

Use of Differentiated Pedagogical Approaches by English Teachers in China: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: This article uses a literature review to examine the practical implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) by English teachers in China, with particular attention to recent policy adjustments such as the 'New Curriculum Standards' (2022) and the 'Double Reduction Policy' (2021). The review identifies the main obstacles to implementation, including systemic, didactic and technical aspects, and highlights the continuing gap between national policy objectives and classroom reality, particularly with regard to urban-rural differences, standardised assessment systems and teacher preparation. Finally, it proposes a framework that combines flexible policy interpretation, continuous professional development and technology-assisted teaching support.

Keywords: China, English Language Teaching, Differentiated Instruction, Differentiated Teaching Approaches, Educational Equity, Policy Implementation, Teacher Preparation.

1. Introduction

As classrooms become more diverse, differentiated instruction (DI) is seen as a useful way to meet students' different learning needs. In China, recent education reforms have pushed for more fairness and student-focused teaching. Still, old habits---like the strong focus on exams and the uneven spread of resources---make it hard for these changes to take root.

English language teaching (ELT) is a good example of where these problems show up. It's a key subject tied to university entrance exams and seen as important for international competitiveness. Teachers are expected to adjust their teaching to fit different learners, but many things stand in the way---rigid lesson plans, big classes, low digital skills, and students from very different backgrounds. This review looks at current research to understand what affects the use of DI in English classrooms in China and to suggest ways forward for future practice and research.

2. Methodology

This review groups the research into three parts: theory, teaching environment, and practical strategies. The selected papers were chosen based on their relevance, the time they were published (from 2019 to 2025), and how much they help us understand DI in China. Both Chinese and international academic sources were used to keep the view balanced.

The key topics are: (1) diversity and fairness in the classroom, (2) teacher training and support, and (3) broader system and technology issues. These areas help explain the gap between education policies and what really happens in schools. The review also brings in cross-cultural ideas and gives suggestions for making DI work better in Chinese classrooms.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Differentiated Pedagogy

Differentiated Instruction is based on the idea that students

learn in different ways and have different needs. This means teachers need to adjust their teaching to fit those differences. In China, Liu (2022)[7] points out a conflict between using the same teaching for everyone and trying to meet each student's needs. This problem isn't just about teaching---it also comes from cultural values, like working in groups and focusing heavily on test results.

Other researchers like Zhang (2022)[21] and Bi et al. (2024) [1] show that DI can fit into Chinese classrooms through careful lesson design and clear learning goals. They build on Vygotsky's idea of the "zone of proximal development", which says students learn best when given just the right amount of help. These scholars show how DI ideas---especially those from Tomlinson [20]---can be mixed with Chinese values, such as the belief in teaching students based on their talents. At the same time, they recognize the need for new digital tools to support more personalized learning. Together, these ideas give a strong base for improving teaching in ways that make sense for China.

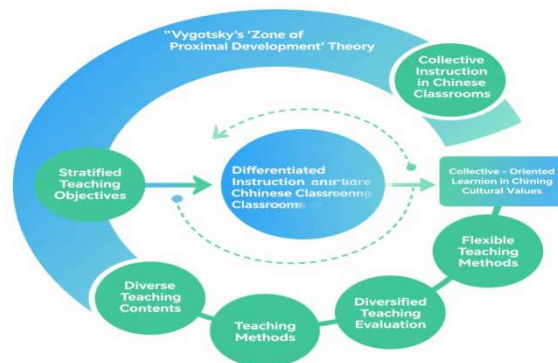


Fig. 1 Applying Vygotsky's ZPD

4. Classroom Diversity and Equity Gaps

While differentiated instruction has gained momentum in policy discourse, its implementation across classrooms in

China remains uneven---largely due to long-standing structural disparities[13] Tang, Y. (2022). Urban schools often enjoy the advantages of stronger infrastructure, higher teacher qualifications, and better access to digital learning technologies. In stark contrast, many rural institutions continue to grapple with chronic underfunding, limited teacher availability, outdated instructional materials, and sporadic opportunities for professional development (Gu, 2022 [3]; Yan, 2022[18]).

These challenges are compounded by excessively large class sizes, which frequently exceed 50 students, making it nearly impossible for teachers to deliver individualized instruction or maintain consistent, formative feedback loops. Further complicating the landscape is the sizeable population of migrant students, who regularly face educational disruptions, misaligned regional curricula, and a lack of academic support---all of which undermine the equitable application of DI practices (Sun & Du, 2021[14] ; Jiao, 2025 [5]).

Beyond China, similar obstacles have been documented internationally. For example, Pozas and Letzel (2019) [9] emphasize that although teachers generally recognize the value of differentiation, institutional inertia and inequitable resource allocation often stand in the way of implementation. These converging findings suggest that DI cannot succeed in isolation from the broader social and infrastructural conditions that shape everyday schooling.

5. Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

Teacher Preparedness Teachers play a central role in facilitating DI, and their preparedness significantly influences its implementation. While the majority of teachers express theoretical support for DI, many lack confidence in applying it effectively. Li et al. (2023) [6](also see Huang et al., 2023[4]) validated a Chinese version of the Teachers' Attitudes Toward Differentiated Instruction (TATDI) scale and found that although teachers valued DI conceptually, they reported low self-efficacy in practical classroom settings[12] Tang, X. (2024).

One major issue is the misunderstanding of DI itself. Xu and Li (2022)[19] observe that teachers often equate DI with student tracking or ability grouping, rather than as an inclusive approach that flexibly adapts to learners' needs. Pre-service training programs rarely emphasize DI methodologies, and in-service training remains episodic and theoretical. Liang and Zou (2025) [8] call for the institutionalization of continuous mentoring, especially in vocational and bilingual school settings, where diverse learner needs are most pronounced.

6. Systemic Constraints and Policy-Practice Misalignment

Systemic and Policy Barriers Policy-implementation gaps continue to hinder DI practices in China. Although the New Curriculum Standards (2022) and the Double Reduction initiative (2021) advocate for more student-centered and inclusive teaching, local educational systems remain governed by summative assessments and fixed curriculum mandates (e.g., Zhejiang Provincial Department of Education, 2023 [20]; Henan Provincial Department of Education, 2025 [21]).

Tang (2022)[16]critiques the rigidity of China's

examination framework, which emphasizes uniform academic outcomes at the expense of differentiated learning processes. Teachers often work within narrow margins of instructional autonomy, balancing pressure from administrators, parents, and school rankings. Administrative inertia and lack of clarity in policy directives further exacerbate the difficulty of adopting innovative practices. This disconnect between top-down mandates and bottom-up realities calls for more coherent implementation strategies (Tang, 2024 [15]).

7. Technology-Enhanced Differentiated Instruction

Role of Technology Technology is increasingly seen as a means to support DI by enabling more personalized, responsive, and scalable instruction. Jiao (2025) [5] introduces the concept of an "Education Brain," an AI-powered system that analyzes learner profiles and recommends stratified learning tasks accordingly. Similarly, Gu (2022)[3] and Qiao (2022)[10] describe how smart classrooms can facilitate real-time feedback and adaptive teaching, particularly in resource-limited environments.

However, Dong (2024)[2]warns against techno-solutionism---the overreliance on digital tools without sufficient pedagogical anchoring. While technology can assist differentiation, its impact depends on adequate teacher training, curricular integration, and sustained institutional support. Thus, digital innovation must be accompanied by clear instructional frameworks and professional learning opportunities.

8. Gaps and Future Directions

Gaps and Future Directions Although research on DI in China is growing, significant gaps remain. Most existing studies focus on urban schools, leaving rural and vocational contexts underexamined (e.g., Wang, 2022[17]). Empirical research is also needed to validate localized models that integrate both cultural values and technological innovations.

Future investigations should adopt longitudinal designs to trace the impact of DI on student achievement, teacher development, and institutional culture. Comparative studies between provinces---or between China and other collectivist education systems (e.g., Pozas, R. & Letzel, S., 2019 [11])---could yield valuable insights. Additionally, attention should be paid to the role of school leaders and district administrators in facilitating or constraining DI implementation.

9. Conclusion

Differentiated instruction has gained recognition as a key strategy for advancing educational equity and student engagement in China's English classrooms. Nonetheless, entrenched structural inequalities, teacher misconceptions, and rigid policy environments continue to obstruct its full realization. To address these issues, this review proposes a triadic approach: (1) recalibrating policy frameworks to enhance flexibility and coherence; (2) institutionalizing teacher development programs centered on practical DI strategies; and (3) strategically integrating educational technologies that support, rather than replace, teacher agency.

Ultimately, DI should not be considered an optional supplement but rather a foundational component of high-quality, inclusive education. A future-oriented ELT system in

China must recognize and respond to student diversity not as a challenge to be managed, but as an opportunity to foster deeper learning and broader educational justice.

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