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USING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION TO DEVELOP READING SKILLS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Abstract: *the authors examine the role of differentiated instruction in developing reading comprehension among secondary school students. Particular attention is given to vocabulary difficulties, inferential reasoning, and metacognitive skills in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. Drawing on international research, the authors propose an evidence-responsive reading model combining diagnostic assessment, flexible grouping, targeted scaffolding, and independent comprehension tasks. Practical recommendations focus on adapting instructional support while maintaining common learning objectives and developing students' independent reading competence.*

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, reading comprehension, secondary education, EFL, diagnostic assessment, cognitive scaffolding.*

Introduction. A secondary school student may read an English passage fluently and still fail to explain the author's argument. Another may understand the central idea but struggle to identify the evidence supporting it. A third can answer factual questions accurately yet becomes uncertain when asked to distinguish an author's opinion from a verifiable claim. These differences expose a persistent problem in reading instruction: identical reading materials and uniform questions do not

necessarily engage the same cognitive processes in every learner. The OECD's PISA 2025 results highlight persistent challenges in reading literacy: Kazakhstan scored 385 points, compared with the OECD average of 461 and Singapore's 535 [1]. In mixed-ability EFL classrooms, reading difficulties are further complicated by differences in vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, and inferential reasoning. Identical tasks may therefore conceal distinct barriers to comprehension. Tomlinson's differentiated instruction addresses these differences by adapting content, learning processes, and expected outcomes while maintaining common educational objectives [2]. Reading, however, involves more than accurate word recognition. Gough and Tunmer distinguished decoding from linguistic comprehension [3], while Duke and Cartwright emphasised the contribution of cognitive self-regulation [4]. Effective differentiation consequently requires targeted vocabulary support, guided interpretation of complex sentences, and structured inferential questioning. Rather than permanently dividing students by ability, instruction should respond to specific comprehension difficulties and gradually develop independent, evidence-based reading skills. Three interconnected components deserve particular attention in secondary EFL instruction: lexical-semantic competence, inferential comprehension, and metacognitive regulation. Their interaction determines whether reading remains a process of extracting isolated details or develops into the construction and evaluation of coherent meaning.

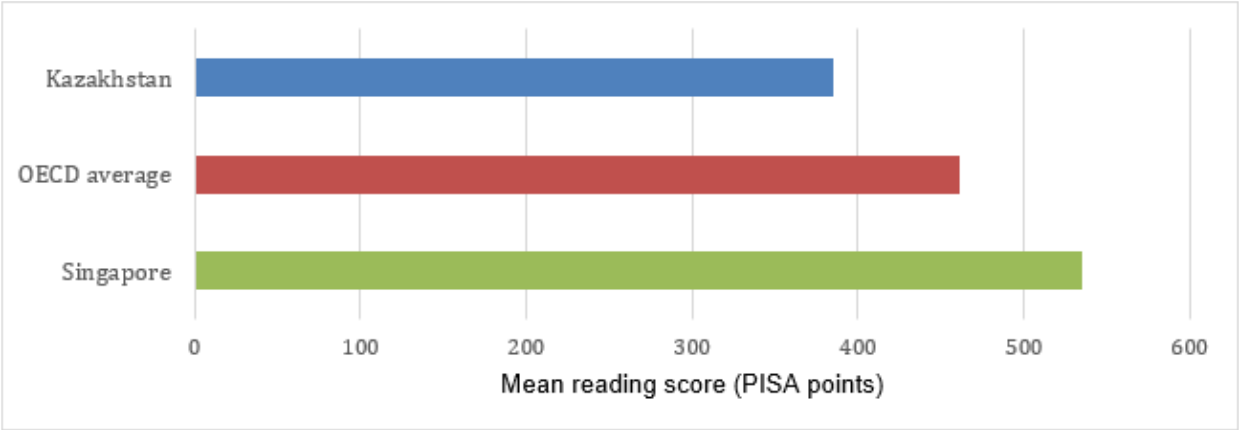


Figure 1. Reading performance in PISA 2025: Kazakhstan, the OECD average and Singapore (score points) [1].

The difference between Kazakhstan's 385 points and the OECD average of 461 points amounts to 76 points. This disparity reflects broader challenges in reading literacy, including the ability to locate, understand, evaluate, and reflect on textual information. Foreign language education introduces an additional instructional demand: students must perform these operations while working with a linguistic system that they are still acquiring. A systematic review by Smale-Jacobse et al. identified 12 empirical studies across 14 publications, with most reporting small to moderate positive effects of differentiated instruction on secondary students' achievement [5]. Magableh and Abdullah found improved reading comprehension among 54 tenth-grade students using tiered tasks, adapted texts, and flexible grouping [6]. In Thailand, White and Vibulphol reported positive outcomes from differentiated content, processes, and learning products among ninth-grade EFL students [7]. Similar improvements were observed in Bahraini secondary schools, where differentiated instruction outperformed conventional teaching [8]. Recent studies further demonstrated gains in reading comprehension and student engagement through literary texts [9], as well as improvements in vocabulary acquisition and main-idea identification among Indonesian EFL learners [10].

Table 1. Empirical evidence on differentiated reading instruction in secondary education.

Research	Educational context	Instructional approach	Reported findings
Magableh and Abdullah (2021) [6]	Grade 10, 54 students	Tiered tasks, adapted texts and grouping	Improved reading comprehension
White and Vibulphol (2020) [7]	Grade 9, Thai EFL learners	Differentiated content, process and product	Positive reading outcomes
Saleh (2021) [8]	Secondary EFL learners, Bahrain	Differentiated reading instruction	Higher comprehension scores
Octaviyanti et al. (2025) [9]	Grade 8 EFL learners	Literary texts and differentiated tasks	Improved comprehension and engagement
Ismail et al. (2025) [10]	Senior high school EFL learners	Differentiated reading activities	Improved vocabulary and main-idea identification

Differentiation is most meaningful when instructional adaptations correspond to identifiable learning demands: vocabulary acquisition, interpretation of implicit meaning, comprehension monitoring, or evaluation of textual arguments.

An important distinction nevertheless emerges between differentiation by general ability and differentiation by the particular barrier encountered during reading. A student with a restricted academic vocabulary may possess well-developed analytical reasoning, while a fluent reader may struggle with interpreting contradictory arguments. Permanent ability grouping can obscure these differences and limit access to cognitively demanding tasks. The more productive principle is to maintain ambitious comprehension objectives while adjusting the scaffolding through which students reach them. The intellectual challenge of a reading activity should not depend entirely on how fluently a student can process the English text. A learner who needs vocabulary assistance can still evaluate arguments, draw conclusions, and defend an interpretation using textual evidence. This principle supports an evidence-responsive reading cycle

built around three pedagogical relationships: diagnostic evidence identifies the immediate comprehension barrier, targeted scaffolding addresses that barrier, and independent transfer determines whether the support should be modified or withdrawn.

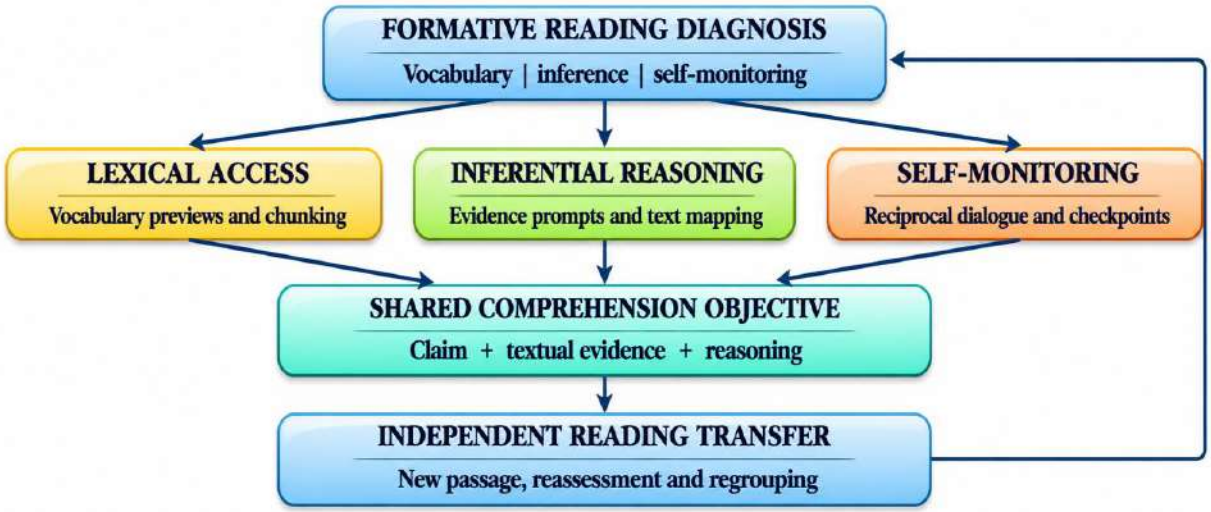


Figure 2. Evidence-responsive differentiated reading cycle.

The diagnostic phase begins with a short passage and carefully selected questions that distinguish factual retrieval, lexical interpretation, inference, and evaluation. Different errors then lead to different instructional responses. For example, an incorrect answer concerning the author's main argument may result from unfamiliar vocabulary, failure to recognise a contrastive conjunction, or difficulty distinguishing evidence from opinion. Giving every student the same additional worksheet would address these problems only indirectly. Targeted support through vocabulary previews, guided text analysis, and discussion should gradually decrease as students develop independent comprehension skills. Since reading difficulties vary across genres, continuous formative assessment is essential. In a Grade 9 EFL lesson on smartphone restrictions, students may receive different levels of support while addressing the same question: Should schools restrict smartphone use during lessons? All learners must justify their conclusions with textual evidence.

Table 2. Differentiated reading activities with a common comprehension goal.

Reading need	Instructional support	Student activity	Evidence of comprehension
Lexical-semantic difficulty	Vocabulary clues and text segmentation	Identify claims and evidence	Accurate, justified conclusion
Inferential difficulty	Guided questions and argument maps	Interpret implicit relationships	Evidence-based inference
Metacognitive difficulty	Clarification prompts and comprehension checks	Reread and revise interpretations	Corrected understanding
Advanced evaluative competence	Reduced scaffolding and contrasting views	Compare and evaluate arguments	Reasoned critical judgement

Effective implementation requires careful calibration of cognitive demand and instructional accessibility. Reducing the number of unfamiliar expressions may improve access to a passage, but removing every argumentative difficulty can deprive learners of the reasoning opportunities necessary for comprehension development.

A useful alternative is to differentiate the amount and form of assistance while retaining the central intellectual operation. Students requiring support may receive a partially completed argument map, others construct the map independently. More advanced readers examine whether the author's evidence justifies the conclusion or whether an alternative explanation remains plausible. Vocabulary instruction is particularly important because academic texts rely on words whose meanings differ from everyday usage. Terms such as evidence, assumption, consequence, reliable, and interpretation carry specific argumentative functions. Explicit instruction in these relationships can strengthen comprehension beyond memorisation of isolated translations. The Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on improving literacy in secondary schools recommends targeted vocabulary teaching, the development of students' ability to read complex academic texts, structured classroom talk, and high-quality support for struggling readers [11]. These principles complement differentiated

instruction by linking linguistic knowledge to disciplinary reasoning and purposeful communication. Reciprocal teaching offers another evidence-based technique. Palincsar and Brown developed a structured approach involving prediction, questioning, clarification, and summarisation. Their research demonstrated improvements in comprehension-related performance among struggling readers, including seventh-grade students [12]. Within a differentiated lesson, these operations can be distributed flexibly among students. Readers with limited monitoring skills may receive specific clarification prompts, whereas more independent readers can formulate questions and challenge interpretations without teacher-generated cues. The instructional progression moves from externally supported comprehension to autonomous strategic regulation.

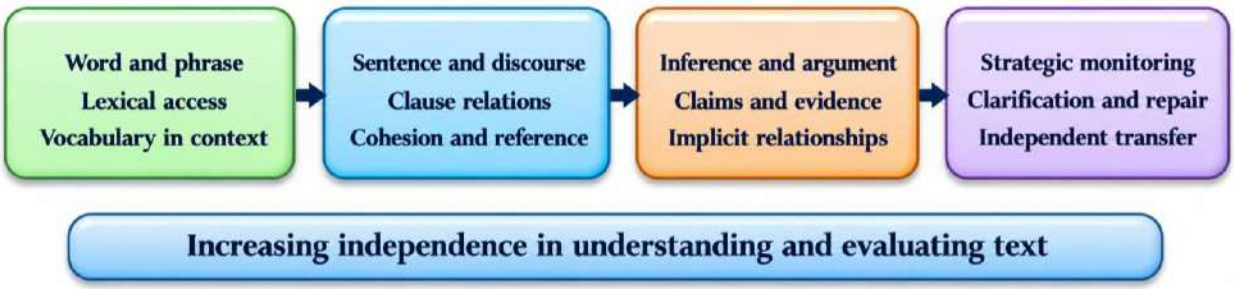


Figure 3. Reading operations and progression towards independent comprehension. Based on [3, 4].

Differentiated reading instruction becomes educationally meaningful when assessment is sensitive to the underlying comprehension process. A correct multiple-choice response may conceal uncertainty in reasoning, just as an incorrect answer may reflect a limited vocabulary rather than deficient inferential competence. A more informative assessment combines selected-response questions with short explanations requiring textual justification. Students may be asked to identify a claim, quote relevant evidence, explain the relationship between two propositions, and evaluate the credibility of an argument. Each operation produces distinct diagnostic information.

1. Differentiate according to reading barriers rather than fixed ability labels. Diagnostic questions should distinguish lexical knowledge, grammatical processing, inference, and self-monitoring.

2. Preserve common comprehension objectives. Students may receive different scaffolds while working towards the same analytical outcome, including argument identification and evidence-based interpretation.

3. Integrate explicit strategy instruction. Prediction, clarification, summarisation, and question generation should become visible elements of the reading process rather than incidental classroom activities.

4. Use flexible grouping and gradual withdrawal of support. Group composition should respond to evidence from new tasks. Demonstrated competence should lead to increased independence.

5. Assess transfer, not merely task completion. A new but comparable passage can establish whether learners can apply a comprehension strategy without the original prompts.

Task differentiation and learning differentiation are not equivalent. Offering students several worksheet formats represents a change in instructional materials. Meaningful learning differentiation occurs when those variations address identifiable cognitive demands and improve students' opportunities to develop transferable reading competence. An instructional sequence built around diagnostic questions, targeted assistance, collective interpretation, and independent transfer may therefore integrate the practical advantages of differentiated teaching with the cognitive requirements of advanced reading comprehension.

Conclusion. Differentiated instruction supports reading comprehension by addressing learners' linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive needs through tiered tasks, adapted texts, and flexible grouping. Its effectiveness depends on identifying specific comprehension difficulties rather than assigning easier materials according to general ability. An evidence-responsive approach integrates diagnostic assessment, targeted scaffolding, and independent practice while maintaining common learning objectives.

For secondary EFL learners, this promotes inferential reasoning, critical evaluation, and autonomous reading competence.

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