English Language Teaching and Linguistics Studies
ISSN 2640-9836 (Print) ISSN 2640-9844 (Online)
Vol. 8, No. 5, 2026
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/eltls

Original Paper

Differentiated Teaching Strategies and Practices for Enhancing Student Engagement in Professional English Classrooms

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Received: September 20, 2026 Accepted: October 09, 2026 Online Published: October 24, 2026

doi:10.22158/eltls.v8n5p115 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v8n5p115

Abstract

The vocational English classroom generally faces several practical challenges such as uneven English proficiency among students, weak learning motivation, and prominent classroom silence. The participation levels of students in all three dimensions - behavior, cognition, and emotion - are not satisfactory, severely restricting the cultivation of workplace English communication skills. Differentiated teaching is based on the core concept of "student-centeredness", advocating targeted adjustments in teaching content, process, and outcome evaluation according to students' preparedness levels, interest preferences, and learning styles. This provides strong theoretical support and practical paths for solving the participation dilemma. This study adopts the action research method, selecting a professional class in a vocational college as the object, and comprehensively using English proficiency tests, learning style scales, classroom participation questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations to conduct differentiated teaching practice over one teaching cycle. The research process includes pre-diagnosis and understanding, strategy design based on stratified needs, implementation of multi-dimensional differentiated plans, and post-effect evaluation. Strategy design and implementation cover dynamic student stratification, differentiated presentation of teaching content, flexible organization of processes and methods, and diverse choices of outcome evaluation. The data analysis results show that after implementing differentiated teaching, students' behavioral participation indicators such as the frequency of active questioning in class and task completion rates have significantly improved. The use of deep learning strategies has increased, reflecting the deepening of cognitive participation, and learning interest and self-efficacy have significantly enhanced, indicating the improvement of emotional participation. The study believes that differentiated teaching can effectively activate the multi-dimensional participation in the vocational English classroom by achieving ability matching, granting autonomous choice, and constructing a positive interdependent

cooperative environment. The key to its practice lies in precise diagnosis of student conditions and dynamic adjustment of strategies. It also puts forward higher requirements for teachers' teaching design ability and school resource support.

Keywords

Professional English, Diversified Teaching, Student Engagement, Teaching Strategies, Classroom Practice

1. Introduction

The diversity of the student source in vocational colleges determines the highly heterogeneous nature of vocational English classes. The English foundation of students shows a polarized trend, with some students lacking vocabulary and weak grammar, making it difficult for them to complete basic daily conversations, while a few students have a more solid language foundation and have higher expectations for the class content. This level disparity has led to the predicament of traditional uniform teaching where "good students cannot be satisfied while poor students cannot keep up." At the same time, students generally view English as a public basic course with limited relevance to their majors, lacking long-term internal motivation. The phenomenon of classroom silence is prominent: there are few responses to the teacher's questions, group discussions are merely formalities, and students' willingness to initiate language interaction is weak. From the multi-dimensional model of student participation, this predicament is manifested in the three aspects of behavior, cognition, and emotion: behavioral participation remains at a shallow level of passive listening and mechanical recording; cognitive participation is mainly based on surface memory, lacking reflection and deep processing; emotional participation is mostly manifested as anxiety, fatigue, and even resistance and other negative experiences. The three dimensions of participation mutually restrain and reinforce each other. Improving a single dimension alone is difficult to fundamentally reverse the classroom ecology. It is necessary to seek breakthroughs from the teaching concept and strategy level.

In response to this participation predicament, differentiated teaching provides a systematic solution based on the "student-centered" concept. This teaching framework, rooted in constructivism and multiple intelligences theory, centers on acknowledging that learner differences are an objective existence in the classroom rather than an obstacle to be eliminated. The starting point of teaching design should shift from uniform content and progress to the diverse preparation levels, interests, and learning styles of students. Differentiated teaching implements adaptive adjustments in three dimensions: the content dimension focuses on the difficulty gradient and presentation channels of learning materials, the process dimension emphasizes the flexible organization of learning activities, and the product dimension grants diverse representation forms for learning outcomes. By introducing this framework into vocational English classes, teachers can design differentiated task sheets for different levels of students based on diagnostic analysis of their learning situations, provide multimodal learning resources and activity menus, and offer various choices such as oral presentations, role-playing,

and project works in the outcome display. From this perspective, students' silence and disengagement are regarded as signals of the mismatch between teaching content and cognitive starting points, prompting teachers to respond dynamically rather than uniformly. When students continuously encounter learning tasks of moderate difficulty, matching style, and with choices, a successful learning experience drives the recovery of self-efficacy, moderate challenges stimulate the deepening of cognitive engagement, and the right to choose based on interests and strengths nourish the sense of belonging and positive emotions towards the class. Thus, differentiated teaching does not lower standards or infinitely cater to preferences. Instead, it precisely responds to differences, builds appropriate scaffolds, and transforms the discrete distribution of students' abilities into the vitality source of multi-dimensional interaction in the classroom, laying a solid theoretical and practical foundation for enhancing the participation in vocational English classes.

2. Research Design

2.1 The research Object

This study selected a natural class of the XX major in the second year of a certain vocational college as the research field. There were a total of 42 students in the class. The preliminary English proficiency test results showed that the students' English foundation presented a significant differentiation trend: approximately 28.6% of the students had not reached the English proficiency level required for junior high school graduation, 54.8% were at the medium level range, and 16.6% had passed the College English Application Ability Examination. The results of the learning style scale survey further indicated that there were obvious preference differences in the way students received and processed information. These structural differences provided a practical basis for the implementation of differentiated teaching.

2.2 The Research Method

This study adopts the action research method as the core research paradigm, following the spiral cycle path of "planning - action - observation - reflection". The researcher and the instructor, who also serves as the teacher, continuously diagnose problems, implement interventions, and evaluate the effects in the teaching practice. To enhance the triangulation validity of the research, questionnaires are used to collect quantitative data, semi-structured interviews are employed to obtain in-depth qualitative information, and classroom observation methods are combined to record the behavioral manifestations during the teaching process. The integrated use of multiple methods aims to comprehensively capture the mechanism and actual effectiveness of differentiated teaching on students' participation from different perspectives.

2.3 The Data Collection

The data collection tools for this study consist of four categories. Firstly, the student English proficiency test paper is compiled based on the difficulty standards of the college entrance examination English, and is used to divide the students' preparation levels in the pre-test stage. The learning style scale is revised according to the Kolb learning style model and is used to diagnose students'

information processing preferences. Details can be found in Table 1. Secondly, the classroom participation survey questionnaire is adapted based on the Fredricks three-dimensional model and includes three subscales: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional participation. It is administered in both the pre-test and post-test stages to quantitatively assess the changes in students' participation levels before and after the intervention. Thirdly, the semi-structured interview outline is designed around three themes: learning experience, participation changes, and perception of teaching strategies. Students at different levels are selected at the end of each round of action research for in-depth interviews. The teacher reflection log records the immediate observations, problem analysis, and decision-making on strategy adjustments after each teaching intervention. Fourthly, the classroom observation record sheet focuses on the behavioral participation dimension. The cooperating teachers use a five-minute sampling unit to systematically record the frequency and quality of students' attentive listening, active responses, and collaborative discussions, providing process-based evidence for the changes in behavioral participation.

Table 1. Data Collection Tools

Tool Type	Name	Testing Time	Data Form	Corresponding Dimension
Test Paper	English proficiency pre-test	Week 1	Quantitative score	Preparation level diagnosis
Scale	Learning style questionnaire	Week 1	Type classification	Learning preference diagnosis
Questionnaire	Class participation questionnaire (pre-test)	Week 1	Likert five-point scale	Behavior/Cognition/Emotion Engagement
Questionnaire	Class participation questionnaire (post-test)	Week 16	Likert five-point scale	Behavior/Cognition/Emotion Engagement
Observation Form	Class behavior participation observation form	Weeks 3 - 15	Frequency and grade rating	Behavior Engagement
Interview Outline	Semistructured student interview	Weeks 8, 16	Text transcription	Experience and Strategy Perception of Participation
Log	Teacher reflection log	Entire Period	Text Recording	Teaching process and strategy adjustment

2.4 The Research Process

This research lasted for 16 teaching weeks and followed the basic procedures of action research, systematically advancing in four stages. The first stage was the pre-diagnosis (weeks 1-2), where an English proficiency test paper and a learning style scale were used to assess the learning situation of all 42 students in the class. At the same time, a classroom participation questionnaire was distributed for a pre-test, and a baseline database of student readiness levels, learning preferences classification, and three-dimensional participation was established. The second stage was the strategy design (weeks 2-3), based on the diagnostic data, students were divided into three flexible levels: weak foundation, medium level, and above average. A differentiated teaching plan was constructed from three dimensions: content, process, and product: in the content dimension, a three-level difficulty gradient of reading texts and learning task sheets were designed; in the process dimension, an elastic grouping mechanism combining homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping was adopted; in the product dimension, multiple outcome expression options such as written reports, oral presentations, and practical tasks were set. The third stage was the plan implementation (weeks 3-15), which was carried out in two rounds of action spirals. The first round (weeks 3-9) focused on implementing differentiated strategies in content and process, and the intervention effect was continuously recorded through classroom observation and teacher reflection logs. In the 10th week, a phased reflection was conducted based on the data from the first round of student interviews, identifying problems such as insufficient differentiation in the product dimension and weak task appeal for high-level students. Based on this, the plan was adjusted and entered the second round (weeks 11-15), which further added differentiated product menus and learning contracts, and expanded supplementary project tasks for the excellent level. The fourth stage was the post-evaluation (week 16), where a participation questionnaire was distributed for a post-test, and English proficiency post-tests and the second round of in-depth interviews were implemented simultaneously. The obtained data were compared and analyzed with the baseline of the pre-test to verify the actual improvement effect of differentiated teaching on three-dimensional participation.

3. Design and Implementation of Differentiated Teaching Strategies

3.1 The Student Stratification and Demand Analysis

Based on the previous diagnostic data, this study comprehensively considered the students' English proficiency test scores, classroom participation performance, and learning style preferences, and adopted a dynamic flexible stratification strategy to divide 42 students into three levels: the basic level (12 students, accounting for 28.6%), the improvement level (14 students, accounting for 33.3%), and the expansion level (16 students, accounting for 38.1%). The stratification followed the principle of "implicit operation and dynamic adjustment", where teachers only knew the level affiliation internally and did not disclose the labels to the students. After each round of action research, the performance in the stage was re-evaluated and adjusted. On this basis, in line with the English ability requirements of the corresponding professional positions in this field, differentiated learning goals were set for each

level: the basic level aimed to master the core vocabulary and basic sentence patterns needed for daily workplace communication, focusing on the reconstruction of language foundation and the establishment of communication confidence; the improvement level aimed to be familiar with common text types in the industry and complete information acquisition and processing tasks, focusing on the strengthening of language application ability; the expansion level aimed to be competent in communicating in simulated business scenarios, completing cross-cultural problem analysis and oral reports, focusing on the coordinated development of comprehensive language literacy and professional English ability.

3.2 The Differentiated Presentation of Teaching Content

Based on the hierarchical goal framework, this study designed the teaching content in a three-level gradient manner, ensuring that students at each level could receive appropriate challenges within the same unit theme. The basic-level teaching content focuses on consolidating core vocabulary and frequent sentence patterns, and is designed around professional micro-scenarios such as hotel reception and telephone communication, with fill-in-the-blank, imitation-speaking, and role-play exercises that match the students' current level, reducing cognitive load to enhance learning competence. The enhancement level builds on mastering core language knowledge and adds information-difference tasks (such as completing customer itinerary confirmation based on flight information) and workplace short passage reading discussions, requiring students to extract key information, perform simple logical reasoning, and express opinions, promoting the effective transformation of language input to communicative output. The expansion level introduces project-based learning-driven high-level tasks, such as designing an English product promotion plan, writing a business email and simulating a presentation to the client, or conducting cross-cultural case analysis on differences in workplace etiquette between China and abroad, requiring students to comprehensively apply language and non-language resources to solve problems in real or simulated complex task scenarios. The themes of the three levels are the same, with increasing difficulty, which not only ensures the overall nature of classroom teaching but also meets the learning needs of students with different preparation levels.

3.3 The Differentiated Organization of Teaching Processes and Methods

At the level of teaching processes and methods, this study implements differentiated organization from three dimensions: group mechanism, resource provision, and teacher support. Firstly, a flexible grouping strategy combining heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping is adopted. In aspects such as topic introduction and cultural background activation, heterogeneous grouping is used, leveraging the cognitive differences within the group to promote peer assistance and viewpoint exchange; in the tiered task section, homogeneous grouping is employed, facilitating targeted guidance from the teacher and avoiding the "monopoly" of high-level students on tasks or the passive marginalization of low-level students. Secondly, a multimodal teaching resource library and flexible activity menu are constructed to provide differentiated input and processing paths for students with different learning styles. Visual learners can prioritize reading graphic materials or watching micro-lesson videos, auditory learners can

obtain information through audio dialogues and teacher explanations, and kinesthetic learners can participate in learning through role-playing and mobile terminal interactive tasks; at the same time, tiered learning resources are released through online learning platforms to support blended learning both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, corresponding tiered task lists with varying levels of scaffolding strength are designed for each level: the basic-level task list provides a complete sentence framework and vocabulary hints, and the teacher adopts a direct guidance mode of demonstration - practice - correction; the enhanced-level task list gradually removes some prompts to guide students to autonomously construct; the expanded-level task list only provides the task context and evaluation criteria, and the teacher uses questioning and inquiry as the main intervention means, providing strategic hints only when necessary, thereby gradually cultivating students' autonomous learning ability within the teaching logic of "moderate support and release".

3.4 The Differentiated Design of Learning Outcome Evaluation

This study has constructed a differentiated evaluation system that combines formative evaluation and summative evaluation, and emphasizes both criterion-referenced and individual development. In the formative evaluation aspect, student learning portfolios are established, systematically collecting each round of stratified task sheets, reflection writings, stage self-assessment forms, and teacher comments to track individual learning trajectories. Classroom performance points are assigned based on the degree of achievement of each level's goals rather than absolute scores, comprehensively considering the quality of behavior participation such as focused listening, active response, and collaborative contribution. Self-assessment and peer-assessment forms guide students to develop metacognitive monitoring abilities in cooperative learning and promote reflective regulation of their own learning process. In the summative evaluation aspect, a single written test format is broken through, and multiple evaluation options such as oral tests, role-playing, project work presentations, and written tests are provided. Students can choose at least two of these as part of their graduation grades based on their learning styles and personal strengths. Among them, students in the basic level focus on oral tests and situational role-playing, those in the enhanced level focus on written tests and role-playing, and those in the expanded level focus on project work presentations and in-depth business simulations. In addition, the feedback mechanism highlights individualization and incentive orientation. Teachers' evaluation feedback focuses on specific progress points and effort levels, minimizing horizontal comparisons, and strengthening students' intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy through non-score-based recognition methods such as "Progress Star" and "Innovative Performance". This makes the evaluation a positive booster that promotes the continuous participation of all students.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Quantitative Analysis of the Changes in Student Participation Levels

To test the intervention effect of differentiated teaching on classroom participation, this study conducted a paired-sample t-test on the pre- and post-test questionnaire data and verified it with

quantitative data from classroom observations. The results showed that the participation levels of students in the three dimensions of behavior, cognition, and emotion all achieved statistically significant improvements. In the behavior participation dimension, the post-test mean value increased from 2.86 in the pre-test to 3.67 ($t = 5.34$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.82$). The classroom observation records further confirmed this trend: the frequency of students' active questioning increased from an average of 0.8 times per class in the early intervention stage to 2.4 times in the later stage. The on-time completion rate of the stratified task sheets increased from 68.3% to 91.7%, and the number of speaking rounds for students with low participation levels in group interactions increased nearly twice compared to the baseline stage, indicating that the differentiated task design effectively lowered the participation threshold and provided more opportunities for students to make superficial behavioral investments. In the cognitive participation dimension, the post-test mean value increased from 2.64 to 3.41 ($t = 4.87$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.75$). Students demonstrated particularly outstanding performance in the diversity of learning strategies: in the post-test open-ended questions, the proportion of students who could simultaneously use three or more strategies such as taking notes, mind mapping, oral recitation, and peer questioning increased from 19.0% in the pre-test to 54.8%. Moreover, students in the enhancement and expansion layers showed more frequent attempts at cross-topic knowledge connection and situational transfer in the unit summary, indicating that the differentiated tasks have initially demonstrated the promotion effect on students' deep information processing abilities. In the emotional participation dimension, the post-test mean value increased from 2.71 to 3.52 ($t = 4.96$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.77$). The two items "being full of anticipation for English class" and "being willing to persist in trying even when encountering difficulties" showed the most significant increase, rising by 0.94 and 0.87 points respectively. Additionally, the proportion of students who expressed "feeling a sense of belonging in the class" increased from 31.0% in the pre-test to 73.8%, suggesting that the stratified support and flexible grouping mechanism have improved students' social-emotional experiences to some extent, especially helping students in the basic layer gradually overcome the negative waiting and fear-of-failure participation dilemma after receiving appropriate assistance.

4.2 The Analysis of the Mechanism of Differentiation Strategy in Promoting Participation Level

Based on the significant changes in quantitative data and the in-depth interpretations from qualitative interviews, this study has identified three core mechanisms through which differentiated teaching promotes three-dimensional participation. Firstly, matching abilities leads to enhanced positive experiences and self-efficacy. A moderate gap between task difficulty and the current level of students is a key condition for maintaining participation. For students at the basic level, after repeatedly practicing scenarios for completion, they gradually overcome the anxiety of "making mistakes at the first attempt" and accumulate small successes, transforming them into the belief that "I can also participate"; for students at the improvement level, in information gap tasks, they find a moderate cognitive challenge that is neither overly frustrating nor boring, continuously experiencing the satisfaction of ability growth; for students at the expansion level, in project-based tasks, they gain the

space to showcase their skills, maintaining a high level of engagement with challenging goals. This task gradient design based on Vygotsky's principle of the zone of proximal development enables students at all levels to repeatedly confirm their abilities in "accessible challenges", thereby constructing a stable cycle of active participation. Secondly, autonomy choice and diverse evaluation stimulate intrinsic motivation. The matching of learning style preferences and the form of outcome expression provides students with a channel to satisfy their psychological autonomy needs. Many students mentioned in the interviews that when they could present their learning outcomes orally instead of through written tests, "they felt that their strengths were recognized". The choice of product menus and evaluation methods returned some learning decisions to students, satisfying the autonomy needs emphasized by Self-Determination Theory while allowing students to perceive the respect for their individual differences in the classroom, and thereby converting into higher levels of emotional and cognitive engagement. Thirdly, positive interdependence and social participation in cooperative learning are enhanced. Heterogeneous grouping created real communication needs driven by information gaps in the introduction and discussion stages, and students established instrumental mutual assistance relationships during the collaborative completion of tasks; homogeneous grouping avoided the social comparison anxiety caused by significant ability differences, enabling low-level students to dare to make mistakes and express themselves in a safe group environment. This dual grouping mechanism not only ensures the cognitive benefits of cooperative learning but also enhances classroom belonging through positive peer interaction experiences, making social participation itself an important emotional bond for maintaining academic participation.

5. Conclusion

Differentiated teaching can significantly enhance the multi-dimensional participation of students in the vocational English classroom in terms of behavior, cognition and emotions. The key mechanism for its effectiveness lies in the design of task gradients based on precise diagnosis, the dynamic adaptation of teaching scaffolds and learning needs, as well as the continuously optimized flexible stratification strategy in the "diagnosis - intervention - reflection - adjustment" cycle. The implications for vocational English teaching are that teachers should shift from the traditional role of knowledge instructors to designers of learning experiences, actively constructing diversified content presentation methods, learning processes and outcome evaluation paths; at the school level, appropriate resource support and collaborative mechanisms for teaching research should be provided to create conditions for the sustainable implementation of differentiated teaching in regular classrooms.

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