

Report

UC Berkeley Language Center Instructional Development Research Project Fellowship — Spring Semester, 2018

Highly Varied Proficiency Levels in the Same Classroom: Differentiated Instruction as a Means of Effective Language Teaching¹

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Introduction

In higher education, instructors of the Less Commonly Taught Languages (“LCTLs”) often confront the challenge of how to create a positive learning environment that supports students of varying language proficiencies in the same classroom. Such a particular situation is usually due to students of different language levels enrolling in the same courses as a result of limited course offerings. The unintended result is that students with significantly different skill levels share the same classroom. Under these conditions, instructors frequently struggle to support the language-progression needs of all of the students while trying to create a manageable classroom environment. Further, the lack of language-specific teaching resources in the LCTLs, combined with an instructor’s time constraints to develop new teaching materials, magnify these difficulties. The question that arises in these situations is how to teach all of the students in a way that will provide for each of their individual language-progression needs, without losing classroom cohesion and interest. In such a setting, both teaching and learning pose a challenge to instructors and students alike. This report explores some aspects of how adopting differentiated instruction in Hungarian language courses at UC Berkeley supports a positive learning environment that welcomes all students with different language abilities and helps them progress.

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction has been used to teach a wide assortment of students with different backgrounds for more than twenty years now, from gifted pupils to English language learners. The differentiated teaching approach aims to create an ongoing collaboration between students and instructors. According to Tomlinson, differentiated instruction recognizes and welcomes that students have different backgrounds, knowledge, and interests in the same learning environment.

¹ The following report summarizes the main findings of my research during the Spring 2018 UC Berkeley Language Center Fellowship to explore differentiated instruction in the setting of Hungarian language teaching. I am grateful to the generous support of the UC Berkeley Language Center and the constructive feedback of Rick Kern, Mark Kaiser, Deniz Ekici, and Erica Weems.

(Tomlinson, 2014). She also explains that a differentiated teaching model creates options for the students, without separating them into groups based narrowly on their abilities, and emphasizes: “[i]n a differentiated classroom, teaching is evolutionary. Students and teachers are learners together. While teachers may know more about the subject matter at hand, they are continuously learning about how their students learn.” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, differentiated instruction with its multi-layered approach to teaching seemed like a practical solution to use in those Hungarian language courses I taught, where the language abilities were so vastly different that at first glance it seemed impossible to teach all of the students together at the same time.

The starting point for teaching a mixed proficiency level classroom is the basic understanding of students’ language levels. Hungarian, among many other LCTLs, does not offer placement tests at UC Berkeley. Therefore, it is the instructor’s responsibility to understand the students’ proficiency levels from the beginning of the semester and to keep following their progress. Since individually testing students’ proficiency levels is a prohibitively time-consuming endeavor, one alternative involves having the students fill out a series of “I can do statements” – which provides a functional estimate of their grasp of the language. According to recent research, the reliability of these statements in assessing the major levels are fairly accurate; however, the sublevels are questionable. (Cox, 2017). Regardless of the tests’ weaknesses in gauging sublevels, the “I can do statements” are helpful in creating personal goals and assisting with modifying teaching plans. (Tigchelaar, 2017)

Blaz stresses the importance of understanding student’s readiness by pre-assessments, which can be approached formally or informally and can be done before each unit. (Blaz, 2016, pp 35-37). It is also valuable to administer a questionnaire about the students’ previous language exposure and interests and to continuously observe their performance throughout the entire semester, so as to allow adjustments of teaching plans to cater to the students’ needs. (Blaz, 2016). Considering the limited hours of instruction available in many LCTLs, possessing a continuous understanding of students’ language levels is necessary to create an active and supportive teaching environment, where students in varied group settings can still collaborate together while supporting to each individuals’ progression needs.

Hungarian at UC Berkeley

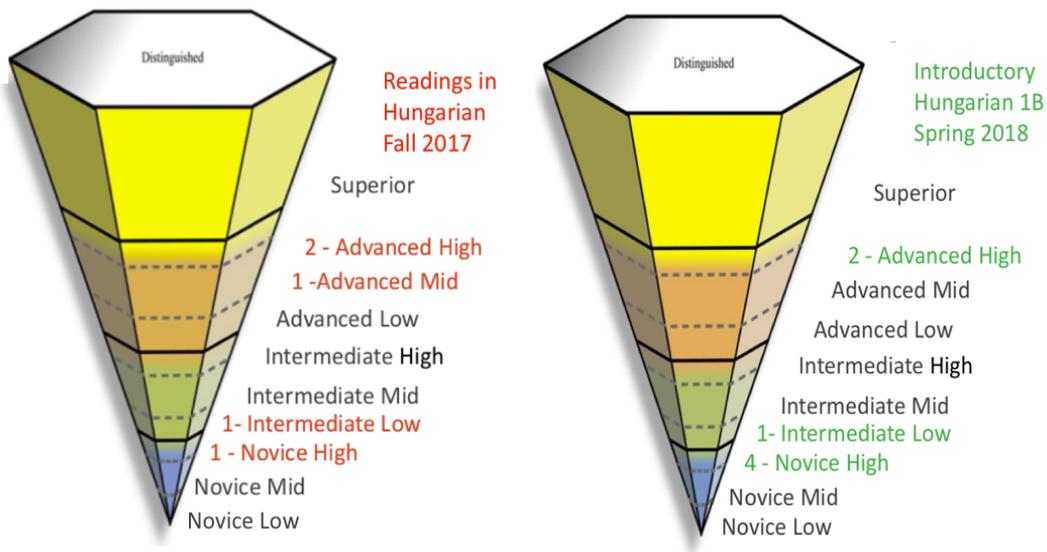
Both instructors and students consider Hungarian a difficult language to teach and learn, as certain aspects of its phonemic system and complex language structure are novel to most learners. Since Hungarian separated from its linguistic neighbors more than 2,500 years ago, it does not have a mutually intelligible language, and learners cannot readily rely on cross-linguistic similarities. Students find the lexicon unusual, as the most often used words are Hungarian in origin and loanwords are used less frequently. The rigorous language reform movement at the turn of the 19th century to modernize the archaic lexicon and linguistic elements added a good number of neologisms to the vocabulary, whose meanings are frequently difficult to deduce.²

A language’s difficulty level often depends on its similarity to the learner’s native language. The distance between the second and native language of the learner determines the language

² Example: The compound word *rendőrség* meaning the “police” is derived from the words “order” + “guard” + a noun derivative to describe the concept of “wholeness.” This serves as a contrast to other European languages reaching back to the more common etymological roots of the Latin “*politia*” or the Greek “*polis*.”

difficulty level and the learning hours needed to reach certain proficiency levels.³ If a student’s first language is English, then they typically need significantly more learning hours to reach a certain proficiency level in Hungarian, as opposed to learning Spanish, French, or Romanian. In contrast to this fact, LCTLs’ difficulty levels are rarely used to assign the number of instructional hours in a scholastic setting, and instead they are given less instructional hours than the given language would necessitate.

UC Berkeley’s 1st-year Introductory Hungarian’s two-semester sequence – “Hungarian 1A” and “Hungarian 1B” – provides three hours per week of instruction. The “Readings in Hungarian” course is the only follow-up course offered after this sequence, and it also includes a strong cultural focus. The course meets for two instructional hours per week, and the prerequisite is one academic year of Hungarian language knowledge. Based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) 2012 proficiency guidelines, the criterion of "one academic year of knowledge" in Hungarian usually means that students reach “novice high” level by the end of the school year, providing that they take the two-semester introductory sequence within one academic year and practice excellent study habits. I provide the following graphics to depict those courses where students’ proficiency levels were highly varied, specifying the language levels and the number of students at each estimated sublevel. It is based on ACTFL proficiency levels guidelines. (ACTFL, 2012).



³ The ACTFL Language Testing International (LTI) and the State Department Foreign Service Institute School of Language Studies (FSI SLS) consider Hungarian a category III level language, among languages like Russian and Vietnamese. However, the Defense Language Institute considers Hungarian's difficulty level to fall somewhere between Russian and Korean, placing its difficulty level higher than others in category III, but lower than category IV languages.

Based on each Hungarian language difficulty category and the guidelines approximating the number of learning hours needed to reach specific language levels, it would take approximately 480 learning hours to get to a “novice high” level in Hungarian, and 720 learning hours to reach an “intermediate high” level. (LTI, ACTFL, 2017). However, at UC Berkeley, because of the actual instructional hours offered, the students' estimated academic-year learning hours – including instructional and at home study hours – are significantly less than would be optimal. Students in the Introductory Hungarian 1A and 1B courses receive approximately 252 learning hours, while students in the Readings in Hungarian course usually gather approximately 168 learning hours.

Applying Language-Level-Related Differentiated Instruction in Hungarian Courses: A Unit on Unusual Weather in Hungary

During the 2018 spring semester, the Introductory Hungarian 1B course had students from novice to advanced levels, which provided an opportunity for me to explore differentiated instruction as a solution to manage students' varying skill discrepancies. As Tomlinson claims, the cooperation of instructor and students is a significant element in differentiated instruction, and students' reactions and progression should influence the teaching response. (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 21). The course built upon this concept. The teaching approach led to forming a learning community, where both the teaching content and process were modified according to the students' learning response. It also focused on how to deepen students' understanding of Hungarian culture itself – by providing the context for the language's usage within the wider Hungarian society – to motivate the students to learn more about both the social context and language themselves.

Having a logistical platform to quickly distribute a variety of immediately-accessible learning materials was necessary to facilitate student to student and student to instructor collaboration throughout the unit. Within the learning management system, Canvas' bCourses, the Pages section helped to build virtual learning centers, where teaching materials were collected in a logical order, including images, text, links to music, and video clips, and to provide direct links to Google documents and slides. The virtual learning centers also helped to introduce each course topic and to create flexible groupings where students used their computers to collaborate on tasks. Since the bCourses Pages' section was available for the students throughout the semester, students were able to access the materials from their homes for follow-up assignments, to refresh their memories, or as a starting point for deeper explorations.

The creation of a new unit on an unusual weather event provided the opportunity to put differentiated instruction in the Hungarian language courses on a solid ground. In January 2017, Lake Balaton solidly froze over, which has become an increasingly less frequent event since climate change has started to affect Hungary. The mesmerizing scene offered an opportunity to organize a first-ever event, the *Balaton átcúszás*⁴. Thousands of people crossed over the frozen

⁴ The Hungarian word *átcúszás*, meaning “sliding across,” is a play on the word *átúszás*, which means = “swimming across,” an annual event at Lake Balaton. Thus, *Balaton átcúszás* – Sliding Across Lake Balaton.

lake during a successful social event. Then, in 2018, an unusual season of deep-freeze weather reigned over Europe, including Hungary. The snow covering the Hungarian scenery became a deeply frozen landscape that kept people inside; social contact was minimal, and the weather renewed dialogue on its adverse effects on society.

The press covered the 2017 and 2018 winter events of Hungary extensively, which made it relatively easy to find compelling photographs and videos to juxtapose the two winters.



(Mohai, 2017)



(Varga, 2018)

Using powerful images and intriguing short videos in language teaching provides a solid platform to start discussions, invoke curiosity, increase comprehension, and strengthen memory. Using a short clip of a creative aerial recording of the event – with inspiring music but without spoken language – helped to introduce the topic to all of the students. (Légi, 2017). The topic introduction followed a warm-up activity where a weather-related folk song eased students into

the language. Singing is a proven motivator in language learning; it elevates the mood of the class, builds community, and helps to retain vocabulary while improving pronunciation skills. (Good, 2014). To understand the context of the song, a 1908 photograph gave a starting point. It depicted a Hungarian shepherd in his full finery, and it piqued the students' curiosity to learn more about the garments he wore and the items he held, most of them still in use today.

Népdal - Folk Song

(Juhász, 1908, Hortobágy. Magyar Földrajzi Múzeum.)

Télen nagyon hideg van (tél - winter, hideg - cold)

Nyáron nagyon meleg van (nyár - summer, meleg - warm)

Soha sincs jó idő (soha sincs - never ever, idő - weather)

Mindig esik az eső (mindig - always, esik - fall (v), eső - rain)

Esik eső fúj a szél (esik - drop, fall (v), eső - rain, fúj - blow, szél - wind)

Hull a fáról a levél (hull - fall, fa - tree, levél - leaf)

Káromkodik a juhász (káromkodik - swears, juhász - shepherd)

Hogy a nyája széjjelmász (nyáj - flock, nyája - his flock, széjjelmász - wonders away)

[Muzsikás Télen nagyon hideg van.mp3](#)

(bCourses Pages screenshot, segment, Hungarian 1B, 2018).

The vocabulary, listing only those words that were likely to be new to some students, helped them to understand the essential elements of the lyrics. The music played by *Muzsikás*⁵ set the tone for the rest of the unit and facilitated all students gaining a better awareness of the song and the cultural background.

After the introduction of the topic students formed small groups to work on specific tasks, aiming to improve their language competence and cultural awareness. In differentiated instruction,

⁵ *Muzsikás* is an internationally recognized Hungarian folk music group.

groupings are flexible, and vary from task to task. Collaborations can be based on reasonably close language levels or different levels, depending on the desired learning outcome. The following tasks offer an illustration of how to give some choices to students to increase their motivation within a differentiated instruction environment. (Ryan, 2000).

Collaborations Based on Similar Levels – Tiered Tasks

Offering tiered tasks helps all students to improve their language knowledge in an environment where they feel comfortable to explore the given topic at their own level while also aiming to a slightly higher level when they feel ready.

Novice High/Intermediate Low

Goals: Creating simple, connected sentences and asking questions related to the video and the photos.

Aim: Intermediate Low level

Task Option 1: Collect words related to winter weathers. Collaborate on creating a Quizlet file; then, using many of the collected words, write simple sentences and questions.

Task Option 2: Create a short presentation, using Google Slides, related to Hungarian winter weather. Collect images for illustration. What is happening in the photos gathered? What are your observations? At the end of the class, present the slides.

Intermediate Mid/Intermediate High

Goals: Telling a story; narration and description; encouraging students to use past tense.

Aim: Intermediate High Level

Task Option 1: Imagine that you participated in the *Balaton átcsúszás* event. Collaborate on writing a letter to those classmates who couldn't join you there. Explain to them the event, what happened there, what did you do, how Lake Balaton looked like, etc. Give as many details as possible. Share your letter with your classmates.

Task Option 2: You want to participate in the *Balaton átcsúszás* event with your friends. Talk to your partners about the event, find out how to get there, how to prepare, and arrange the meeting. Be as detailed as possible.

Advanced Mid /Advanced High

Goal: Talk about a topic of social relevance

Aim: Advanced High Level

Task Option 1: People traveled not just from Hungary, but also from other countries to participate in this event, and more than five thousand people completed the 5 km trip across the frozen lake. What drew so many people there? Why did they participate in such an event? How do you think the people related to each other when they completed the same goal? What is the social impact? A) Create talking points. B) Talk about these questions as if you were at a company meeting in

Budapest. Express and support your opinion. Record your conversation.

Task Option 2: What are the consequences of deep-freezing weather? How did Hungary react and how can they prepare for such events in the future? Collaborate on an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Collaborations Based on Different Language Levels

Group formation can also have highly mixed-language levels, where students work for the same goal. Although the result is often uneven, it builds a community within the classroom, and inspires a broader collaboration where the less advanced students aim for higher levels, and the more advanced students gain a deeper understanding of the topic by giving explanations and helping others.

Goal: Increasing oral proficiency; telling a story

Aim: All language levels

Task: Create a skit. Imagine that you are at the *Balaton átcsúszás* event.

In the middle of the lake, unexpectedly, you meet with your classmates. Tell each other your story, how did you get there, what happened since the beginning and ask a good number of questions to your friends. At the end of the class, perform the skit.

Goal: Creating sentences or paragraphs

Aim: All language levels

Task: Collaborate on creating a fictional Facebook post about the current extreme weathers in Hungary. Add illustrations with explanations.

Differentiated Assignments for Home

It is well-supported that there is a close correlation between intrinsic motivation, interest, the feeling of competence, and autonomous extrinsic motivation, leading to better performance and learning outcome. (Ryan, 2000). In Hungarian courses, consistently providing assignment choices assisted students to work at their level and be motivated to push their limits, which helped to increase their language and cultural competence.

During the 2017 fall semester, in the Readings in Hungarian course, students worked on a unit related to a 20th-century poet, *Sándor Weöres*⁶, a virtuoso of the Hungarian language, who wrote playful and captivating poetry. Students explored the only political statement he ever made in a poem. He published *Macskainduló*,⁷ in a children's book, since political restrictions at the time limited his publishing opportunities. The home assignments were related to the poet, poem, and the social background explored during the class. All of the students were asked to revisit the

⁶ *Sándor Weöres* was probably the most influential poet of his time both in Hungary and in Europe, who showed unparalleled plays and humor, and an inclination for experiencing with all forms of poetry.

⁷ *Macskainduló* = Marching of the Cats

information collected on bCourses Pages including external video links, images, and the vocabulary of the poem, which included a written explanation of the most difficult words and expressions. Students had the opportunity to choose from a group of options, giving them partial or full autonomy.

One of the listed assignment options below was an experiment to see how students reacted when given full autonomy, where they were allowed to create an assignment for themselves. While most students choose one of the well-defined assignments, a couple of them created tasks for themselves. One of the advanced students watched a one-hour Hungarian documentary about the poet and the socialist era of the time, and then wrote a short essay on his observations and thoughts. He explained that the reason for the choice was to learn more about the poet. After he watched the documentary, he started to think more deeply about Hungary's socialist era, and how the political changes of that time influenced his own life today. Another student wrote a spoof on the original poem, describing the day of "An Average Hungarian Cat," where regardless of the cats' higher aspirations for a sophisticated lifestyle and gourmet cat food, the reality boiled down to the fact that at the end, he just had to catch his food like all other common cats. The student explained that his reason to give himself that particular assignment was that he has always been drawn to sarcastic humor, and that he also had a knack for rhyming in which he wanted to test on this particular topic.

Giving autonomy on choosing assignments motivated students to push their learning further. Students are more likely to take language risks, enjoy the learning process, and explore the boundaries of their language knowledge even if they increase the amount of grammatical and lexical mistakes they make. They understand from the beginning of the course that assignments for home are always graded based on pass/no pass and making mistakes is part of their learning process, and would not be met with penalization. This particular approach strengthens an atmosphere where students are in control of their learning outcome, and feel responsible for their development.

List of Assignments Choices to Improve Autonomy and Motivation

1. Read the poem carefully, and then think about both its obvious and the hidden meanings. Sing along while listening to the *Ferenc Sebő*⁸ music clip. Repeat it until you feel comfortable with the pronunciation and intonation. Read out the poems a few times until you are comfortable with it. Record your best reading and your thoughts on the poem. Turn in your recording.

2. What is happening in the poem and the video? Read the poem, listen to the music, understand it well, and watch the related video clip. Write about it at your level. Approach the topic any way you wish. Practice reading your work, and then record it. Turn in your recording.

3. Write an introduction for a university newspaper about *Macskainduló* and its social and political background. Turn in your writing as a Microsoft Word Document. Be sure to check your

⁸ *Ferenc Sebő* is a Hungarian folk musician, who had a significant role in the Hungarian Dance House movements in Hungary. He also popularized contemporary Hungarian poetry by his music and singing.

spelling. If you are uncertain of any grammatical forms, check it on the internet to see how your phrase is used there. Cite your sources whenever it is required by academic standards.

4. Give yourself an assignment that would be useful for your Hungarian language improvement, and that you would enjoy doing. Turn in your work and indicate why did you choose that particular approach.

Conclusion

Differentiated language instruction is focused on serving a variety of language levels in the same classroom, and can be particularly well-suited to effectively solving many of the difficulties that instructors face in such a situation. It opens the doors to creativity for instructors and students alike by building a positive and supportive learning environment, where teaching is moderated by students' feedback, reactions, and learning results. Understanding the learner's language levels as early as possible and continuing to observe their developments offers an opportunity to readjust the teaching to their learning needs. Building teaching around original cultural materials, using attention-catching visual elements, music, and multimedia helps to build a classroom where grouping is flexible -- sometimes all students work together, and at other times they break into groups of similar or mixed levels -- depending on the learning goals. Using the bCourses Pages (or other similar online tools) option can provide a readily available platform, where teaching can be organized, and materials stay available all for students for follow-up assignments. Differentiation can also focus on assignments for the home, where learning autonomy can be a substantial motivating factor for students. In the Hungarian courses at UC Berkeley, students gave strong positive feedback to the differentiated teaching approach that helped to create a learning community among students of profoundly different language levels and measurably allowed for their progress.

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