña y qué asignatura?
- c. ¿Cuántas horas clase tiene con cada grado?
- d. ¿Puede describir su experiencia enseñando inglés en este colegio bilingüe?

2. Estrategias de Diferenciación

- a. ¿Cuántos alumnos en promedio tiene en cada clase que presenten diferentes capacidades y niveles de aprendizaje?
- b. ¿Cuántos alumnos en promedio cuentan con el nivel de inglés esperado para lograr comprender la clase en inglés?
- c. ¿Qué factores cree que contribuyen en esa variabilidad de alumnos?
- d. ¿Qué estrategias utiliza cuando se da cuenta de que alguno de sus alumnos no está siguiendo la clase o no le está entendiendo?

- e. ¿Qué métodos o estrategias de enseñanza le han resultado más eficaces para lograr apoyar a todos los alumnos y fomentar un entorno de aprendizaje positivo?
- f. ¿Cómo evalúa el progreso y los resultados del aprendizaje de los alumnos que tienen distintos niveles dentro de la misma aula?

3. Factores de Toma de Decisiones

- a. ¿Cómo decide cuándo usar enfoques individualizados versus instrucción para todo el grupo?
- b. ¿Cómo gestiona las limitaciones de tiempo y se asegura de que los alumnos de distintos niveles reciban la atención y el apoyo adecuados?
- c. ¿Cómo toma decisiones sobre la selección de actividades y materiales para la enseñanza del inglés?
- d. ¿Considera las diferencias individuales al planificar y estructurar sus lecciones?
- e. ¿Considera que la escuela en general sabe cómo lidiar con la variabilidad de alumnos y ayudar u orientar a los profesores para que lo hagan?
- f. ¿Colabora con otros profesores, dentro o fuera de su centro, para compartir estrategias y experiencias relacionadas con la variabilidad de alumnos?

Para terminar, me gustaría agradecerle el tiempo que ha dedicado a participar en esta entrevista. Sus opiniones y experiencias contribuirán significativamente al éxito de mi proyecto de investigación. A medida que avance en la investigación, preveo la posibilidad de que me plantee más preguntas. Entonces, ¿puedo pedirle un correo electrónico o un número de contacto para ponerme en contacto con usted? Además, si tiene alguna

pregunta o si hay algo más que le gustaría compartir en el futuro, no dude en ponerse en contacto conmigo.

ANNEX B: CLASS OBSERVATION SHEET**Hoja de Observación de Clases****Información General:**

Fecha:	Curso:
Seudónimo:	Duración de la clase: 40min

Observaciones:

Estrategia mencionada en la entrevista	Utilizada	No utilizada	Parcialmente utilizada
Notas:			

