GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

“But that’s the frustration of teaching”

A Qualitative Study on Differentiation in the Swedish EFL Classroom

Matilda Ask

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Abstract

An individualistic shift has made its way into the school context through e.g. the Salamanca Statement, the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum and syllabus for English. Due to this, teachers need methods, such as differentiation, to accommodate the education to individual student needs. The implementation of differentiation is relevant in Swedish EFL classrooms as national steering documents support adjusting teaching methods to learner needs in order to enhance academic performance and learning outcomes. Much research has been conducted on differentiation, providing various definitions, approaches and frameworks. The 5D-model was used as theoretical framework in this study. The aim of this study was to explore the challenges Swedish EFL teachers at upper secondary schools encounter with differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms, as well as the strategies they use to manage them. In order to reach this aim, six teachers from schools with varying achievement levels were interviewed. The interviews revealed various components of challenges and strategies in relation to differentiation. While much data was directly relevant to the aim and research questions, i.e. focused on challenges and strategies, the responses also yielded information about material resources, support, AI tools, learning profiles, and motivation. Because these aspects concerned significant pedagogical practices, they were included in the results. The most prominent challenges included lack of time, large class sizes, and lack of resources or support. The strategies that were emphasised by most participants included reactive differentiation and varied teaching methods. Reactive differentiation being the most frequently practiced aligns with the challenge of lack of time.

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1 Introduction

As society has moved towards a greater emphasis on individuals, the Swedish school system has developed a more individualised approach to teaching instead of focusing on "educating the individual *for* society" (Carlgren et al., 2006, p. 319). This student-centred shift began in the 1980 curriculum for compulsory school, where student interests were incorporated as a starting point for teaching content, rather than students being "taught […] in relation to an existing body of knowledge" (Carlgren et al., 2006, p. 304). Although individualisation has been present throughout the Swedish curricula over time, its meaning has turned from preparing the individual for society to focusing society around the individual, adding a more competitive perspective (Carlgren et al., 2006, pp. 303-307, 319). This development of emerging individualism has continued into the present and can be seen through the lasting focus on supporting the learning of the individual student in the current curriculum for upper secondary school (Läroplan för gymnasieskolan [Curriculum for upper secondary school], 2025).

While Swedish schools and steering documents have become increasingly focused on the individual over time, global changes in education regarding inclusion and diversity can be seen in for example the Salamanca Statement, although its main focus is on inclusion of students with "special educational needs within the regular education system" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 8). Incorporating students with special educational needs in regular education naturally introduces more diverse learning profiles, thereby increasing the need for methods to accommodate these varied learner needs. In the Swedish context, this is further emphasised as all education must follow the Education Act, in which it is stated that students' differing needs must be considered and that appropriate support and stimulus should be provided to ensure all students have access to equal education (SFS 2010:800, ch. 1, § 4).

An additional regulation that implicitly supports differentiation in Swedish schools is *Gymnasieförordningen* (the Upper Secondary School Ordinance), which includes a chapter on support measures (SFS 2010:2039, ch. 9). This chapter details how students are entitled to support, including measures such as course retakes and extended study programmes. However, it can be argued that integrating proactive measures, such as differentiation, would be more beneficial for both students and schools than relying only on these reactive measures. The Swedish curriculum further stresses that education cannot be the same for everyone despite the requirement of equal education for all. Students who experience difficulties

attaining the goals stated in the syllabus are explicitly entitled to additional support in order to achieve a final passing grade (Lgy25, 2025).

As explained above, the Swedish educational system has been more individualised over time, leading to the need for methods that allow teachers to tailor the education to all individual learners' needs, with differentiation emerging as one method. While differentiation is a broad term that is explored further in Section 2.1, it can briefly be defined as proactive and reactive modifications to teaching practices in response to students' varied abilities, interests, and needs (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 4). Although much research focuses on the pedagogical aspects of differentiation, multiple studies suggest that differentiation plays a significant role in motivation, and not only for performance. Differentiating with students' interests in mind enhances engagement, which can positively impact students' learning (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 7; Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 128). Because student motivation is an essential pedagogical aspect in classroom practices, this study utilises an extended definition of differentiation that includes both academic performance and learning profiles.

Before the individualistic shift, Swedish schools used ability grouping to some extent to more easily manage differentiated teaching, a practice that often resulted in segregating students into specialised observation classes (*obsklasser*) (Asp-Onsjö, 2020, pp. 428-429). While ability grouping can be seen as a form of differentiation, especially in the Scandinavian context (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022, p. 158) it contrasts with differentiation as it is a more permanent structural division rather than a flexible adjustment. When grouping is used as a method in differentiation, the more frequent approach is flexible grouping, where groups are formed based on students' abilities, and depending on the task (Graham et al., 2021, p. 165).

Although differentiation is a broad research field, English as a foreign language (EFL) is rarely the focus of studies. Moreover, existing studies within the Swedish school context tend to focus on compulsory school rather than upper secondary school. While some studies have been carried out with a similar theoretical framework as this study, they are quantitative in nature. A qualitative approach is missing, which is significant to research teachers' experiences in depth. To address this gap, this study aims to explore the challenges Swedish EFL teachers at upper secondary schools encounter with differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms, as well as the strategies they use to manage them. To achieve this, the following research questions are used:

1. What challenges do teachers encounter when working with differentiation in a Swedish EFL classroom?

2. What strategies do teachers use to address the differentiation challenges in a mixed-ability classroom?

2 Theoretical Framework and Definition of Terms

To establish a clear conceptual understanding of the key terminology of this study, this section explores multiple definitions and theoretical frameworks used as a foundation. First, an overview of differentiation is provided through various definitions, concluding with the definition chosen for this paper. Then, theoretical frameworks and models are laid out according to these different definitions. Last, the Five-Dimensional (5D) Model is detailed as it played a significant role in the design of the interview guide. The 5D-model was created with the purpose of being a clear and accessible framework for teachers wanting to differentiate their teaching.

2.1 Defining Differentiation

A broad definition of differentiation is proposed by Tomlinson et al. (2003, p. 131), who argue that student interests and learning profiles should be considered in differentiated teaching rather than only student readiness, which refers to a student's proficiency level in relation to the teaching level (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 126). A student's learning profile includes their "learning style, intelligence preference, gender, and culture" (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 129), meaning that many factors must be taken into account when differentiating according to learning profiles. The authors also emphasise differentiation as qualitative rather than quantitative, as there are many other strategies for differentiation than assigning additional tasks to high-achievers or reducing tasks for low-achievers (Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 5-7). Differentiation according to these definitions involves adapting content (what students learn), process (how they learn it), and product (how learning is demonstrated) (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 7). In addition to these three components, Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019, p. 6) include learning environment as something to consider in differentiation. Graham et al. (2021, p. 164) and Lindner and Schwab (2025, p. 2204) further highlight the need to consider student needs and interests, rather than only academic performance.

Although these definitions all present a holistic view on what to include, they differ regarding what practice to use, some presenting differentiation only as a proactive approach, while others include a reactive approach. The proactive strategies are pre-planned modifications prior to performing a task or teaching a lesson, rather than adjusting in response

to students' reactions. These proactive strategies include varied teaching materials, varied teaching pace, and flexible grouping within the classroom (Tomlinson et al., 2003, pp. 131-133; Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 5-6). The proactive approach is supported by Graham et al. (2021, p. 164) and Smale-Jacobse et al. (2019, p. 6), who also emphasise pre-planned adjustments. In contrast, Lindner and Schwab (2025, p. 2204) present a reactive approach to differentiation by stating that differentiation should be based on students' educational needs through observing and reacting to individual student needs.

Moreover, other researchers propose definitions that include both proactive and reactive approaches, while also focusing on aspects that go beyond the learners' needs and interests. For instance, Bondie et al. (2019, pp. 356-357) focus on learning outcomes and include decision-making in their definition, stating that teachers must be perceptive of diverse learner needs in the classroom. Their approach involves planning and teaching and thus includes both a proactive and reactive approach. Similarly, Pozas et al. (2020, p. 218) encompass both the proactive and the reactive components by defining differentiation as "a toolbox of instructional practices" (Pozas et al., 2020, p. 218). This description shows a reactive approach as the tools must be used in response to classroom situations. The proactive dimension is introduced as teachers use this toolbox to tailor education to students' needs (Pozas et al., 2020, p. 218). Eikeland and Ohna (2022, p. 158) divide differentiation into organisational and pedagogical practices. The organisational aspect includes practices like ability grouping, which has historically been considered differentiation in a Scandinavian context. However, along with the increasingly individualistic focus, permanent grouping has decreased in popularity, thereby allowing more room for pedagogical differentiation and the use of varied teaching methods, tasks, and assessments.

While all these definitions bring valuable aspects of differentiation, this study utilises the definition provided by Roiha and Polso (2021) due to its broader perspective and its alignment with the participants' own understanding of the term. Their definition includes the proactive approach presented by researchers such as Tomlinson (2017), while simultaneously involving the reactive approach by acknowledging the need to differentiate in reaction to students' behaviour and reactions (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 4). To widen the scope of the definition the authors state that "[a]ll differentiation practices are always informed by the students and their individual features such as learning profile, […] readiness, needs, motivation" (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 4), which is also shown in figure 1. Consequently, the term in this paper focuses on pedagogical aspects as well as individual factors unrelated to performance. Furthermore, this definition accounts for macro- and micro-levels, addressing

organisational aspects such as teaching arrangements as well as practical teaching methods. To further explore these dimensions, Section 2.3 details their 5D-model, which was created in alignment with this definition and the Finnish curriculum (Roiha & Polso, 2021, pp. 6-7).

2.2 Theoretical Framework on Differentiation

This section expands on the theoretical framework associated with the definitions provided in the previous section, starting with content, process, and product. In short, content refers to what the lessons include; process focuses on how the students internalise that content; and product represents the outcomes of the content and process, where students demonstrate their learning (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 7). By differentiating within these three aspects, teachers can make modifications to accommodate students' varying abilities, interests, and learning profiles. Incorporating students' interests is essential as it can heighten motivation and therefore increase learning (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 7; Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 128).

Moreover, Bondie et al. (2019, p. 356) suggest that incorporating decision-making into differentiation increases teachers' reflection on teaching, which further enhances differentiation. The authors also emphasise differentiation as a tool to "increase *Clarity, Access, Rigor, and Relevance* (CARR) for *all* students" (Bondie et al., 2019, p. 356). Within this framework, clarity assists learning for diverse student needs, access ensures the necessary instructions for independent work, rigor maintains appropriate level for diverse learning profiles, and relevance directly relates to student interests and motivation (Bondie et al., 2019, pp. 356-358). This emphasis on clarity and adapting to various learning profiles coincides with the requirements in the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school (Lgy25, 2025).

Teaching practices following the definition by Eikeland and Ohna (2022, p. 158) can be divided into macro- and micro-level methods. The macro-level includes organisational dimensions such as ability grouping and school policies, whereas the micro-level focuses on implementing varied in-classroom practices to allow for inclusion (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022, pp. 158, 165-166). By incorporating this macro-level perspective, the responsibility for differentiation is extended to the school administration, which can allow teachers to focus on micro-level practices in the classroom (Eikeland & Ohna, 2022, p. 165; Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 8).

As established earlier in this paper, differentiation is a broad term that comprises other components than student proficiency levels, with motivation being one of these. Within this context, motivation is closely related to student interests highlighted in the definitions

proposed by Tomlinson et al. (2003). Accounting for student interests has been shown to impact learning positively, both in relation to performance and motivation (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 128). Although motivation is not the most frequently researched aspect of differentiation, previous research indicates that differentiating to increase motivation promotes overall learning outcomes (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019, pp. 17, 19).

Kótay-Nagy (2023, pp. 38, 40) found that teachers who used student interests for differentiation received more student engagement during lessons, which in turn led to increased student motivation. Furthermore, positive learning experiences emerged from involving students in the decision-making process regarding tasks and topics. As learners experience more engagement and greater responsibility for their own learning, intrinsic motivation is enhanced, meaning that students "perform activities for their innate fulfilment rather than based on some form of external stimuli" (Wong et al., 2023, pp. 142-143). Promoting intrinsic motivation is essential as it has been shown to yield positive effects on learning outcomes (Ginsberg, 2005, p. 220). While intrinsic motivation can differ between high- and low-achieving students, differentiation is a method that can promote intrinsic motivation among low-achieving students. Wong et al. (2023, pp. 143, 147, 149) also explain that the impact of differentiation positively affected all students regardless of their achievement level. Additionally, differentiation has been shown to improve student motivation by providing opportunities for learner autonomy and classroom collaboration (Sapan & Mede, 2022, pp. 138-139). The physical and social learning environments are foundational components for differentiation practices. To further enhance motivation for students, these are highlighted as significant contributors. By promoting an inviting classroom environment focused on student interests and individual decisions, intrinsic motivation naturally emerges (Ginsberg, 2005, pp. 220-221).

2.3 The 5D-Model

The purpose of the model is to provide a framework to facilitate differentiating the education in a diverse classroom (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 6). Although the model is created in accordance with the Finnish curriculum, it can be used in other school contexts (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 1). The model consists of five aspects regarding differentiation: teaching arrangements, learning environment, teaching methods, support materials, and assessment (see Figure 1 below). To further make the model accessible and comprehensible these aspects are separated into macro- and micro-level. The macro-level encompasses organisational

components, namely teaching arrangements and learning environment, whereas the micro-level practices focus on classroom practices through teaching methods, support materials, and assessment.

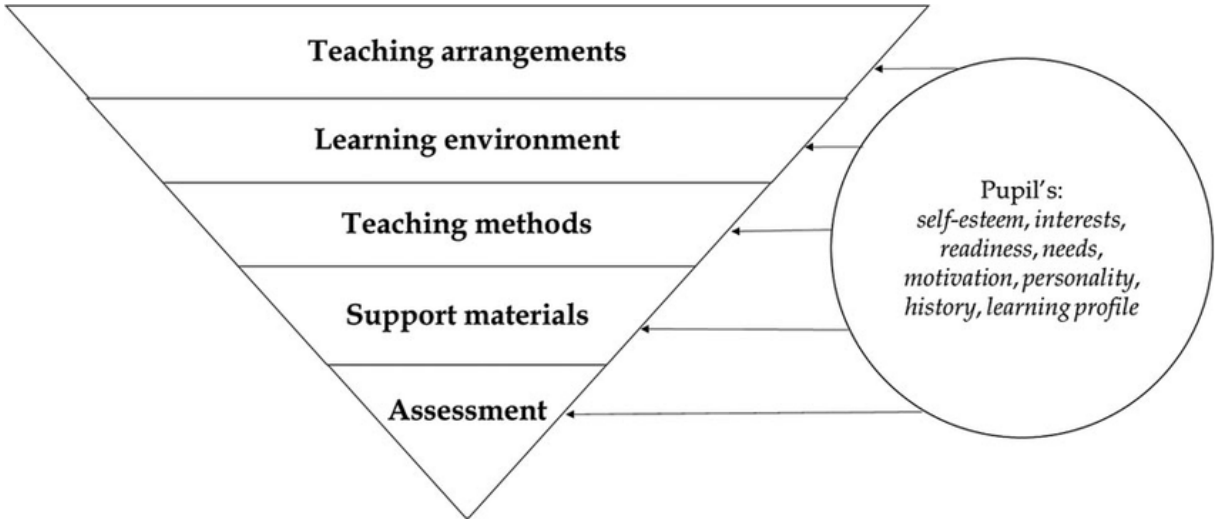

Figure 1: *The 5D-Model* (Roiha et al., 2025, p. 3)

The macro-level aspects play an essential role for differentiation but are often more difficult to control than micro-level practices. Teaching arrangements involve group divisions and strategies that involve other staff members, such as special education teachers. The learning environment is divided into the physical and the psycho-social environment. The physical environment must be "flexible and adaptable" (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 8) to allow for different seating arrangements and to accommodate varied types of teaching. The psycho-social learning environment requires attention since a positive atmosphere can lead to improved learning outcomes (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 9). In addition to these learning environments, the authors point out that the atmosphere outside of the classroom is equally important since transitions can present challenging situations for certain students (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 9).

Teaching methods are the third dimension of the 5D-model and are a key component in many definitions. This dimension encompasses both general principles, such as instructions and study skills, and concrete classroom practices, including projects and station work. Using station work creates opportunities to incorporate multimodality, allowing teachers to accommodate for diverse learner needs (Roiha & Polso, 2021, pp. 9-10). Closely related to these practices are support materials, which comprise a wide range of equipment to support focus and autonomy. These materials include tools to support concentration, as well as practices such as allowing students to choose their own reading material. Furthermore, this

category includes digital tools as an aid in the process of differentiation (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 10).

The final dimension of the model is assessment, which according to Roiha and Polso (2021, p. 10) is the most significant component because it acts as a scaffolding structure in students' learning. Similar to the previous dimensions of the 5D-model, assessment is divided into smaller components: "pre-assessment, formative assessment and summative assessment" (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 10). Pre-assessment is beneficial for both teachers and students, as it provides data regarding students' proficiency level to teachers and clarifies learning objectives to students. There are numerous ways to perform pre-assessment, such as group discussions or mind maps (Roiha & Polso, 2021, pp. 10-11). Formative assessment occurs continuously throughout the teaching unit and is significant as it is used as a learning strategy rather than only as an assessment tool. To achieve this, teachers must provide continuous feedback, though self-assessment or peer-assessment can also be included (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 11). Finally, summative assessment evaluates learning outcomes at the final stage of a unit. Similar to formative assessment, summative assessment can be done through various methods, including written essays, tests, or group presentations. Since the authors state that assessment is a foundational component for differentiation, they argue that a "[t]ruly differentiated approach to assessment would be to allow students to choose the assessment method" (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 11). This flexibility would, however, not be feasible for every assessment in a Swedish context as the national syllabus for English explicitly requires the assessment of the four skills listening, reading, speaking, and writing (English, 2025).

3 Previous research

The following section presents previous research relevant to the aim and research questions of this paper. The research included is focused on teachers' perceptions and experiences of differentiation. First, this review outlines research regarding teachers' general attitudes towards differentiation alongside their perceived challenges. Second, it explores reported strategies to address these challenges, as well as specific methods to implement differentiation effectively.

3.1 Teacher Attitudes and Challenges

Many studies show that while teachers generally have a positive attitude towards differentiation, multiple participants in these studies report finding its implementation

challenging (Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022, p. 15; Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 42; Zólyomi, 2025, p. 2310). For instance, in a survey study exploring 40 pre-service German EFL teachers' perceptions of specific differentiation approaches, attitudes varied depending on the approach. Respondents were most positive towards pedagogical approaches, such as "valu[ing] the opinions of the learners [and] the different skills of the learners" (Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022, p. 11). However, approaches targeting the four skills, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking, yielded contrasting results depending on the skill and the strategy. In writing, for example, participants disagreed with using technology as a differentiation tool, preferring instead strategies that supported the planning of the writing process (Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022, pp. 11-14). The authors note that the disagreement with using technology could stem from an insufficient awareness among pre-service teachers regarding how the use of technology can support students with learning difficulties (Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022, p. 15).

Supporting these findings, Kótay-Nagy (2023, p. 38) found that Hungarian EFL teachers were positive towards differentiation despite viewing its implementation as challenging in practice. However, a key difference from the German context is that differentiated instruction is explicitly required within the Hungarian national curriculum (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 35). Moreover, the participating teachers based their differentiation strategies on students' proficiency levels, with specific strategies explored in the next section. The practice of implementing differentiation based on students' proficiency level is mirrored in another study also conducted in Hungary, but with upper secondary EFL teachers. The results revealed that teachers concentrated differentiation practices around proficiency level, leaving little focus for student interests and learning profiles (Zólyomi, 2025, pp. 2306-2307).

Teachers reported consistently experiencing challenges regarding differentiation, with lack of time identified as the most prevailing one (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, pp. 38, 40; Roiha, 2014, p. 10; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 10-11; Zólyomi, 2025, pp. 2302, 2304). Lack of time is intensified by an already existing heavy workload, as planning for differentiation requires significantly more preparation time than traditional non-differentiated lessons (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 40; Roiha, 2014, p. 10; Roiha et al., 2025, p. 10; Zólyomi, 2025, p. 2304). Furthermore, teachers highlighted lack of knowledge or professional development as an obstacle to differentiation. They expressed the need for further training in how to differentiate effectively, such as through concrete differentiation methods (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 41; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 10-11).

Managing a differentiated classroom requires a teacher's divided attention, leading to teachers perceiving multi-tasking as a challenge (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 41). This issue is

further emphasised as large class sizes are brought up as a challenge (Roiha, 2014, p. 10; Roiha et al., 2025, p. 10). Teachers also see the lack of resources as a difficulty, pointing out that having the right resources can facilitate differentiation for diverse learner needs (Roiha et al., 2025, p. 11). In addition to these challenges, teachers mention differentiation for high-achieving students who require more advanced tasks as a difficulty, because these students broaden the overall proficiency level of the class (Zólyomi, 2025, p. 2304). Finally, a relational aspect is presented as some participants note that effective differentiation requires mutual trust between teachers and students (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 41).

3.2 Strategies

Two studies focused on strategies and presented them according to the 5D model. Both studies were conducted by Finnish researchers, one in Finland and the other in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, the results revealed many similar strategies. For instance, teachers reported using flexible grouping to differentiate teaching arrangements, allowing students to receive individually adapted instructions in smaller groups, while the rest of the class worked individually (Laari et al., 2021, p. 603; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 7-8). Furthermore, a method that was frequently used when differentiating the physical learning environment was seating arrangements to accommodate students' diverse learner needs (Laari et al., 2021, p. 604). Teachers used seating arrangements to place students requiring more teacher attention closer to the teacher's desk, while placing students capable of independent work towards the back of the classroom to promote a calmer environment (Roiha et al., 2025, p. 8). Another strategy implemented to adapt the learning environment was the use of pre-planned student groups, which not only facilitated differentiation, but also aided the prevention of bullying, thereby contributing to an improved learning environment (Laari et al., 2021, p. 604).

As established in previous sections, teaching methods include a broad array of strategies. Within these studies, this is mirrored through concrete teaching practices, such as translating important words, explicitly teaching reading strategies, and focusing on lesson clarity and structure (Laari et al., 2021, p. 605; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 8-9). Moreover, while the dimension of support materials was utilised less frequently overall within the 5D-model, specific resources like digital tools and visual aids were the most frequently used when materials were adapted (Laari et al., 2021, p. 606; Roiha et al., 2025, p. 10). Roiha et al. (2025, p. 10) note that teachers rarely used tools to enhance concentration as a strategy for differentiation. Finally, the findings regarding assessment practices differed slightly between

the two studies. Laari et al. (2021, pp. 606-607) found that homework and traditional examinations were frequently used, although some teachers attempted to vary their assessment methods. In contrast, Roiha et al. (2025, p. 10) found that student presentations functioned as the main assessment practice, with homework ranking fifth. Furthermore, teachers also highlighted that standardised testing often created an obstacle to truly differentiated assessment.

Other studies investigating strategies used to differentiate teaching found that providing supplementary tasks for high-achieving students was a common occurrence (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 39; Roiha, 2014, p. 8). This strategy prioritises differentiating according to learner differences in proficiency, frequently identified as the main reason for differentiation in both teaching and feedback, whereas adaptations based on student interests and learning profiles are less frequently mentioned. Moreover, teachers reported using flexible student grouping as another method for differentiation, supporting the findings mentioned above within teaching arrangements. Grouping was occasionally used to assign different, level-appropriate tasks, which simultaneously facilitated classroom management (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, pp. 39-40; Roiha, 2014, pp. 8, 13). Finally, student interests were actively accommodated during tasks involving presentations or discussions, an approach that incorporates the dimension of learner motivation into the classroom practices (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 40).

To tailor teaching to low-achieving students, a focus on additional instruction as well as visual support during teacher-led activities is emphasised (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 39; Roiha, 2014, p. 8). Differentiating for low-achieving students can also entail increased preparation time and a greater demand for encouragement from teachers, as well as peer support (Roiha, 2014, p. 8). Moreover, Roiha (2014, pp. 8-9) proposes allowing the use of the students' first language (L1) as a differentiation tool for low-achieving students, in contrast to only allowing the use of English for high-achieving students. For students across all proficiency levels, providing individual support and using presentations and project-based assignments emerged as frequently utilised methods for differentiating assessment (Roiha, 2014, p. 8).

In summary, the existing literature highlights a contradiction between the positive attitudes towards differentiation and the challenges related to its implementation in the classroom. While frameworks like the 5D-model provide structure for adapting teaching arrangements, learning environments, teaching practices, support materials, and assessment, teachers are continuously limited by obstacles such as lack of time and large class sizes. Furthermore, previous research suggests that differentiation is frequently used to address differences in proficiency level, often leaving student interests and learning profiles less

prioritised. Because education is closely tied to national steering documents, further research is required to understand differentiation within specific contexts. To address this, the following section outlines the method used in the present study to investigate challenges and strategies in the context of Swedish upper secondary EFL classrooms.

4 Method

As previously mentioned, this study is qualitative, and therefore interviews were used for data collection. A qualitative approach was chosen because the purpose of the study is to explore teachers' experiences of differentiation in greater depth and to gain a holistic view of each participant's perspective (McKay, 2008, p. 7). The following sections explain how the participants were found and informed about the study. Then, the creation of the interview guide and the data collection process are outlined. Finally, the method used for analysing the gathered data is detailed.

4.1 Participants

Prior to finding participants, a letter of consent was drafted. This letter detailed the purpose of the study and specified that the study adheres to the four principles established by *Vetenskapsrådet* (the Swedish Research Council): the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement, and the use requirement (Swedish Research Council, 2002). To follow the information requirement, the participants were informed of the study's scope, their role and their right to withdraw at any point. In accordance with the consent requirement, verbal participant consent was obtained at the beginning of every interview. To adhere to the confidentiality requirement, the participants were guaranteed confidentiality. However, complete anonymity was not possible as the interviews were conducted face-to-face, meaning the researcher was aware of the participants' identities. Consequently, any descriptive details that could reveal the teachers' or their schools' identities were omitted or altered. Lastly, to comply with the use requirement, the use of all gathered data was limited to the present study (Swedish Research Council, 2002, pp. 7, 9, 12, 14).

4.1.1 Participant Recruitment

The letter of consent was emailed to 32 schools in Gothenburg using contact information obtained from the City of Gothenburg's official website. For some schools, contact

information was only available for the headmasters, whereas other schools provided contact information for all teachers. The letter of consent was sent to all available e-mail addresses, both headmasters and teachers. Because the period of the school year when the interviews took place was particularly demanding, the headmasters who responded declined to forward the request to their staff due to the need to prioritise national tests and other core tasks. Ultimately, this initial outreach yielded only six responses, with only one leading to securing a participant. Consequently, convenience sampling was employed to recruit the remaining five participants through contact with peers. Convenience sampling has certain limitations, primarily because it is non-random. Therefore, the findings cannot be used to draw as strong conclusions as those derived from a random sampling (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2). Although convenience sampling was used, two inclusion criteria were maintained: participants were required to be teachers in upper secondary school (i.e., have a teaching degree) and teach English. No restrictions were placed on whether the participant taught at municipal or independent schools. However, deliberate efforts were made to recruit participants from both high-achieving and low-achieving schools to explore potential differences in differentiation challenges and strategies across diverse school contexts.

4.1.2 Participants and School Categorisation

The six recruited participants worked at various schools and possessed varying amounts of teaching experience. To provide a clear overview of this information, Table 1 is presented below. As previously noted, some detailed information has been reduced to protect participant confidentiality. All participants taught English in combination with either another language or a social science subject. Rather than using exact numbers for individual schools, they were categorised as either high-achieving or low-achieving based on statistics from *Skolverket* (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE]). This categorisation is used to contrast the high- and low-achieving schools, primarily in the results and discussion.

When applying to upper secondary school in Sweden, students are admitted based on their ninth-grade merit points, which range from a scale of 0 to 340 (SNAE, n.d.). For students in 2025, the national average was 228.5 points (SNAE, 2025a). The minimum number of points required to be accepted into an upper secondary school is 80 points and suffices for admission to a vocational programme, which is achieved by receiving passing grades in eight subjects, including Swedish, English, and Mathematics (SNAE, 2026). Based on these statistics, schools with an average of admission points surpassing 228.5 were categorised as high-achieving, whereas schools with an average of admission points under

228.5 were categorised as low-achieving. Moreover, throughout this study, the terms high-achieving and low-achieving pertain to students' academic performance and do not reflect other qualities such as motivation or learning profiles.

Table 1: *Overview of Responses to Background Questions*

Participant	**Teaching experience**	**Cooperation between teachers**	**High- or low-achieving schools**
Teacher 1	3 years	Good	Low
Teacher 2	15 years	Good & across subjects	High
Teacher 3	10 years	School too big, good at programme	Low
Teacher 4	41 years	School too big, good at programme	Low
Teacher 5	3 years	Good, but only within subject	High
Teacher 6	24 years	Not that good	Low

4.2 Interview Design and Data Collection

The interviews were conducted either in person or online via Zoom, depending on the participants' preference. All interviews were held in Swedish as it is the first language (L1) of both the researcher and the participants. This choice was made to minimise the risk of misunderstandings, reduce communication barriers, and create a comfortable environment for open dialogue. Since all interviews were conducted in Swedish, an additional step was added as all quotations used in the results had to be translated into English. The quotations were translated as close to the original as possible to ensure a fair representation of the responses.

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix 1 for English and Appendix 2 for Swedish) was developed prior to the first interview and used in all sessions. This method ensured that core topics were consistently addressed while allowing the flexibility to ask follow-up questions for clarification or deeper elaboration if the participant raised unexpected, relevant points (Lichtman, 2013, p. 272; McKay, 2008, p. 52). The interview guide was divided into five thematic sections: background questions, challenges with differentiation, addressing the challenges, the 5D-model, and differentiation at various levels. Each section, excluding background questions, contained two to five core questions. While a few of the questions were closed-ended, they were always accompanied by follow-up questions for richer, more descriptive responses if the participant's initial answer was brief (Jacob & Fergurson, 2012, p. 5). On average, the interviews took 31 minutes, with the longest session being 37 minutes and the shortest 27 minutes.

To ensure accuracy for the analysis, all interviews were audio-recorded with a recording application on a phone. Recording the sessions allowed for more focus on active listening to the participants' responses without losing any data (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 69; McKay, 2008, pp. 55-56). To optimise the transcription process, the *Transcribe* feature in Microsoft Word was used for the initial text generation. After this first step, all transcriptions were manually checked against the original audio to correct any errors. While the transcription process started during the interview phase, the thematic analysis did not begin until all six interviews were completed and fully transcribed.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

To analyse the qualitative data, thematic analysis was selected as the analytical method. Within the literature guiding this approach, the terms *concepts* and *themes* are used interchangeably (Lichtman, 2013, p. 307). The thematic analysis involved reducing the data according to "the three Cs: coding, categorizing, and concepts" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 309).

First, the data were coded by inserting comments into the transcription utilising the *Comment*-function in Microsoft Word. These comments consisted of single words or short phrases that summarised parts of the interview data. Once this initial coding was complete, the codes were revisited and refined to ensure consistent use of wording across all transcripts, as recommended by Lichtman (2013, p. 311). After all six interviews had been coded and revisited, the codes were compiled separately to facilitate the categorisation. The codes were organised into broader categories using colour-coding for a clear overview. Similar to the codes, the list of categories was reviewed to determine which elements could be combined and which seemed most important. For instance, the category *motivation* included specific codes such as *motivation through feedback* and *creative freedom*. Finally, these categories were condensed into fewer, more developed concepts (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 311-312). Certain broad categories remained the same when converted to concepts due to their high volume of codes. For instance, the category *challenges* remained a concept on its own, whereas *motivation* was merged with the categories *low- and high-achievers* and *student interests and learning profiles* to create the concept of *learners*. Ultimately, four themes were generated in alignment with the research questions: *Challenges, Strategies, Material resources and AI,* and *Learners*. These themes then guided the subheadings in the following results section.

5 Results

This section details the results found from the thematic analysis of the interview data. First, perceived challenges regarding differentiation are explored (5.1). Second, strategies for differentiating both teaching and assessment are addressed (5.2). Third, resources relating to materials, support and AI are presented (5.3). Last, matters relating to learning profiles, student interests and motivation are detailed (5.4).

5.1 Challenges

The main challenge identified by all teachers was lack of time, demonstrated in various ways. The two most frequently mentioned areas are limited time with students during lessons as well as hours spent outside of the classroom, i.e. for planning. One teacher stated that "differentiation takes up a ton of planning time", which two of the other interviewed teachers also brought up. The problem of lacking time in class with the students is relevant to differentiation as it requires individual attention for some students. In addition to being time-consuming, Teacher 1 also perceived differentiation as energy-consuming, especially in cases where there is a significant variety in student abilities within the same class.

Another challenge frequently highlighted by the interviewed teachers was class size, as larger groups hinder the possibility to differentiate for all students, despite a desire to meet individual needs. Closely related to this is the struggle of being the only teacher in the classroom, which further limits individualised differentiation. Because of students' varying needs, differentiation might require additional time with the teacher, which is rarely feasible if the teacher is alone. Furthermore, lack of resources was frequently mentioned, with respondents emphasising a need for assistants and more varied teaching materials. Moreover, Teacher 4 regularly experienced that support and resources for English were not prioritised. Challenges pertaining to resources and materials are explored further in Section 5.3.

Despite a shared wish among all teachers to exclusively use English in the classroom, Teacher 1 and Teacher 6 expressed this as a challenge and reported occasionally using Swedish when teaching grammar or vocabulary to facilitate understanding. On the one hand there is the view that everyone should always speak English: "You have to speak English all the time. If they say something in Swedish, I say, sorry, I don't understand what you mean". On the other hand, there is the view that "if we are going through some grammar, then I switch over to Swedish". This approach, however, introduces its own challenges as there are

many students that do not have Swedish as their L1, which is exemplified in the following quote by Teacher 4 who worked at a multicultural school:

> Yes, English is indeed a problem and I think sometimes that it's harder, because Swedish-born students, they have encountered English for many years and are used to it, but a student who has grown up in a completely different part of the world might not even have heard English, doesn't listen to English music. They don't have these advantages, you don't really have the culture either, in that way somehow. One student said to me: but I'm not allowed to put on my English movies. We have to watch the Arabic channel, it's on twenty-four-seven at our house and I have no chance to watch.

Learning two languages simultaneously adds a layer of complexity as Teacher 3 noted that a teacher must make a distinction "between what are interferences from their dual language acquisition and what are actual gaps in knowledge". This is part of the challenges of differentiation in a multicultural classroom and is discussed further in Section 6. Participants also emphasised only using English in their classroom, although noting that some students can experience uneasiness due to this requirement. A required use of English in the classroom enhances the need for a secure learning environment. While enforcing an exclusive use of English in the classroom can be considered a teaching method, its direct relevance to differentiation can be discussed. However, because all teachers reported using this method, it is further explored in Section 6.

In two of the interviews, Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 reflected on their students' digital competence, or rather a perceived lack of digital skills, with Teacher 1 stating that "everyone assumes that teens are so incredibly good at computers" and emphasising that students struggle with "knowing what keys to use […] and using shortcuts". This lack of digital competence has led to the need to spend time on teaching digital skills rather than focusing on study techniques or core syllabus content. Consequently, this aspect reinforces the challenge of lack of time.

In line with the content in the syllabus, steering documents place many demands on students as well as teachers, which was perceived as a challenge by some participants. One of the requirements placed on teachers is to provide individual adaptations according to students' learning profiles (Lgy25, 2025). The adaptations can differ depending on the student, and Teacher 2 noted that differentiating according to students' academic performance is easier than adjusting for motivation, as varying levels in academic performances are more visible. Teacher 3 expressed uncertainty about how to follow the requirements from steering documents while also differentiating according to all individual needs. As Teacher 3 mentioned, there is a "minimum common baseline to reach" in class, and continuously

adjusting teaching to make exceptions "has somewhat shattered the standards we are expected to uphold."

As previously mentioned, managing diverse student needs within a single classroom can easily become problematic without sufficient resources or support. This can be intensified by a broader range of student levels, which Teacher 1 referred to as having "outliers". Low-achieving outliers become a challenge due to the previously mentioned minimum common baseline in teaching. One explanation for the presence of low-level outliers is that "they have gotten a 'kind E' from compulsory school […] and are placed in the wrong class", which generally prevents them from following the teaching at the required level. Accommodating the students' needs takes both time and resources, which have both been addressed earlier as two of the main challenges. Furthermore, Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 reflected on lacking competence and materials required to teach the low-level outliers. Lastly, a contradictory finding emerged between the two high-achieving schools: while Teacher 5 saw a challenge in bringing up low-achievers to the required level, Teacher 2 struggled with maintaining motivation among high-achieving students.

5.2 Strategies for Differentiating Teaching and Assessment

While the interview data yielded information about many challenges, the interviewed teachers also described multiple strategies to address these challenges, which are explored in this following section. As mentioned in Section 2.1, there are proactive and reactive approaches, which are clearly mirrored in the findings. Reactive differentiation was used more frequently, with a probable cause being the lack of time for planning. Teacher 2 explained that it is more practical to give additional instructions spontaneously if a student does not understand. However, Teacher 3 noted that lessons run more smoothly when differentiation is pre-planned, while without it, "it can lead to uncertainty [and] fragmentation". To further emphasise the positive impact of proactive differentiation on teaching, Teacher 3 clarified that it leads to a sense of security and stability.

Variation of teaching methods was also frequently highlighted as a teaching strategy for differentiation. The findings suggest that while it is impossible to always cater to all learner needs, the goal is to find methods that occasionally suit all individual needs. Only Teacher 3 favoured continuity over frequent variation of method and stated that "you should keep the same [method] until they get it". Despite these differing opinions, all teachers agreed that clarity in instructions is important regardless of the chosen teaching method. In practice,

implementation of varied methods differed. Teacher 4, who worked at a low-achieving school, reported using teacher-led instruction during the autumn term and allowing more freedom and individual work during the spring term. In contrast, Teacher 5 worked with projects over a few weeks, which allowed for variation both within and between the projects.

The syllabus includes the four skills reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which can all be differentiated through various methods. Several teachers elaborated on specific strategies to differentiate writing, reading, and speaking. To differentiate writing tasks, Teacher 6 used "sentence starters […] and model texts" to exemplify the assignment. Teacher 4 used writing summaries, which allowed students to practice writing skills without the need to come up with their own ideas, if that was an obstacle. To practice reading, Teacher 4 reported reading together with the class to ensure that students were following along. This teacher also intentionally chose novels adapted for a lower level rather than the original texts. These examples of specific methods were all highlighted by teachers at low-achieving schools. Ultimately, speaking tasks were the most frequently adapted due to the emphasis on speaking as a difficulty for many students.

Furthermore, flexible grouping and group work were methods highlighted by all teachers when discussing strategies for differentiation, although yielding varying results. Mixing high-achieving and low-achieving students within the same group was a method used by some teachers, while other participants stressed that it was unfair to the high-achievers, and varied the grouping instead. Group work was also utilised to facilitate differentiation for academic performance as groups can be assigned separate tasks or materials adapted to their proficiency levels. Working in groups was therefore encouraged in both structured, teacher-assigned groups and voluntary, self-selected groups. Both approaches were highlighted as useful in various pedagogical situations. Deliberate grouping was emphasised by three teachers, particularly for tasks involving speaking due to some students experiencing difficulties when speaking in front of specific peers. In these situations, deliberate grouping was used to create a secure learning environment, which was emphasised as an essential component for successful differentiation.

On a macro-level, strategies include collaboration with colleagues and a supportive school culture, which also entails students helping each other if they are on different levels. Teacher 5 emphasised that communication between teachers facilitates differentiation, exemplifying this by stating that teaching methods that suit a specific student's needs can be shared if the communication is clear. Furthermore, the previously mentioned minimum

baseline for teaching can be implemented more effectively if teachers cooperate. It promotes more clarity and an equal education for all, across different classrooms.

Assessment was a significant element in the interviews. When addressing this topic, all respondents emphasised the role of feedback, with Teacher 1 highlighting that they separated feedback and assessment by "correct[ing] linguistic accuracy and assess[ing] the work as a whole". Feedback was referred to as time-consuming yet important, particularly on written assignments. Nevertheless, feedback on written tasks was the most frequently mentioned strategy, specifically as a tool to promote students' learning. To achieve this, teachers noted that the use of individual feedback is crucial, as well as adapting feedback to the student's proficiency level. For high-achieving students, feedback focused on detailed comments, whereas low-achieving students received feedback on one grammatical aspect at a time. Additionally, feedback was reported as a tool to challenge high-achieving students and help them develop their knowledge even when they had already demonstrated skills relating to the highest grading criteria.

In addition to feedback, grading is an essential part of assessment, which is reflected in the results as all respondents included it in their answers about assessment. However, while feedback can be differentiated individually, differentiation within summative assessment is more challenging due to the criteria enforced in the steering documents. To manage this, three teachers mentioned *PYS-paragrafen* (the exception clause), which allows the teacher to disregard one criterion under certain circumstances when giving a final grade (SNAE, 2025b). While this regulation allows for some adaptations, all teachers specified that it can only be applied to the final grade and not to individual assignments. Moreover, Teacher 3 noted that tests and assessment situations are created in a Swedish context, which can negatively impact students without Swedish as their L1 through lack of validity in the assessment. This teacher emphasised that differentiation regarding summative assessment becomes especially important for those students.

In further discussions about testing, the respondents outlined concrete strategies for assessment. The implementation of varied types of assessment was highlighted, mirroring the use of varied teaching methods, to adapt to differing learner needs. Participants additionally emphasised the importance of planning for assessment of the four skills on multiple occasions. Teacher 2 also detailed their continuous assessment process: "I make sure to assess everything. I take notes after every lesson, even if it wasn't an official assessment occasion." While this approach is highly time-consuming, it yields additional assessment materials. In terms of concrete strategies, there were different practices regarding two matters. The first

concerned providing additional time for examinations, where Teacher 1 explained that they adapted the tests to fit the length of the lesson, whereas Teacher 5 used assistants to allow extended time for tests. Second, some ambiguity emerged in the reflection by Teacher 3 on whether examinations should be carried out by hand or digitally as they both have benefits and drawbacks. Furthermore, participants included anonymous grading and aligning grading with the grading framework for national tests as two strategies to ensure equality in grading. Finally, these findings suggest that while differentiation in assessment is important, ensuring equality and validity is essential.

The final aspect of assessment focuses on speaking and oral presentations as there is a difference compared to written production as illustrated by Teacher 2: “If they’re writing essays, it [mistakes/errors] isn’t really noticeable, but it shows when they’re, like, supposed to be in front of each other, so it’s a bit tricky when it comes to the assessment.” To address this vulnerability, one adaptation mentioned to facilitate oral tasks is using smaller group settings to “make it as comfortable as possible”. This adjustment allows students to demonstrate their skills without impact from external factors, such as performance anxiety.

5.3 Material Resources, Support Systems, and Artificial Intelligence

Beyond the previously explored teaching strategies are material resources and support that either assist or hinder effective differentiation. One of the main material resources highlighted by participants was the textbook, which generated both positive and negative opinions. On the one hand, teachers found that textbooks provided additional structure to their lessons, while on the other hand, textbooks were deemed overly repetitive for some students. Due to these opposing opinions on textbooks, five out of six teachers explicitly stated that they primarily work with their own teaching materials. Because creating new material is time-consuming, Teacher 1 suggested reusing material from other levels for differentiation. This suggestion saves time and energy, which can be redirected to differentiate for other students.
Furthermore, to address the challenge of students lacking digital competence, participants preferred physical copies of novels rather than digital editions. This choice prevented students from “struggling with their login and licenses, or if they forget their computer they don’t have the book”. An additional advantage of physical novels was their capacity to demonstrate to students that they “can just lie in bed and read a book, that’s fine.”, thereby encouraging them to use English outside of school.

Moreover, physical learning environment plays a key role in differentiation and was perceived as a significant aspect by several respondents. On the one hand, Teacher 3 mentioned that there were no colourful decorations on the walls anymore to prevent certain students being distracted. On the other hand, Teacher 1 explained that their walls were "grey and boring […] so there is a lot of potential" since the physical environment is not prioritised over the core tasks. Three teachers also emphasised that a lack of study rooms limits numerous opportunities for differentiation, an issue directly related to large class sizes and diverse learner needs within one class. Participants noted that additional study rooms would allow them to assign separate tasks to different groups simultaneously without causing disruption.

Another aspect of support materials in the 5D-model involves tools for keeping concentration, which were available in various forms at all schools. Specifically, three schools provided some fidget toys, whereas one school used mandala drawing as a method to support concentration. This indicates that students are encouraged to identify and adapt a suitable method during lectures. The benefits of permitting students to use individual methods was exemplified by Teacher 1 who recalled a student who

> doodled during every lesson, all the time, but he was also the only one in class who always raised his hand and answered all my questions, so he probably listened best of all thanks to being allowed to sit and do what he needed to do, while listening at the same time.

This reinforces the point that individual strategies for concentration are beneficial, provided that they promote focus without causing disruption to other students.

Moreover, a support system definitely facilitates differentiation by allowing schools to delegate responsibilities to other staff, including special education teachers and assistants. Nearly all teachers reported having various kinds of support systems in place. However, only Teacher 2 highlighted mandatory support through additional lessons. The other teachers solely spoke about voluntary support times. Aside from providing students with extended classroom time, a well-functioning support system can be utilised to address the problem of large class sizes. Teacher 5 emphasised that additional resources, specifically assistants, would facilitate differentiation more effectively than having additional time. Nevertheless, even with a support system, Teacher 4 noted that the voluntary support sessions were often scheduled too late in the day, meaning that students were too tired to utilise them.

An emerging aspect that has simultaneously become a new challenge and a new asset is artificial intelligence (AI), with both perspectives clearly visible in the findings. Two participants viewed AI as problematic, where Teacher 5 encountered students using AI when completing tasks in the classroom, and therefore not learning. Teacher 4 noted that students

were using AI to cheat on examinations. To manage this, Teacher 4 performed tests written by hand or on computer in a locked-down browser. Contrastingly, Teacher 3 and Teacher 5 explored AI as a tool in various ways and found it particularly efficient to differentiate teaching material. Teacher 3, who was the most enthusiastic, stated that prior to AI, there was no time for "real differentiation". AI allowed these two teachers to differentiate further for different levels, specifically aimed at high-achieving students, by using their own material and prompting AI to "adapt it [the task] for a bit higher [level]". In addition to differentiating teaching material, both teachers used AI as a resource in assessment. Teacher 5 highlighted AI as a tool to identify specific errors and give "metalinguistic feedback" while Teacher 3 used AI as a learning tool for high-achieving students who were striving to reach the highest grade:

> So I take that [student text], send it to the AI, and there I have my grading prompt – 'What is the assessment?' – and then I send the assessment back to the student. 'No, this is only a B, look, these things aren't working, you need to develop this.' And then they keep wrestling with it, and meanwhile, I have 10-15 minutes where I can walk around and help those who need my help.

By using AI with this purpose, the participant stated that students received more comprehensive feedback, while being able to redirect time and attention to students requiring more teacher-led instruction.

5.4 Learning profiles, Motivation, and Student Interests

While differentiation is frequently utilised to accommodate diversity in academic performance, it can also be used to adapt teaching to students' diverse interests or learning profiles. Accordingly, this section elaborates on participants' responses regarding low- and high-achievers, student motivation, and individual interests. Although the respondents were not asked to define their understanding of differentiation, their answers indicate that their understanding of differentiation extends to aspects beyond academic performance. This perspective mirrors the definition of differentiation in this paper, which comprises academic performance as well as individual student profiles.

When asked whether their differentiated teaching was primarily directed towards high- or low-achievers, all teachers acknowledged that they focused on low-achievers, while also emphasising that "[e]veryone, of course, has an equal right to differentiation". Similarly, low-achieving students were occasionally prioritised in the creation of groups, where they were intentionally paired with high-achievers to receive additional support. Teacher 2 reflected on this potential injustice to high-achievers but ultimately stated that this approach was

justifiable provided that it only happened occasionally, rather than consistently. Contrastingly, Teacher 5 paired students with similar proficiency levels for increased stimulation and utilised seating arrangements as an aid in placing students of similar level close to each other for opportunities of enhanced learning.

Participants highlighted the fact that low- and high-achievers mainly diverge in their ability to work autonomously. High-achievers are more independent, whereas low-achievers require guidance from the teacher. It was noted that providing support material for low-achieving students helped them follow the lesson, which allowed for more teacher-led instruction for high-achievers, rather than them being provided with additional material on a higher level to work with autonomously. Multiple participants admitted that the most common strategy to challenge high-achieving students was "unfortunately […] to give them an extra task" and leaving them to work independently. Another frequently mentioned method to differentiate for high-achieving students involved providing feedback on details to help them perfect their language, alongside having higher expectations on their performance to encourage further learning. In contrast to high-achievers, multiple teachers reported having lower demands on low-achievers in addition to extending support in both time and materials.

While differentiation is important to facilitate goal attainment for low-achievers, it plays an essential role in motivating high-achievers, since receiving additional material without teacher-led instruction can lower motivation. The topic of motivation was mentioned by four teachers regarding both low- and high-achieving students. Regardless of students' proficiency levels, feedback was highlighted as a method to increase motivation, exemplified by Teacher 5 reinforcing that "with effort comes rewards". Moreover, Teacher 4 highlighted that student interests need to be taken into account when working with motivation through differentiation. This teacher reported planning for low-stakes projects centred around student interests and offering several options to choose from during national testing periods to increase motivation and prevent overwhelming students.

Lastly, student needs and learning profiles are foundational components of differentiation, as classrooms include students with varying levels and learning difficulties. While students are legally entitled to accommodations based on their learning needs, all students are different individuals. For instance, some students need repetition without varied teaching methods, and other students require variation to keep focus. Despite these different needs, Teacher 3 highlighted that

> the Education Act demands that these people be in the exact same room, the exact same amount of time. This leads to clashes; it's simply not possible to provide a professional education that caters to everyone as effectively as possible.

In light of this, differentiation emerges not only as a method used to solve the problem explained by the interviewed teacher, but as a teaching strategy to address the demands outlined by the steering documents.

6 Discussion

This section summarises the main findings from the interviews and discusses them in relation to previous research. Given the participating teachers' comprehensive and personal responses, the data includes many aspects. However, exploring them all is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, specific key findings from each subheading in Section 5 were selected for further elaboration.

First, the participants identified lack of time as the main challenge in implementing differentiation. This directly aligns with their reported practice of reactive differentiation, which requires no additional planning time, and corresponds to previous literature highlighting lack of time as a major obstacle. Additionally, the findings coincide with previous research regarding the challenges of large class sizes (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, pp. 38, 40; Roiha, 2014, p. 10; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 10-11; Zólyomi, 2025, pp. 2302, 2304). Furthermore, an interesting difference appeared in relation to school context. Some respondents at low-achieving schools highlighted students who do not speak Swedish as an L1 as a challenge in relation to differentiation because those students add another layer to the learning profiles. In contrast, the teachers at high-achieving schools did not comment on their students' linguistic background. Students who do not speak Swedish as an L1 bring an essential aspect in the discussion of differentiation because they widen the learning profiles, which enhances the need to differentiate according to other components than academic performance.

The teachers at high-achieving schools pointed out that their main challenge was maintaining motivation among high-achieving students. While motivation as a reason for differentiation is present in previous research, the participants in this study emphasised this aspect more strongly. Previous research suggests that differentiation positively impacts motivation for all proficiency levels (Wong et al., 2023, pp. 147, 149). This finding is mirrored by the reported practices at both high- and low-achieving schools, where teachers

incorporate student interests in projects. Although differentiation was highlighted for all students, the focus of differentiation for low-achieving students was to improve their academic performance, while for high-achieving students it was to maintain motivation.

Another difference in reported practice between low- and high-achieving schools relates to proactive and reactive differentiation. Both teachers from the high-achieving schools explicitly stated that they did not differentiate their lesson plans, but instead practiced reactive differentiation, whereas the teachers at low-achieving schools reported utilising both proactive and reactive differentiation. Multiple studies firmly emphasise differentiation as a proactive approach (Graham et al., 2021, p. 164; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019, p. 6; Tomlinson et al., 2003, pp. 131-132; Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 5-6), which would help implement differentiation for high-achieving students as well. Even if high-achievers progress with less teacher-led instruction, it could be argued that they are entitled to differentiated teaching as much as low-achievers, particularly in accordance with the curriculum's guidelines on providing support and stimulus for all students (Lgy25, 2025).

Furthermore, the results show that variation is a key element in differentiation, both in teaching methods and assessment situations. While previous research has not explicitly reported teachers utilising varied methods, the findings indicate that variation is used through the listing of various teaching methods (Laari et al., 2021, p. 605; Roiha et al., 2025, pp. 8-9). Interestingly, participants in the present study pointed out that variation only works for certain types of students, which raises questions about how learning profiles are prioritised when choosing teaching methods. The findings suggest that teachers choose to prioritise differentiation for academic performance over motivation when the decision must be made. This adds a dimension regarding who to prioritise between low- and high-achieving students. As highlighted in Section 5.4, the participants tended to focus on low-achievers. This is further supported by the steering documents, as the curriculum for upper secondary school states that teachers should direct particular attention to students who struggle with goal attainment (Lgy25, 2025). This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that low-achieving students receive additional support and attention, while high-achieving students receive additional materials to work with independently (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 39; Roiha, 2014, p. 8; Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 5-7). Lack of attention paid to high-achieving students can, as previously established, affect motivation. This can further be supported by the primary challenge at a high-achieving school being maintaining motivation among the students since they might not receive enough attention and support. This again emphasises the need to find strategies to differentiate for all students equally even if lack of time is a significant challenge.

Moreover, the findings in this paper differ slightly from the previous research regarding the use of English in the classroom. While previous research shows that low-achievers were permitted to use their L1 and high-achievers were urged to use English (Roiha, 2014, pp. 8-9), all teachers in this study reported encouraging all students to speak English, regardless of their proficiency level. This practice is emphasised, especially for students with limited contact with English outside the classroom. However, this approach can be seen as problematic in relation to differentiation because of students' varying proficiency levels and learning difficulties. Since education must account for individual student backgrounds, including learner needs and previous education (Lgy25, 2025; SFS 2010:800, ch. 1, §4, ch. 15, § 2), this reported practice stands in conflict with the Education Act and the curriculum.

An interesting finding that was not expressed in any previous research relates to teachers' opinions on and use of AI to facilitate differentiation. The finding that Teacher 3 reported using AI as a strategy to give feedback to save time is noteworthy for several reasons. First, this specific practice was mentioned by only one participant. Furthermore, the description of this process indicated that the student was left to work independently with the AI-generated feedback while the teacher could direct their attention to other students. This mirrors the findings of leaving high-achieving students without teacher-led instruction (Kótay-Nagy, 2023, p. 39; Roiha, 2014, p. 8). Consequently, the teacher has no way of verifying if the generated feedback is correct, which is problematic due to potential AI errors. It also means that the teacher does not know if the student's final written production demonstrates actual skills, or if the feedback was copied without any learning taking place. In contrast, Teacher 5, who also reported using AI, did so as an aid in assessment in a more controlled manner by combining the use of AI with their own professional judgement rather than giving AI-generated feedback directly to students. As the use of AI expands, utilising it as a tool in teaching and assessment might become common practice. Therefore, practices regarding AI in education are a suggestion for future research. Nonetheless, these findings highlight that teachers see formative feedback as a main strategy to support students' learning at the appropriate level, which also aligns with the assessment dimension in the 5D-model (Roiha & Polso, 2021, p. 11).

7 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges Swedish EFL teachers at upper secondary schools encounter with differentiation in mixed-ability classrooms, as well as the strategies

they use to manage them. The participants in the study detailed many different challenges, where some were expressed by all participants, while others only by a few. However, the most prominent challenges, which also coincided with previous research, included lack of time, large class sizes, and lack of resources or support. A major finding in this study that was less highlighted in previous research concerned student motivation and the varying practices when teaching low- and high-achieving students.

Because the teachers expressed different challenges, they also reported using various strategies to implement differentiation in their teaching practices. The strategies that were emphasised by most participants included reactive differentiation and varied teaching methods. One participant focused considerably on how the emergence of AI has created significantly better opportunities for differentiation in relation to the perceived challenges. While previous research and the findings of this study coincide on most of the reported strategies, the use of AI tools stands out as a new approach within classroom practices related to differentiation.

Moreover, the participants detailed other aspects that, while not directly related to the research questions, remained interesting and relevant for teaching practices and pedagogical implications. The students' varying proficiency levels were frequently the focus in the responses, which entails that differentiation was needed to follow the requirements in steering documents and the Education Act. Another dimension highlighted by multiple participants was motivation and student interests. Motivation was found important by both the participating teachers and in previous research as it impacts students' learning processes and outcomes. However, there was a contrast between the reported intention and classroom practice as academic performance was often prioritised over student interests, motivation, or learning profiles.

Several suggestions for further research emerge from these findings and the identified research gap in Section 1. First, including classroom observations to explore teachers' practices rather than only relying on self-reported practices would be beneficial for understanding differentiation strategies. Second, as Swedish schools become increasingly multicultural, it would be valuable to research how differentiation can be implemented to teach students whose L1 is not Swedish, as this challenge was mentioned by several participants in this study. Last, given the development of AI and digital tools, it would be interesting to explore how these tools can be used, and are used, by teachers to implement further differentiation and address the reported challenges, such as lack of time and resources.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide [English]

Background questions

What levels do you teach?

Would you say that the students you teach are high-achieving or low-achieving?

How long have you been teaching?

What other subjects do you teach?

How is the cooperation at your school? Is there a lot of cooperation? Subject department/programme department?

Challenges

Do you think that students' different levels/abilities is a difficulty/obstacle when planning lessons?

What would you say are the biggest challenges? Why?

Dealing with challenges

How do you deal with those challenges?

In what ways do you use lesson planning to help avoid or address the challenges regarding students' mixed abilities?

What are some concrete examples of how you differentiate your teaching?

The 5D-model

The 5D-model includes 5 aspects to keep in mind when differentiating one's teaching: teaching arrangements, learning environment, teaching methods, support materials, and

assessment. Let’s go through them one by one, and I’d like you to tell me how you work with it in relation to differentiation.

Differentiation at various levels

How do you feel about students that you wish that you could have given more support or differentiation?

Do you differentiate your teaching for high performing/gifted students? If so, how?

Do you give most of your attention to students at lower levels (E-level) or do all students get an opportunity for differentiated teaching?

Appendix 2

Intervjuguide [Swedish]

Bakgrundsfrågor

Vilka kurser/nivåer undervisar du i?

Skulle du säga att eleverna du undervisar är högpresterande eller lågpresterande?

Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?

Vilka andra ämnen undervisar du i?

Hur ser samarbetskulturen ut på skolan? Mycket samarbete? Ämneslag/programlag?

Utmaningar

Uppfattar du att skillnad på elevers nivåer är en svårighet i planeringen av lektionsinnehåll/undervisningen?

Vilken/vilka är den/de största svårigheterna/utmaningarna? Varför?

Hantera svårigheterna

På vilket sätt hanterar du dessa svårigheterna?

På vilka sätt planerar du lektioner för att undvika eller hantera svårigheterna gällande elevers olika nivåer?

Kan du ge några konkreta exempel på hur du differentierar din undervisning?

The 5D-model

I mitt arbete använder jag en modell som forskare i Finland har tagit fram som heter 5D-modellen. I 5D-modellen ingår 5 delar att fokusera på när man differentierar sin undervisning: Organisatoriska förutsättningar, lärmiljö, undervisningsmetoder, resurser och läromedel, och

bedömning. Jag går igenom dem en och en och så får du berätta hur du jobbar med det i relation till differentiering.

Differentiering för olika nivåer

Hur ser du på de elever som du önskar att du kunde ha gett mer stöd eller mer differentiering?

Arbetar du med differentierad undervisning för högpresterande elever? Isåfall, hur?

Får alla elever lika stor möjlighet till differentiering eller läggs mest fokus på elever på en lägre nivå (E-nivå) eller en högre nivå (A-nivå)?