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## DEVELOPING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS OF FUTURE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN MIXED-ABILITY GROUPS

O. A. Chukhno\*

*The ultimate goal of pedagogical education is to prepare specialists who possess a sufficient level of professional competence and are able to teach successfully at school. To achieve this goal, it should be taken into account that students in one academic group may differ in a number of characteristics, such as their cultural and social background, motivation, learner styles, level of academic performance in different subjects, etc. The study aims to set out guidelines for developing professional skills of future teachers of English while working in mixed-ability groups.*

*The analysis of students' academic performance in the courses of methodology and General English leads to the conclusion that the levels of professional skills in one academic group may differ considerably from student to student and that the acquisition of these skills is in many cases affected by students' level of language command, but the impact in question is not limited to this factor.*

*The study also outlines the particularities of teaching methodology in comparison with teaching English to ordinary learners. In the process of teaching methodology, it is recommended; 1) to consider students' level of communicative competence; 2) to identify the reasons for the discrepancy between students' levels of communicative and professional skills and to take these data into account while developing the course; 3) to use differentiated instruction explicitly; 4) to adapt the process and product of teaching (but not the content) to the students' needs; 5) to delegate responsibility for differentiation to students; 6) to use all modes of interaction (whole-class activities, individual work, work in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups). Following these guidelines by methodology teachers may increase the chances for pre-service teachers of English to acquire all the professional skills stated in the educational program by the end of Year 4.*

*Further research in this field involves: 1) developing the algorithm of teacher actions in planning and using differentiated instruction while teaching the course of methodology to pre-service teachers of English; 2) working out a set of activities for teaching the course of methodology to pre-service teachers of English and verifying the effectiveness of these activities via conducting a pedagogical intervention.*

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**Keywords:** *communicative competence, differentiated instruction, methodology, mixed-ability groups, pedagogical education, pre-service teachers of English, professional skills.*

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\* Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences (PhD in Pedagogy), Associate Professor  
(H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University)  
elchukhno@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0001-9601-3321

## ФОРМУВАННЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНИХ УМІНЬ МАЙБУТНІХ УЧИТЕЛІВ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ У РІЗНОРІВНЕВИХ ГРУПАХ

О. А. Чужно

Кінцевою метою педагогічної освіти є підготовка спеціалістів, які володіють достатнім рівнем професійної компетентності для успішного виконання освітньої діяльності в школі. Для досягнення цієї мети необхідно зважати на те, що студенти в одній академічній групі можуть відрізнятися один від одного за такими характеристиками, як культурне і соціальне походження, мотивація, стиль навчання, рівень академічної успішності з різних дисциплін та ін. Метою дослідження є сформулювати рекомендації щодо розвитку професійних умінь майбутніх учителів англійської мови під час роботи в різнорівневих групах.

Аналіз академічної успішності студентів з методики й загального курсу англійської мови дозволяє зробити висновок, що рівень професійних умінь може суттєво відрізнятися від студента до студента і що оволодіння цими вміннями у багатьох випадках залежить від рівня комунікативної компетентності студентів, проте цей вплив не обмежується зазначеним фактором.

Дослідження також розкриває особливості навчання методики у порівнянні з навчанням звичайних учнів англійської мови. У процесі викладання методики рекомендовано: 1) враховувати рівень комунікативної компетентності студентів; 2) виявити причини невідповідності між рівнями розвитку комунікативних і професійних умінь студентів і зважати на ці дані під час розробки курсу; 3) використовувати диференційоване навчання експліцитно; 4) коригувати процес і продукт навчання (але не зміст навчання) відповідно до потреб студентів; 5) покладати відповідальність за диференціацію на студентів; 6) використовувати всі режими взаємодії (фронтальні вправи, індивідуальну роботу, роботу в однорідних і неоднорідних групах). Дотримання цих рекомендацій викладачами методики може підвищити шанси майбутній учителів англійської мови оволодіти всіма професійними вміннями, що прописані в освітній програмі, на кінець четвертого курсу.

Подальші розвідки у цьому напрямку включають: 1) укладання алгоритму дій викладача у плануванні й використанні диференційованого навчання під час навчання методики майбутніх учителів англійської мови; 2) розробку системи вправ для викладання курсу методики майбутнім учителям англійської мови й перевірку ефективності цих вправ шляхом проведення педагогічного експерименту.

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**Ключові слова:** комунікативна компетентність, диференційоване навчання, методика, різнорівневі групи, педагогічна освіта, майбутні вчителі, професійні вміння.

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**Introduction of the issue.** Learners vary according to a range of characteristics: their level of language command, age, learning goals, level of motivation, the use of the target language outside the classroom, heterogeneous or homogeneous origin of the group is, its size [10].

Like any other groups of students (whether at school or university), those training to become teachers of English are a diverse lot. They may come from different cultures and definitely have different learning styles. They enter university with different levels of psychological and social maturity. Their attitude towards studying at university, learning a foreign language, and becoming a teacher may vary

considerably. At any given time, students in one academic group demonstrate different levels of academic performance in various subjects. To make the things even more complicated, readiness and motivation can vary for a given student over time depending on a wide range of factors. Not surprisingly, teaching and studying in such heterogeneity can be rather overwhelming.

The ultimate goal of training pre-service teachers of English is to prepare specialists who, apart from a perfect command of the language, possess a sufficient level of professional skills and abilities to teach English to others successfully. Therefore, it is essential for methodology teachers to address the diversity typical of mixed-ability groups of

students along with curriculum realities so that every single student can acquire the skills and abilities stated in the educational program by the time they graduate. It should also be kept in mind that successful mixed-ability teaching is not about 'forming' students to match a template we have created in our minds, but about enabling their own potential to be discovered and realized [2].

**Current state of the issue.** Over the last decades, one can observe extensive research in teaching mixed-ability groups of students. Among the major works are:

1. *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* by Carol Ann Tomlinson [9]. The scholar determines what differentiated instruction is, explains the rationale for using it in mixed-ability classrooms, describes the role of the teacher in a differentiated classroom, gives recommendations on how to begin to plan for differentiated instruction, how to differentiate content, process, and product of language learning, and how to grade students in a differentiated classroom.

2. *Teaching Large Multilevel Classes* by Natalie Hess [4]. The researcher outlines the principles of coping in large multilevel classes, as well as strategies of working in groups, maintaining motivation, individualization and personalization, establishing routines, making students responsible for their own learning. She also gives insights into using various kinds of class rituals which may help to deal with a multilevel group of learners.

3. *Mixed-Ability Teaching* by Edmund Dudley and Erika Osváth [2]. The book contains recommendations on preparing for and managing a mixed-ability class, using students' native language while teaching English, developing basic communicative skills, collaboration, creativity, and expression, assessment in multilevel groups of students. The authors also emphasize the importance of understanding students' attitudes and motivation as well as explain the reasoning behind following a whole-person approach.

4. *Designing Groupwork. Strategies for Heterogeneous Classes* by Elizabeth G. Cohen and Rachel A. Lotan [1]. The work offers solid theoretical insights into and

empirical evidence of creating groupworthy tasks which set the stage for deep learning and equitable participation. The authors describe groupwork as a pedagogical strategy, provide reasons for its use, suggest guidelines on preparing learners for cooperation, planning groupwork in stages, distributing roles and responsibilities among students, and evaluating groupwork of learners.

Other studies:

- synthesize the research supporting the shift to differentiated instruction and sheds light on the rationale behind using this approach [8];

- consider the problems in mixed-ability classes and coping strategies, including needs analysis, explanation of the mixed-ability situation to students and its discussion [3];

- outline the techniques of organizing English lessons in mixed-ability groups of students of non-linguistic specialties emphasizing the necessity of using graded tasks and different ways of grouping students [6];

- investigate strategies and methods (e.g. peer tutoring, assignments of different levels of complexity, differentiated assessment, etc.) that can be applied in English language teaching in mixed-ability groups, as well as students' psychological problems arising in the process of learning English in a multi-level group [5];

- identify problems associated with the design, development, and delivery of differentiated instruction, and provide inputs as to how differentiated instruction can be implemented in a pure online and a blended learning modes [7], etc.

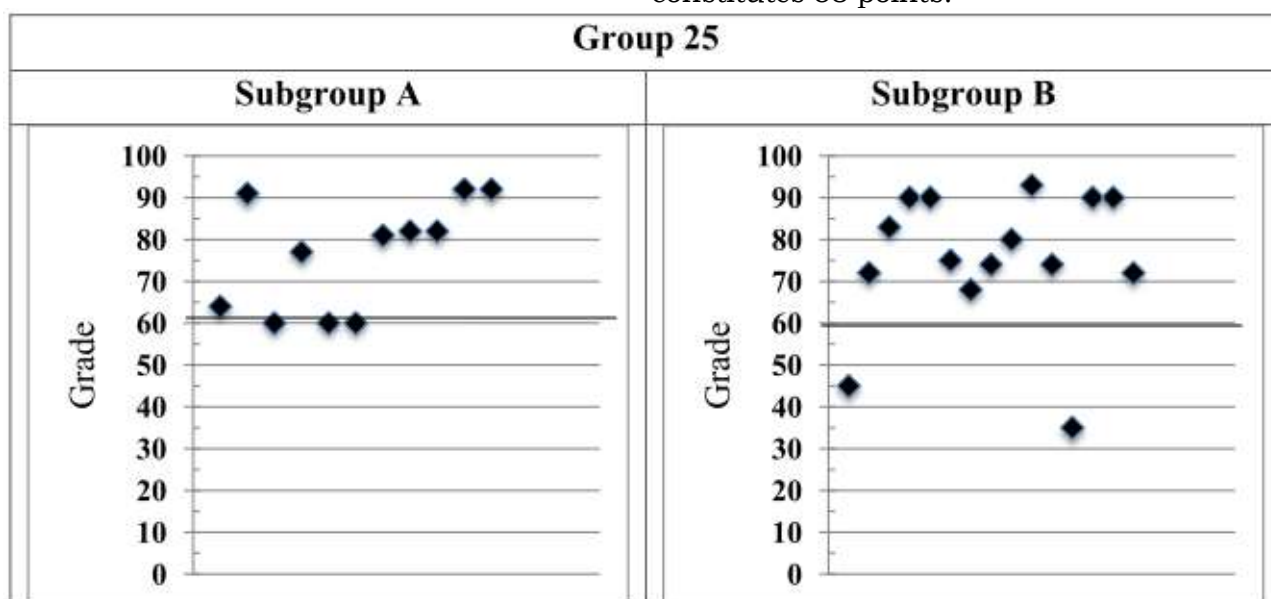
Despite the availability of extensive research in the field, little attention has been paid to the issue of teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English in multilevel academic groups. We believe that this process should have some particularities comparing to teaching ordinary multilevel groups of language learners. On the one hand, it also involves using differentiated instruction, but, on the other hand, pre-service teachers need to acquire the professional skills of using such instruction themselves while teaching English to schoolchildren.

**Aim of research** is to provide guidelines for differentiating instruction while teaching methodology to mixed-ability groups of future teachers of English.

To achieve the aim of the research, we considered it necessary to set such **objectives**:

- to define a mixed-ability group of students in the context of teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English;
- to compare and contrast differentiated instruction in teaching English to mixed-ability classes of ordinary learners and the process of teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English in multilevel academic groups;
- to formulate recommendations for teaching mixed-ability groups of pre-service teachers of English.

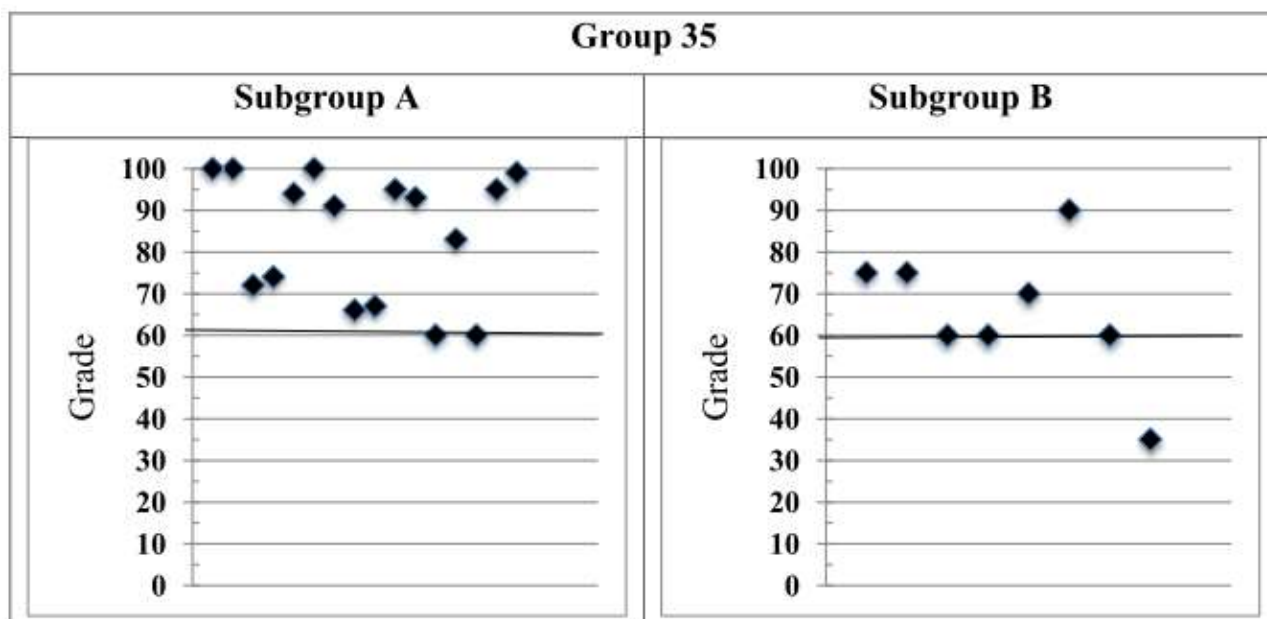
**Results and discussion.** To define a mixed-ability group of pre-service teachers of English, we consider it necessary to analyze their academic performance in methodology. Figure 1 presents the grades a group of second-year students received for their methodology course for the second semester in academic year 2022-2023 in H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University. The group is divided into two subgroups – Subgroup A and Subgroup B. As we can see, in Subgroup A, all the students passed the course successfully. However, the difference between the results of some students is significant with the lowest and the highest grades differing by 32 points (the lowest grade is 60 and the highest grade is 92). In Subgroup B, two students failed the course. The lowest grade is 35 and the highest one is 93, so the difference constitutes 58 points.



**Fig. 1. 2<sup>nd</sup>-Year Students' Academic Performance in Methodology**

Figure 2 presents the grades received by a group of third-year students for their methodology course in the second semester. The group is also divided into Subgroup A and Subgroup B. In Subgroup A, all the pre-service teachers passed the course. 2 students received the minimum positive grade of 60 points and 4 students achieved the maximum

grade of 100 points. Thus, the difference between the highest and the lowest grades is 40 points. In Subgroup B, 1 student got 35 points and failed the course. Another one received the maximum grade in the group which is 90 points. Therefore, the maximum and the minimum grades in Subgroup B vary by 55 points.



**Fig. 2. 3<sup>d</sup>-Year Students' Academic Performance in Methodology**

The presented data lead to the conclusion that both subgroups in Group 25 and Group 35 can be considered multilevel. We suppose that in these groups, those pre-service teachers who reached the maximum grade of 90-100 points need additional challenge in the development of their professional skills and abilities while others who failed the course or received the minimum positive grade of 60 points are in need of a great

deal of personal attention, assistance and encouragement.

Since methodology course is taught in English, students' language command may significantly affect their understanding of the subject matter and, as the result, their development of professional competence.

The data in Tables 1 and 2 enable us to track the dependence of students' grades in methodology on their level of language command.

*Table 1*

**2<sup>nd</sup>-Year Students' Grades in Methodology and English**

<b>Group 25</b>			
<b>Subgroup A</b>		<b>Subgroup B</b>	
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>English</b>
64	70	45	60
91	92	72	68
60	35	83	62
77	83	90	72
60	63	90	82
81	85	75	70
82	90	68	70
82	90	74	70
92	90	80	72
92	95	74	68
60	70	90	72
		90	82
		72	62
		93	80
		35	35

As we can see, in Group 25 (see Table 1), most students' grades in methodology and English differ by maximum 10 points. Thus, we can assume that in most cases the level of students' communicative skills in English affects their acquisition of professional skills and abilities. However, 5 students managed to succeed much more in their methodology course than in English with the grades differing by up to 25 points, and 1 student failed the methodology course having a positive grade in English. This discrepancy can be explained by various reasons, e.g. students' positive or negative attitude to the subjects and/or the teacher, the quality of teaching materials, teachers' requirements, students' personal issues (moving abroad, their psychological state at a given moment, family issues, the necessity to work and study, etc.). All these may have substantial impact on pre-service teachers' academic performance. Since the solution of any problem is impossible without knowing its cause, methodology teachers need to

conduct a thorough investigation in order to find out underlying reasons for students' academic failures and their inability to keep up with peers. By doing so, teachers are more likely to develop some coping strategies to meet every student's learning needs.

In Group 35 (see Table 2), the situation is partially the same with most students' grades differing by maximum 7 points. 2 students passed the methodology course with the minimum positive grade of 60 points but failed English receiving 35 points. In contrast, in Subgroup A, 4 trainee teachers received much lower grades for the methodology course, e.g. 60 points in methodology and 92 points in General English, or 66 points in methodology and 85 points in English. This phenomenon may be explained by students' willingness to excel at English (that is why they put in a great deal of effort in learning the language), but not to become teachers of English (as the result, they make just as much effort as it is needed not to fail the course).

Table 2

**3<sup>rd</sup>-Year Students' Grades in Methodology and English**

<b>Group 35</b>			
<b>Subgroup A</b>		<b>Subgroup B</b>	
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>English</b>
100	96	75	72
100	96	60	35
72	74	70	74
74	77	90	95
94	97	60	35
100	98	35	35
91	98	60	63
66	85	75	76
67	87		
95	95		
93	98		
60	90		
83	84		
60	92		
95	87		
99	98		

Thus, in the scope of our study, we define a mixed-ability group of pre-service teachers of English as a group of students whose level of professional skills may differ significantly from student to

student and whose acquisition of professional competence is in many cases affected by students' level of language performance, though the impact in question is not limited to this factor.

To teach mixed-ability group of students, scholars recommend using differentiated instruction. Carol Tomlinson describes differentiated instruction as creating in the process of teaching multiple options for students to take in information, make sense of ideas, and express what they learnt. The scholar further clarifies that a differentiated classroom provides different ways of acquiring content, processing information and developing products so that each student can learn effectively [9].

Thus, there are three main instructional elements that can be adjusted to meet learners' needs:

- content (the knowledge and skills students need to master);
- process (the activities students use to master the content);
- product (the methods students use to demonstrate learning) [9].

While we are teaching English to ordinary learners of English, we can adjust all three elements. For instance, working with struggling students, we may adjust content by limiting the amount of new vocabulary we would like to introduce at the lesson or grammar material we want our students to master. While developing their communicative skills, we may ask our lower-level students to read or listen for the gist instead of going into detail if the text seems too complicated. We do not have to worry that they will miss out on something important or that it will affect their communicative competence much. At another lesson, we may develop their scanning or intensive reading skills and at every next level of English students will deepen and expand the linguistic skills they have already acquired. On the other hand, when we teach more advanced students, we should provide them with more complicated but still manageable assignments. By doing challenging activities, such students are less likely to experience stagnation in their level of academic performance, so they will continue progressing towards mastery.

In contrast, the methodology course is more linear: each module aims to develop some definite professional skills and

abilities which may serve the foundation for other skills to be developed but which are unlikely to be expanded in the next modules. Thus, if pre-service teachers fail to acquire some skills (e.g. the skills of teaching initial reading, the skills of teaching with the help of ICT or the skills of developing students' sociocultural competence), they will find it challenging to teach successfully when they find their first job. For that reason, adjusting the content in teaching methodology (in other words, limiting it to the skills which seem more important or not as difficult) does not seem reasonable enough.

It is worth mentioning that in an ordinary classroom, students may be unaware of the fact that the teacher applies differentiated approach. When the teacher provides additional assistance or easier assignments to some learners, it is not advisable to openly explain why he/she does that. Otherwise, struggling students would feel embarrassed and/or unequal to more difficult tasks while high-achievers may find it unfair to perform more complicated activities. So, the use of differentiated instruction in teaching English to ordinary language learners must be, in our opinion, implicit.

Contrarily, pre-service teachers should acquire the skills of using differentiated instruction in teaching multilevel classes which is hardly possible without being aware of differentiation strategies and understanding the ways of using them. Consequently, explicit differentiated instruction in teaching methodology appears a better choice.

Another distinction between differentiated instruction in teaching English to ordinary learners and methodology to pre-service teachers of English is in who holds responsibility for differentiation. Obviously, ordinary learners do not normally create teaching materials and do not possess professional skills, so differentiation is conducted by the teacher exclusively. At the same time, pre-service teachers should practice their professional skills and abilities. When they develop materials for teaching English, they need to create equal opportunities for all the learners. So, they

should be ready to take responsibility for taking into account everybody's needs.

Moreover, students can even decide themselves how they are going to do some methodology assignment (which mode of interaction it can be done in, how long it will take different students, how the assignment can be expanded or modified for fast-finishers, what kind of help lower-level students will need and who will provide this help, etc.). Pre-service teachers may also decide on the product

of their work. For instance, if they study a case which describes some child's problems at school, they may decide to formulate a list of tips for the child, make a poster with guidelines or even record a video with advice. Therefore, responsibility for differentiation may be shared between the methodology teacher and students.

The differences we outlined are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

**Differentiated Instruction in Teaching English and Methodology**

Issues which differ	Learner categories	
	Ordinary students	Pre-service teachers
How	implicitly	explicitly
What	content process product	process product
Who	teacher	methodology teacher students

No matter what category of students we teach, we should keep in mind that differentiation does not equal individualization [9]. As our investigation shows, some students in one and the same academic group may demonstrate approximately the same level of professional skills and abilities. As the result, the teacher can roughly divide the group of students he/she works with into two or more subgroups according to the level of their skills development and adapt the teaching process to the needs of these groups but not individual students. This will make the use of differentiated instruction more feasible for the teacher. However, this does not mean that differentiated instruction is reduced to homogeneous grouping. One of the features of effective differentiation is using flexible grouping by accommodating students who are strong in some areas and weaker in others. Heterogeneous grouping is even more beneficial for pre-service teachers creating additional opportunities for peer teaching, consequently, developing professional skills.

Although it may seem reasonable to always adhere to group work in a mixed-ability setting, whole-class or individual

instruction will sometimes appear more efficient. Pre-service teachers may start an assignment as a whole group discussing how it can be done or sharing their background knowledge on the issue. Then, they can pursue learning in small groups or individually, and, finally, come together to share and discuss the results of their work. Consequently, differentiated instruction can be considered a mixture of whole-class, group, and individual work.

Considering the definition of mixed-ability groups of pre-service teachers of English and the distinctions we identified, we can formulate the following recommendations:

1. The language of instruction in the methodology course should be adapted to the level of students' language command. This would enable lower-level students to successfully acquire professional skills and abilities. At the same time, more advanced students would encounter additional challenge on the way to developing not only their professional competence but also communicative skills.

2. If some pre-service teachers demonstrate significant difference in the levels of their communicative and



professional skills, it is reasonable to identify the cause for this discrepancy via questionnaires among such students and, if possible, to consider the received data while designing the course.

3. The process of differentiation in training pre-service teachers should be made explicit. Students should be made aware of differentiation strategies and the ways of using them to realize the benefits of this approach and to acquire the skills of its application.

4. Among the curriculum elements which are reasonable to differentiate are process and product. Methodology teachers may vary the way students do the activities and/or how they demonstrate the result of their work on condition that they acquire all the professional skills and abilities stated in the program.

5. Providing pre-service teachers have been acquainted with the strategies of differentiation and the ways of using them, university teachers should sometimes delegate responsibility for differentiating process and product of studying methodology to students.

6. Differentiation in teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English should involve all types of interaction patterns (whole-class activities, working in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, and individual work). Students' exposure to all modes of interaction will result in their acquisition of the corresponding professional skills since they will see how the methodology teacher organizes work and understand why he/she selects a certain interaction pattern.

**Conclusions and research perspectives.** The study aimed to draw up guidelines for using differentiated instruction in teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English. A mixed-ability group of pre-service teachers of English can be defined as a group of

students who considerably differ in the level of professional skills whose development of professional competence is affected by students' level of language command. This influence cannot be limited to the only factor, though. In mixed-ability groups, it is advisable to use differentiated instruction which is creating opportunities for all the students to assimilate the new content successfully, to process information in the way which seems most appropriate for each learner, and to display the outcomes of learning in different ways.

Considering the impact students' language command has on their performance in methodology course, the necessity to build trainee teachers' awareness of differentiation strategies and their professional skills, we believe it is important to adjust the language of instruction to students' level of language proficiency, to find out the reasons for students' academic failures in the course of methodology and take them into account in the process of teaching, to explicitly differentiate process and product, to share responsibility for differentiation between the teacher and students, and to use a blend of whole-class, individual and homogeneous/heterogeneous group work. In our opinion, following these recommendations will enhance the chances for pre-service teachers to acquire all the necessary professional skills and abilities by the time they graduate from university.

Further research in the field may involve: 1) creating the algorithm of teacher actions in preparing for and using differentiated instruction while teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English; 2) working out a system of activities for teaching methodology to pre-service teachers of English and verifying its effectiveness through pedagogical intervention.

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