

Teaching English to a Finnish as a second language student

- a case study on differentiating language teaching

Bachelor's Thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tutkielma on tapaustutkimus eriyttämiskeinoista, joita erään neljäsluokkalaisen suomi toisena kielenä –oppijan englanninopetuksessa käytettiin, kun opetus tapahtui suomeksi. Taustateoria koostuu vieraan kielen oppimisesta, suomi toisena kielenä –opetuksen lisääntyneestä määrästä sekä kieltenopetuksen eriyttämisestä. Vieraan kielen oppiminen on laajalti tutkittu aihealue lingvistiikan ja pedagogiikan aloilla. Opetushallituksen mukaan maahanmuuttajien määrä on kaksinkertaistunut vuodesta 2005; tämän myötä myös S2-oppilaiden määrä on luonnollisesti kasvanut. Tutkimus pyrki selvittämään, millä keinoin erityisopettaja ja englanninopettaja tahoillaan eriyttivät opetusta kyseiselle oppilaalle, ja millä perusteilla kyseisiin eriyttämismenetelmiin päädyttiin.</p> <p>Metodina aineiston keruuseen olivat erityisopettajan ja englanninopettajan haastattelut. Erityisopettajan rooli englannin eriyttämisessä osoittautui erityisen keskeiseksi, kun taas englanninopettajan työssä eriyttämistä ilmeni vähemmän. Erityisopettaja keskittyi oppilaan suullisen kielitaidon vahvistamiseen ja sanaston opetteluun käyttäen muun muassa samaa tehtävää useaan otteeseen haastavammaksi muokattuna. Lisäksi erityisopettaja tuki oppilasta kokeiden täydentämisessä. Englanninopettaja mainitsi eriyttämiskeinona suomenkielisten sanojen avaamisen koetilanteissa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen pohjalta voidaan todeta, että osa-aikainen erityisopetus oli itsessään keskeinen eriyttämiskeino tämän S2-oppilaan kohdalla, ja erityisopettajan käyttämät keinot tukivat oppilasta paljon. Englanninopettajan rooli eriyttämisessä oli pienempi. Erityisopettaja korosti myös, että oppilaan oman äidinkielen ja suomen välinen suhde (L1-L2) tulisi saada kuntoon, ennen kuin englannin opinnoissa voitaisiin edetä vakaammin.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning, often referred to as L2 learning, have been studied rather extensively (see e.g. Ellis 1984 and 1994; Mitchell and Myles 2004). Furthermore, discussions of Finnish as a second language (*suomi toisena kielenä*) teaching in Finland are current and vital. The number of immigrant students in Finnish schools has increased rapidly during the past decade (National Board of Education 2013), hence the increased interest and need in Finnish as a second language teaching.

This thesis is a case study on the ways in which a Finnish as a second language student was taught English at school. The student was approximately ten years old and had lived in Finland with his parents for a few years. He was learning English with his peers in a Finnish-speaking class while still learning the Finnish language itself. More precisely, this study focuses on how the teacher differentiated English for this learner; in this specific case, both an English teacher and a special education teacher were involved in the English teaching. I chose this topic because I am interested in teaching both the English language and Finnish as a second or foreign language and studying this specific case offers the opportunity to study both two; furthermore, the number of immigrant students is increasing and familiarizing oneself with the aspects of teaching these culturally and linguistically diverse students is useful in general and will also assist my future career as a language teacher. In the present study, I refer to Finnish as the student in question's L2 and English as L3, that is, a *third or a foreign language*. The aim of the study is to define the means a teacher may use to assist the student's learning of L3 through L2. In addition, the present study discusses a single learner case that, in a way, represents a number of others in Finland as well; despite the exceptionally broad support this learner got, the focus of this study is on the teacher's perspective of a learner from a culturally and linguistically diverse background as part of a Finnish classroom.

2 FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learning or acquiring languages is a broadly researched and discussed topic in the linguistic research field. It is rather common to refer to foreign language learning processes – where one learns any language other than his or her mother tongue – with the concept of *second language learning*. Furthermore, Mitchell and Myles (2004: 5) point out that second language learning is a concept that may include the learning of any language, provided simply that learning this ‘second’ language takes place some time after the acquisition of the speaker’s first language – the L1 or ‘mother tongue’. Thus, using L2 learning theories as the theoretical background of the present study seems appropriate though English is, in fact, the third language for the learner whose teaching this study focuses on.

Krashen’s theory (1985) on second language learning, SLL, is among the leading ones that define the entire SLL research field; according to Krashen’s *input hypothesis*, the learner language progresses most efficiently when the learner understands input that is slightly more advanced than their current level – Krashen refers to this as the level of “ $i+1$ ”, where i means the input and $+1$ the next stage of language acquisition. Krashen’s theory is relevant to the present study as differentiation follows the main idea of it; the students are offered slightly more challenging input according to their personal level to guarantee as successful development of language as possible.

Language knowledge and learning consist of several sections, such as spoken language and listening comprehension, pronunciation, grammar and written language and reading comprehension. According to Dufva, Vaarala and Pitkänen (2007: 160), the management of a foreign language’s and a second language’s vocabulary affects the skills in oral and written production and understanding. They continue that the management of a language’s phonetic structure is linked with listening comprehension. Furthermore, Dufva et al. (2007: 160) point out that recognizing difficulties in foreign language learning requires observing skills in L1 and L2 or L3; the goal is tight co-operation of teachers across subject and class related boundaries. In the present study, the foreign language learning of the student was observed and supported by his own teacher, the English teacher and the special education teacher.

3 FINNISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Finnish as a second language has become a relevant topic in the Finnish education system during the past decades; as a result of increased immigration, cultural and linguistic diversity has become a more central aspect in our society. The National Board of Education (2013) reports that the number of immigrants in Finland has doubled since year 2005. A similar trend appears in schools, as well; the amount of students with a mother tongue other than Finnish in grades 1-9 has increased from 15 373 in 2005 to 25 347 in 2012 (National Board of Education 2013). Such notable changes have, naturally, led to increased need for Finnish as a second language teaching. It is stated in the Finnish comprehensive school's syllabus that the students whose mother tongue is not Finnish, Swedish or Sami, are taught Finnish as a second language full or part time instead of the syllabus of Finnish as the mother tongue (Nissilä, Martin, Vaarala and Kuukka 2006: 25). Nissilä et al. (2006: 25) emphasize that though the amount of separate Finnish as a second language teaching has increased, more than half (51%) of the students in question participate in both Finnish as the first language and Finnish as a second language teaching. According to Nissilä et al. (2006), the syllabus for Finnish as a second language has been formulated so that the amount of teaching Finnish is the same for native Finnish students and for those who participate in Finnish as a second language teaching. Furthermore, Nissilä et al. (2006) point out that when an immigrant student participates in a Finnish as the first language class, his or her teaching needs to be *differentiated* and the student must be offered differentiating teaching materials that match his or her language level.

According to the National Board of Education (2014: 86), the curriculum of the Finnish comprehensive school, its goals and principles apply to all students. The linguistic abilities and cultural backgrounds of the students are taken into account; therefore, a specific syllabus can be formulated to cater for the needs of a Finnish as a second language student (National Board of Education 2014: 86-88). Siiskonen et al. (2007: 229) state that such syllabus may basically be formulated for each student following the national curriculum or for those only whose learning requires a greater deal of support and differentiation. Siiskonen, Koivula, Laitinen and Virtanen (2007: 229) explain that the syllabus includes the student's study program and a plan for

achieving it; they emphasize that such syllabus “at its best is a tool of differentiation, co-operation and pupil counseling”.

4 DIFFERENTIATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Supporting students' learning and differentiating teaching is a current and vital topic in pedagogy. Differentiation in language teaching has been studied and reported both in Finland (e.g. Moilanen 2004, Ahonen et al. 2004) and abroad (Bearne 1996, Nijakowska 2010). There are different views from which to observe the concept of *differentiation*. According to Viljanen (1975), from an individualistic point of view, differentiation aims to promote the specific student's development, whereas the social-pedagogical aspect emphasizes the need for differentiation from society's point of view. In practice, differentiation can be seen located between these two. Bearne (1996: 39) also defines the multi-dimensional concept of differentiation by claiming that classroom level differentiation may require focus on individuals and difference by observing the differences between children's performances in a particular task. However, Bearne (1996: 39) points out that while on the one hand focusing on individuals, on the other, differentiation also relates to what should be common, "since the principle of entitlement is to provide equal access to what is deemed of value and essential for all".

Differentiation may be needed if the student is notably on a different level with the rest of his or her group; whether the student is more advanced and in need of extra materials and challenges or below the average level in the class and thus in need of special support. However, the need for differentiation may not be tied to the student's skill level; for instance, an immigrant student often needs specific tools to assist his or her learning because the language barrier that exists in the class room where the learning takes place creates extra challenges – needless to say, this is not due to the student's personal talents or the lack of such. Furthermore, another example of those in need of differentiation regarding foreign language learning are dyslexic students or those with some other deficit in language learning. For instance, a student who has difficulties in reading and writing must be given the opportunity to learn and prove his or her knowledge and skills orally or functionally (Pitkänen, Dufva, Harju, Latva and Taittonen 2004: 83). It is stated in the Finnish National Curriculum (National Board of Education 2014: 221) that a student who faces difficulties in language learning is provided with support. That is, whether the foreign language learning deficit is related to the student's cultural and thus different linguistic background or developmental linguistic difficulties such as dyslexia, learning can be supported through differentiation.

Typical ways of differentiation in comprehensive school are remedial education and part-time special education. According to Siiskonen et al. (2007: 224), remedial education is not a form of special education but rather a form of differentiation where the exercises, use of time and instructions are planned and executed individually. They continue that as for part-time special education, it can be conducted as co-teaching, in small groups or individually; furthermore, part-time special education is carried out by special education teachers who co-operate with other teachers and the parents of the student.

Furthermore, there are some variations of differentiation, such as differentiating the goals or contents of the syllabus or following different methods of differentiation in the teaching process. According to Linnakylä (in Koppinen and Blom 1980), all the different subcategories of differentiation demand, above all, thorough knowledge of the student in question. Linnakylä (1980) lists some factors that may affect the student's learning, such as his or her skills, knowledge and emotions, social skills, studying habits and interests. By familiarizing him or herself with these aspects, the teacher is more likely to choose means of differentiation that are the most efficient for this specific student. As for the present study, one of the interview questions for the English teacher focuses on the knowledge of the student and the role of this in differentiation.

5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study combines the topics of foreign language learning, Finnish as a second language and differentiation in language teaching. While all language teachers are professionals on their own field, each teacher makes choices on their own when it comes to methods for working with individual students. From this point of view, there is a research gap as there is a small number of case studies about individual teachers differentiating English for a Finnish as a second language student. The current study contributes to this as a small-scale case study. Thus, the present study is a case study of an English teacher and a special education teacher who taught a Finnish as a second language student English through Finnish. What kind of differentiation promoted this student's learning? The research questions are:

1. What kind of differentiation methods does the special education teacher use with the student's English teaching?
2. In which ways does the English teacher differentiate fourth grade English for this Finnish as a second language student?
3. What are the main reasons behind the chosen methods of differentiation?

6 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The Finnish as a second language student whose teaching the present study researched was a fourth-grader with an Asian background and mother tongue; he went to a primary school in Southern Finland. Because of his cultural and linguistic background, the student followed a syllabus that was customized for a Finnish as a second language student. More specifically, he studied Finnish as a second language – henceforth F2 – and English through Finnish in step with his Finnish peers. He attended regular English classes and the learning was also supported by a special education teacher, to whom I will later in the study refer to as *SET*. The student had gotten little English teaching back in his home country some few years prior to the time of the present study. He began studying English in Finland on third grade, thus the fourth grade, which he attended during data collection, was his second year of English studies in the Finnish environment.

The research questions of the present study focus on the English teacher and the special education teacher's methods of differentiation and the reasons for the methods in question. The data was collected by interviewing the teachers and recording the interviews. The language of the interviews was Finnish so that the responses were as natural and free as possible. It was necessary for the analysis to translate the discussion from Finnish into English and to also conduct some basic level transcription. As the present study is a case study, it does not aim for broader hypotheses but rather a description of two individual teachers' ways of working with an immigrant student in the foreign language learning process. The place of the collection of the data was the primary school the student in question went to. Furthermore, the data consists of two qualitative interviews. The interview questions translated from the original Finnish ones into English can be found in the appendix. The actual questions are numbered; the italicized parts are notes that assisted me to keep the interview discussions flowing.

There was no detailed information on the *SET*'s role in this student's English studies prior to the interview; thus the interview questions for her were set so that she was able to answer them regardless of the time she spent with the student. The interview questions for the English teacher, with whom the student spent two hours per week, were based more on the theoretical background as knowledge of the student and learner errors were mentioned. Question 3 for the English teacher (see appendix) brought up the possibility of viewing the student's language development from a so-

called *error-based* point of view. One assumption regarding the differentiation for this F2 learner was that he had created several L3 errors which then led to differentiating the English teaching for him. Error-based learning theories are somewhat widely discussed in the L2 learning field; see e.g. Johnson (2008: 66-75) and Mitchell and Myles (2004: 15-16).

7 RESULTS

7.1 The special education teacher's differentiation methods

The original plan of recording the interviews had to be varied during the first interview because the recorder would not boot properly despite several attempts. Therefore, the special education teacher's interview data was collected by writing down her answers to the interview questions. By the time of the second interview with the English teacher, the technological issues with the recorder were solved and thus that interview was successfully recorded and analyzed as an audio record.

The special education teacher supported the English learning of the student in question typically once a week and sometimes two times a week. According to the SET, this was a very special case as there was, at the time, only one F2 learner in the school; this made it possible for the SET to invest in this learner with fuller capacity. During the special education English lessons, the SET and the student mainly revised third-grade English and new vocabulary; the SET pointed out that during third grade, the student's first year in a Finnish primary school, his F2 studies were seen as the priority so that he could keep up with the syllabus and his peers. As this prioritization of F2 was necessary and helped the student to cope in a Finnish class and with other subjects, it also meant that his English studies could not be supported broadly enough as the special education teacher invested in improving the student's Finnish as much as possible. According to the SET, the student's weak basis for English in the third grade was something that clearly affected his English studies in fourth grade, as well.

In addition to the weekly English lessons, the SET also assisted the learner with English exams; a rather recent method of assistance was that the student took the exam in the class with his group and the SET asked him to complete his answers orally. Over all, oral language skills were central with this student; for instance, most translation work was done orally rather than literally. This could be due to the fact that the phonological system of the English language is one where written and spoken language differ a great deal; thus focusing on both could have created even more obstacles to English learning. The SET mentioned several methods that work well with this learner regarding his translating skills and vocabulary learning. A typical oral translation from English to Finnish proceeded so that the student translated and read the

given text into his 'own' Finnish, to which the SET added, specified and corrected when needed. For reverse translations from Finnish to English, the SET emphasized the role of Finnish; for example, new words were always gone through in Finnish first and at this point the SET made sure the student understood everything – only after this could translation into English begin. However, the SET mentioned that translating from Finnish to English was specifically challenging for this learner.

In vocabulary learning, the SET pointed out that strong associations regarding the words were essential; using, for example, pictures as an aid for this process was typical. When translating a longer text, correct translations always began on the word level. Exercises were made more challenging step by step; the same vocabulary exercise could be used several times by adding to the difficulty of the task gradually through, for instance, demanding more independent translation. As for methods that did not work as efficiently with this learner, the SET mentioned independent work; that is, the student benefitted and progressed the most when his learning was supported and assisted rather than trying things completely on his own. The most challenging aspects of English for this learner seemed to be focused on translation, grammar rules and correct pronunciation. That is, the student faced many difficulties which the SET acknowledged as translation tasks and spoken language were carefully supported.

The student's attitude towards the special education teacher's support was over all very positive; according to the SET, the student was responsive, understood why the SET's support was necessary and, above all, was willing to learn and get support for it. Perhaps for this reason he got easily disappointed if the learning did not proceed as efficiently as he would have hoped. Furthermore, the SET admitted that the student gets tired easily, as language learning was a lot of work for him, and was not very eager to show emotions or admit that he was struggling.

Furthermore, the SET emphasized that the student's home played a major role in supporting the learner's English studies, as well. Outside school, the student also saw an interpreter of his own mother tongue who assisted him with his English homework. According to the SET, the interpreter translated the student's English homework into his own mother tongue which allowed him full access to the content of the text. This, then, supported translating the texts into Finnish with the SET at school as the student understood the meanings completely with the help of his first language.

This emphasizes the role of a strong L1 as an prerequisite for learning a foreign language, discussed by e.g. Nijakowska (2010).

If time or resources had not been obstacles, the SET believed an interpreter of the learner's mother tongue at school would have been useful for his English studies as well. Furthermore, another F2 learner of a similar background and a similar skill level in the school would have motivated and helped the learner. The SET also mentioned that revising fourth grade, or perhaps even third grade English completely would have been something that could benefit the student's English studies as it would have strengthened the basis for his English in general, which then would have simplified the development of the language.

The SET emphasized the investment in Finnish as perhaps the most central aspect of this learner's linguistic development. She stated that the relationship between the learner's L1 and L2 needed to be improved and strengthened before additional languages could be learnt systematically. According to the SET, the difficulties the student faced in Finnish language were very central to the challenges in his English studies. However, the learner followed a syllabus that was customized for his linguistic needs as an F2 student, and the SET pointed out that according to the alignments of the syllabus, also the goals of special education were set according to the child's hopes, coping and abilities.

7.2 The English teacher's views on differentiation

The first question for the English teacher was on differentiation methods used with this learner. According to the teacher, there had not been any differentiation of materials by the time of the study but the student did not always manage through as many exercises as his peers in the given time, that is, a lesson; however, the student's home was involved in his English studies a great deal and he got assistance with the missed exercises at home. The teacher mentioned the student's own activity as an asset here; if the student had not understood something, he typically asked for specification himself:

English teacher: *--and instructions, well, if he does not understand something, he asks, and also--*

Interviewer: *yeah, so, he asks, unprompted*

ET: *yes, yes he asks, or then asks his neighbor. So that the peers have typically helped him out a lot--*

The English teacher says that when it came to deciding whether the student required extra support in the class, it was mostly about observing how the student kept up with the group. There had not been specific methods of differentiation in use by the time of the study; however, the teacher mentioned the support of the SET in English exams explained in Chapter 7.1; furthermore, “the Finnish words that are a little stranger” had been explained to the student during the exams.

The English teacher also stated that the student uses the same English materials as his peers. The most difficult areas in the materials for the learner seemed to be texts. The teacher pointed out that “they do a lot of work at home very well” with the texts as well. She also listed memorizing English as a weaker feature for this student:

ET: *--but then it's a whole another issue whether [he] remembers (.) whether he remembers the translations into Finnish. --probably the retention is the (.) the most challenging thing--*

Furthermore, the English teacher believed the student had difficulties in English other than those that had to do with his abilities in Finnish; she stated that though the F2 student not knowing Finnish was interfering, perhaps there were difficulties in the English language as well. In addition, the teacher did not believe knowledge of the student had a specific role in differentiation and the supporting of the student's learning. She did, however, point out that the student completed all given tasks “nicely” and did not really express it if he found something difficult. The teacher explained that this, on the other hand “is a bad thing as well when he doesn't say ‘*I can't do this*’” and adds that the student could express more what he finds challenging.

If there had been no obstacles considering time and resources, the English teacher mentioned a smaller group as something that would benefit the student's English learning. According to the teacher, both of the two weekly classes were held for a rather big group and the F2 learner would have “probably benefit[ed] from a smaller group-- and from private tuition, even”. The teacher also mentioned the possibility of

remedial education but pointed out that she as a part-time teacher did not have a potential time at the school in question when this would have been possible.

8 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question focused on the special education teacher's methods of differentiation and the third one aimed to discover reasons for the methods in use. As written English caused difficulties for the learner, the SET emphasized the role of spoken language through completing exam answers with the student and translating homework texts. This supports Pitkänen et al.'s (2004: 83) statement that students who face difficulties with written language need to be given the opportunity to prove their skills some other way, such as orally or functionally. The student's vocabulary learning was assisted by the SET; pictures were a typical aid to support memorization of novel words, and the same exercise was often transformed into a more challenging one by slightly remodeling the exercise. Using pictures to support language acquisition is a typical tool in differentiation, one explained by, for instance, Moilanen (2004: 35), who defines that it is 'a basic principle' to approach the topics being taught in class from different viewpoints and by activating all senses. That is, the students benefit from multiple sense stimuli, of which pictures are a reasonable example.

Vocabulary learning over all was an aspect the SET focused on a great deal with this student; as Dufva et al. (2007: 160) state, the management of foreign language vocabulary affects the skills in oral and written production and understanding. The SET, too, emphasized that correct translations and associations with this student were always built one word at a time.

Furthermore, the SET stated that independent work was not the most suitable option for this learner; thus, the English studies with the SET were mainly cooperation of the SET and the student to assure the most beneficial environment for the student in question's learning. As the Finnish speech sounds were occasionally challenging for the student, the SET for instance let the student translate English into his 'own' Finnish and specified or corrected when necessary. The SET also emphasized the role of the student's L1 in his foreign language studies and was content with the student's access to an L1 interpreter at home – she even suggested it would benefit the student to have another one at school. Investing in the student's L1 is relevant to his English studies; difficulties in foreign language learning can be seen as a consequence of L1 deficit (see e.g. Nijakowska 2010), and in this learner's case the SET emphasized also the role of stronger L2, Finnish, as a foundation to learning L3, English.

The second research question regarded the English teacher's methods of differentiation. The teacher did not name any specific ways of differentiation except for explaining the Finnish words the learner found difficult during exams. In addition, though the English teacher did not find knowledge of the student as very relevant in differentiation, she pointed out that the student did not express difficulties enough; perhaps this could have affected not having specific methods of differentiation as the teacher may not always have been aware of the student's difficulties. Furthermore, the English teacher pointed out that the learner would benefit from a smaller group.

All in all, part-time special education and the special education teacher's ways of working seemed to be the most relevant methods of differentiation in this F2 learner's English studies; the language teacher's role in the differentiation process with this student was lesser. These were central findings in the present study, as the aim was to answer research questions regarding differentiation in the student's English studies from the perspectives of the SET and the English teacher. Further studies could be conducted on language teachers' views and knowledge on differentiation. The present study is a small-scale case study that, in a way, is a representative of some other learner cases in Finnish schools – the differentiation methods supporting a Finnish as a second language student's learning in foreign language class. Of course, the present study introduced a case where the student in question was at the time the only F2 learner in his school and thus may have had access to more resources than many other immigrant students in Finnish comprehensive schools. Furthermore, all F2 learners need to be faced as individuals with their own backgrounds, needs and abilities but on a larger scale, the linguistic settings and the challenges brought with them are similar with a great deal of these students. As Finnish as a second language learning and teaching are a current and rapidly emerging field of study and foreign language skills a vital asset in the Finnish society, further case studies and research on differentiating foreign language studies for immigrant students are needed.

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Appendix

Interview questions for the SET:

1. How extensively do you support this learner's English studies? *For each class, weekly, prior to exams...*
2. What methods have you found the most workable with this student? Why?
3. Are there methods that do not work with this student? Why?
4. What is your experience on this student's attitude with you supporting his language learning as a special education teacher?
5. If the lack of resources or time was not an obstacle, is there something you believe would promote this student's English studies more efficiently?

Interview questions for the English teacher:

1. What kind of differentiation methods are used with this F2 student's English teaching? (*materials, (oral) instructions, something else..?*)
2. How broadly is the syllabus differentiated? I.e. Do you always use aids with the materials or can the student occasionally manage with the same materials as his peers?
→ *what "sections" of the materials are supported the most: texts, vocabulary, listening comprehension etc or all these equally?*
3. How have you decided on the most common differentiation methods? By trying or through the most common errors made by this learner, or with the help of the learner's parents or other teacher?
→ *have you familiarized yourself with some theoretical perspectives considering supporting a F2 learner?*
4. Have you noticed some situations during classes or exams that have been too challenging for this student? If yes, how did the problematic nature of these occur?
5. What kind of role do you think the teacher's knowledge of the student has in differentiation?
→ *do some methods suit this student better than others based on e.g. his personality?*
6. What is your experience on this student's attitude towards differentiation?
7. If the lack of resources or time was not an obstacle, is there something you believe would promote this student's English studies more efficiently?