# The Effects of Differentiated Instruction on the Literacy Process of Learners with Interrupted Schooling[1]

## Los Efectos de la Instrucción Diferenciada en el Proceso de Lectoescritura de los Estudiantes con Escolaridad Interrumpida

Liliana Niño Santisteban[2]*
*Colegio Cundinamarca, Colombia*

## Abstract

This research study analyzes the literacy and foreign langauge processes of learners in the *Procesos Básicos* Program. The participants were 15 Spanish-speaking children and young adolescents, whose highest level of education was first grade. Eight of the 15 children were Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and the others were affected by violence, family issues, and cognitive difficulties. These groups of students attend a public school located in Bogotá Colombia. Most of the students have faced interrupted schooling due to different social factors. As a consequence, there are children of different ages and social backgrounds, including IDPs, in each classroom. Differentiation was used as well as GANAG (Goal, Activating Prior knowledge, New information, Aplication, Generalization) reading formats in both English as a foreign language (EFL) and Spanish (mother tongue) literacy classes. Results show that there was little impact of differentiated instruction on writing production or vocabulary acquisition. However, there was evidence of an impact on reading comprehension when inferring and comparing and contrasting narrative texts.

*Keywords:* Differentiation, reading comprehension, writing production, vocabulary acquisition, literacy, IDPs population.

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## Resumen

El estudio analiza el proceso lectoescritor de un grupo de estudiantes de procesos básicos de un colegio público de Bogotá, Colombia. Los participantes fueron 15 niños hisponoparlantes y jóvenes adolescentes, cuyo nivel más alto de educación corresponde a primer grado de primaria. 8 de los 15 niños pertencen a población desplazada y los otros fueron afectados por la violencia, problemas familiares y dificultades cognitivas. Estos grupos de estudiantes asisten a una escuela pública ubicada en Bogotá, Colombia. La mayoria de estos estudiantes ha visto interrumpida su escolaridad debido a diversos factores sociales. En consecuencia, en cada salón de clase existen niños de diferentes edades y estratos sociales pertenecientes a la población desplazada. Para intervenir el grupo se usó la instrucción diferenciada, formatos de observación en lectura, escritura y planeación a través de GANAC (Goal, Activating Prior knowledge, New information, Aplication, Generalization), tanto en las clases de lectoescritura como de inglés. Los resultados mostraron por un lado, que hay poco impacto de la instrucción diferenciada en la producción escrita y en la adquisición de vocabulario y por otro, que la instrucción diferenciada sí impactó la comprensión lectora especialmente al hacer inferencias, comparar y contrastar textos narrativos los cuales fueron seleccionados para el estudio.

*Palabras clave:* Diferenciación, comprensión de lectura, producción escrita, adquisición de vocabulario, proceso lectoescritor, población desplazada.

## Resumo

O estudo analisa o processo lectoescritor de um grupo de estudantes de processos básicos de um colégio público de Bogotá, Colômbia. Os participantes foram 15 crianças hispano-falantes e jovens adolescentes, cujo nível mais alto de educação corresponde à primeira série do ensino fundamental (No sistema educativo de onze anos). 8 das 15 crianças pertencem à população deslocada e as outras foram afetadas pela violência, problemas familiares e dificuldades cognitivas. Estes grupos de estudantes estudam numa escola pública situada em Bogotá, Colômbia. A escolaridade da maioria desses estudantes foi interrompida por diversos fatores sociais. Em consequência, em cada sala de aula existem crianças de diferentes idades e níveis sociais, pertencentes à população deslocada. Para intervir o grupo, usou-se a instrução diferenciada, formatos de observação em leitura, escritura, e planejamento através de GANAC (Goal, Activating Prior knowledge, New information, Aplication, Generalization), tanto nas aulas de lectoescritura como de inglês. Os resultados mostraram por um lado, que há pouco impacto da instrução diferenciada na produção escrita e na aquisição de vocabulário e por outro, que a instrução diferenciada sim, impactou a compreensão leitora, especialmente ao fazer inferências, comparar e contrastar textos narrativos, os quais foram selecionados para o estudo.

*Palavras chave:* Diferenciação, compreensão de leitura, produção escrita, aquisição de vocabulário, processo lectoescritor, população deslocada.

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## Introduction

Statistics are clear about displacement around the world. According to UNESCO and The National Bank (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010), there are more than 40 million refugees and IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), forcibly displaced by armed conflict. Of these, more than 4,088,770 displaced persons were Colombians by the end of 2013 (The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, 2013). The United Nations protects vulnerable populations with The Guiding Principle 23, which affirms that all IDPs must receive assistance and protection from national governments, including education. However, most of the national governments do not do this; only three of the 10 largest IDP population countries have drafted laws or policies about IDP children or youth: Colombia, Iraq, and Turkey.

In terms of education for IDPs, the national government and individual Colombian districts have created programs that determine the level of students who are over the average student age or have been outside the education system. Local school authorities, along with a non-governmental organization, *Dividendo por Colombia*, deliver elementary and high school programs for vulnerable or displaced populations. This program is divided into two parts: *Procesos Básicos* (Basic Processes) and *Aceleración* (Acceleration). The *Procesos Básicos* group brings literacy support for children from eight to twelve years old, and *Aceleración* is established for teenagers. In the case of this study, a public bilingual school located in a lower-income neighborhood of Bogotá implements both programs. In the morning shift, there is the *Procesos Básicos* group. There are 15 children from eight to 15 years old, whose highest level of education is first grade. Eight of the 15 children are IDPs, and the others are affected by violence, as well as family and cognitive problems, which in academic terms means they are struggling readers or find it difficult to read and write because of economic, social and cognitive factors (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007).

In a year, children are taught literacy skills and basic arithmetic through the Negret method (Barreto, 2006), which takes into account Piaget's genetic constructivism, Vygotskys' relationship between socialization and the linguistic act, and Teberosky's classic systems of literacy in order to impact children's cognitive development. Based on that theory, the objectives of reading and writing in *Procesos Básicos* are integrating curricular areas, and developing communicative skills in reading comprehension and written production in Spanish. English is an additional subject at one of the schools since it is a bilingual school. English is taught in a communicative way to develop the four skills, but

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especially listening and speaking as students are learning how to read and write in the mother tongue.

After finishing the process in *Procesos Básicos* Program, children are integrated into regular schooling. However, they still have to face the common problems of reading and writing in both languages, English and Spanish. As a consequence, most of the students neither adapt to their new classmates nor to the classroom routines, which is why most of them fail the year or dropout because of behavioral or academic problems.

According to Tomlinson (1999), differentiated instruction might help these children since it is a process that takes into account the varied needs and strengths of students' strategies, and it also addresses diversity through adjustments to instruction based on how students interact with the material. Gregory and Burkman (2011) also take into account the importance of respecting diversity through positive relations between students and teachers, a supportive classroom and innovating instructional strategies for students to perform better in the classroom. In addition, studies reveal that the differentiated instruction approach is successful, particularly in reading-writing, mathematics, and biology (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007).

Although there is a lot of evidence of the effectiveness of differentiation instruction on increasing students' success, performance, and motivation by enabling their active participation in the learning process and also in decreasing events of misbehavior, there are no scientific applications or studies of this issue on IDPs or vulnerable populations in Colombia. Therefore, there is a need for a study that would examine the effect of the differentiated instruction approach on students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing performance, as well as on teachers' behavior and instruction on the *Procesos Básicos* group. In line with this aim, the following research question was addressed: W*hat is the impact of differentiated instruction on students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing performance?* To support this question, the following was also asked: *What is the role of the teacher in a differentiated classroom? What are the key factors of differentiated instruction? and How can we find evidence of differentiation?*

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**Literature Review**

**Literacy Education for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**

Literacy is a complex process and is more difficult when learners are facing social, economic and personal traumas due to internal and political conflicts. Populations of refugees and IDPs have dramatically increased around the world. As the school is often in the middle of these conflicts, it has to create solutions for the special needs of these kinds of populations.

According to UNESCO (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010), displaced persons are those people who have to leave their homes for three main reasons: escaping the effects of conflict, hiding from armed groups, or suffering disruption of economic and social life (Barrs, as cited in Ferris & Winthrop, 2010). Additionally, displaced people are divided into refugees and IDPs. A refugee is defined in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees "as a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010, p. 6). Although both groups are similar, they have different rights and political status.

Even though refugees have advantages over IDPs, they also have to face discrimination, learning a new language, conditions of poverty, and a lack of opportunities in a foreign country. Additionally, the governments in charge of refugees are not prepared for fulfilling refugees' educational, psychological and economical needs (McCarthy & Vickers, 2012).

Today, literacy is considered as a right, and it is also an indicator of social development (UNESCO, 2005). When parents are poorly educated and there are conditions of poverty, children may have marked difficulties in the literacy process. Although the different social backgrounds between the second language learners and the native speakers could negatively affect the literacy process, instruction could narrow this gap.

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Due to the fact that the refugee population has increased in the United States and in other developed countries, it constitutes an extra challenge for teachers since most of the refugee students have had interrupted schooling, are over age, and have low levels of literacy in their first language (Gottieb, 2006). This is why teachers have to apply

effective and inclusive instructional strategies that avoid equity gaps and take into account student diversity (Gregory & Burkman, 2012). Among these strategies, there are differentiated instruction strategies that improve students' learning. "Avoiding making assumptions, teaching students how to ask the right questions, allowing students who speak the same language to speak that language in class, making connections in the first language and with the other learning" are some of the strategies suggested by Gregory and Burkman (2012, p. 25) to accelerate growth and learning in refugee classrooms.

There is substantial research on refugee education, and specifically literacy. Most studies fall into four broad categories: educational, social, linguistic and psychological. All of them have pointed out refugees' special psychological and emotional needs (Jones & Rutter, as cited in Sidhu & Taylor, 2011).

Most of the research dealing with educational systems focuses on school policies and teacher training. This kind of research also brings a general perspective of refugee education. MacNevin (2012), Brown, Miller & Mitchell (2006), Taylor (2008) and Howard and Taylor (2011) voice similar concerns and findings about teacher training and school policies. In addition, they discuss the importance of school leadership (Howard & Taylor 2011; Taylor 2008), the importance of adapting text to refugees' ages (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell (2006), the inclusive approach, and celebrating diversity (Taylor, 2008); they also include cooperative learning, parent support teams, tutoring, monitoring, and implementation of a curriculum (Howard & Taylor, 2011) to push students to success in literacy and in the inclusion process.

**Educational systems.** Most of the research dealing with educational systems focuses on school policies and teacher training. This kind of research also brings a general perspective of refugee education. MacNevin (2012) finds that educational systems in Canada are not functioning for refugees since refugees are not a priority for governments. Most of the teachers from the interviewed schools reported that there is no professional development. It is evident that teachers at high and junior school need to be trained in literacy. This training is generally exclusive to primary school teachers. The interviewed teachers also address the importance of knowing about students' backgrounds, psychological support and post-traumatic stress. According to MacNevin, there are four basic areas that teachers and schools take into account to succeed with intermediate and high school refugee students: "1) teaching basic literacy skills to youth in intermediate and high school, 2) differentiating instruction, 3)

determining background knowledge of students, and 4) promoting social interactions between students" (p. 59).

Brown, Miller& Mitchell (2006), Taylor (2008) and Howard and Taylor (2011) also voice similar concerns and findings about teachers training and schools policies. In addition, they discuss the importance of school leadership (Taylor 2008, Howard & Taylor 2011), texts adapted to refugees' ages (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell (2006), the inclusive approach, and celebrating diversity (Taylor 2008); they also include cooperative learning, parent support teams, tutoring, monitoring, implementation of a curriculum ( Howard & Taylor 2011) to achieve student success in the literacy and the inclusion processes.

**The linguistic perspective.** The main themes of linguistic research papers are language acquisition and literacy. However, connections among the texts and reality are also important in acquiring language and literacy skills. Dooley (2009) found that many students of African origin who are mainly non-literate, have low literacy or have experimented disrupted education are not prepared for age-based placement programs. Due to this fact, both schools and teachers have to implement programs and strategies for students to be able to acquire English and literacy skills at the high school level. In terms of programs, these include the critical pedagogy approach, content-area ESL teaching, and literacy skills. In regards to strategies, preschool and primary ESL strategies from reading education; the use of concept maps, retrieval charts, and other graphic organizers for note taking; homework clubs, scaffolding, and linking cultural texts such as hip-hop are the most appropriate ways to allow students to connect concepts and content and relate to their conditions as marginalized youth in refugee situations. In addition, Dooley finds that the mix of literacy resources and deep and critical tasks help refugee students build conceptual knowledge.

Sarroub (2007) also finds that making connections helps students' understanding. By linking something from refugees' popular culture to what is being discussed in the classroom, refugee students can make sense of the curriculum and connect it to the reality of their lives, since academic learning and popular culture both offer survival tools (Monje, as cited in Sarroub, 2007).

In the case of Windle and Miller (2012), they analyze refugees' autonomy regarding language development and skills. They have also found through their research that scaffolding, written resources, teacher-focused activities, checklist models, classroom routines and high-order questioning contribute both to students' literacy and to their autonomy.

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**The psychological perspective.** Medley (2012) explains how knowing about trauma can be aligned with effective language. The author at first provides information about the effects of trauma in the refugee student population and then identifies teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs of those affected by the trauma. He also includes multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993), especially those that are not traditionally encompassed in a language class (kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic) as a way to address the needs of trauma-affected youth and help them access multiple channels for self-expression and language learning. In short, this perspective affirms that trauma-affected learners are like all the other learners in the classroom: they can process new language better if they are able to draw on the types of intelligence that work best for them.

## Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction meets the needs of each student and addresses the diversity in classrooms (O'Meara, 2010). It is described by Tomlinson (1999) as the way a teacher teaches the whole class, small groups and individuals, providing multiple ways of learning and assessment to ensure students' understanding and adjusting instruction to learners' needs. These needs are classified according to students' readiness, interest and learning profiles.

According to Tomlinson and Cunningham (2003), readiness has to do with students' preparedness to work with a prescribed set of understanding, knowledge and skills. Interest refers to children's affinity, passion or curiosity (Tomlinson, 1999), and it is a factor of motivation (Tomlinson & Cunningham 2003). The learning profile refers to students' preferred way or ways to learn or the way a learner learns best. Students' gender, culture, learning styles, or intelligence preferences are the main factors that shape the learning profile (Tomlinson & Cunningham, 2003).

## Methodology

### Research Design

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The study was designed as an action research study, which involves applying a process or systematical data collection and analysis to understand and solve the question at hand. In addition, qualitative and quantitative data techniques were implemented to answer the research question, which related differentiation instruction and literacy.

**Context and Participants**

The participants of this study were a group of 15 Spanish-speaking children andtwo teachers of the *Procesos Básicos* group of a bilingual public school in Bogotá, Colombia. From the 15 children, five were female and ten male from eight to fifteen years old, whose highest level of education was first grade. In addition, eight of the 15 children were IDPs, and the others were affected by violence, familiar and cognitive problems. At the end of the observation, four children left school because of family conflicts.Teachers included two female teachers, one in charge of the literacy process and the other of the English classes. Both teachers participated in the observation, planning and GANAC modified classes.

Students were selected because of their academic and social conditions. Additionally, in the near future they have to adapt to regular schooling, and the study might bring them tools to have better academic results. Both students and teachers volunteered to be part of the study because they were interested in implementing other ways of teaching which help them improve their literacy process.

**Data Collection Instruments**

Various data collection techniques were used in order to answer the research question as to whether the differentiated instruction approach causes any changes in the students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing performance.

**Surveys.** Students filled out a 29-question closed survey to give information regarding student-student and student-teacher interaction, classroom environment, evidence of differentiation, reading materials, learning styles and interests regarding reading.

**Interviews.** After students filled out the survey, the teacher was interviewed to compare and contrast answers from the students' interviews, which concerned classroom environment, as well as teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationships. Additionally, the interviews helped identify differentiation elements and reading comprehension techniques.

**Observations.** Two observation formats served to collect information and identify differentiation practice regarding to reading and vocabulary, comprehension skills in both Spanish and English classes. The first format was divided into six items: 1) developing classroom routines that contribute to success, 2) teacher's behavior,

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3) students' behavior, 4) evidence of differentiation, 5) context goal setting, and 6) students' assessment.This observation format was adapted from Tomlinson (1999, 2003).

The second format was divided into three items: pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities suggested by Taylor and Ysseldyke (2007). Video recordings of each class served to identify evidence of differentiation and the students' and teachers' roles in action.

There were a total of seven observations, the observations lasted in total 22 hours. Four of the observed lessons were not modified. Three were modified using the GANAG (Goal, New Information, Apply, Generalize) model, which is the acronym of a daily lesson planning schema created by Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001), which is designed to optimize students' learning and in our research increase and demonstrate practices of differentiation, reading comprehension, vocabulary and text production. A differentiation format was also used to compare and contrast those differentiated practices in the intervened and the non-intervened classes. In addition, a reading comprehension observation format was designed to collect information from the intervened classes.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

For the observations, an axial coding analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to create the following categories: differentiated instruction, literacy and classroom environment. A hierarchical classification of the themes was also included in order to find evidence of differentiation before, during and after classroom intervention. Lastly, statistics were used to compare and contrast initial and final data in order to verify how differentiated instruction impacted reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing production in both Spanish and English.

To analyze the collected data, the information given in the interview, the surveys and the observations was compared and contrasted. Graphics were used to find evidence of differentiation and changes in literacy practices concerning reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing production in both Spanish and English.

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## Results

The analysis of the data revealed a number of key themes related to language and literacy issues, which will, for the purposes of discussion, be divided into classroom environment, evidence of differentiation reading comprehension and writing production. It should be noted that despite of a high evidence of differentiation after intervening the literacy and the English classes, students had better results in reading comprehension than in written production. While the lack of vocabulary especially in English had an impact on the low writing production, the use of visual aids and graphic organizers helped students, increasing their reading comprehension. In addition to these key topics, it also found that group work and making connections were important issues in order to answer the research questions.

### Classroom Environment

Classroom environment contributes both to classroom efficiency and building community (Tomlinson & Cunningham, 2003). It is determined based on the physical conditions of the classroom, which are space, desk distribution, and interaction between members of the class, all of which are factors that make a safe place. All these elements promote students' learning. Specific questions about student and teacher interaction in the interview and the survey format, the developing classroom management routines in the observation format, and the observations themselves during the English and literacy classes were useful in determining how the classroom conditions and the interactions among students and teachers serve to benefit the literacy process in the *Procesos Básicos* class.

First, when asking questions about physical conditions and environment, both the students and the teacher agreed on feeling comfortable with the classroom conditions and the way they interacted. When asking about teacher- student interaction, there were 6 (six) questions about this aspect in the survey. In 5 of the 6 items a 100% of the students affirmed that they felt respected, and they considered the teacher to be kind. In addition, there were no complaints about the classroom conditions.

Similar data was collected when observing the class. The classroom continued to be considered a safe environment when qualifying students' behavior, especially regarding the use of self-discipline and participation and working with classmates. However, there was no evidence of optimal conditions for promoting learning.

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For example, the classroom conditions do not allow for easy grouping. This is due to a mix of internal and external factors: the classroom is not big enough for moving the tables, and there is a lot of noise outside. However, in general, the collected data demonstrated that there is a positive environment in the *Procesos Básico*s group, and it also showed that the adverse physical conditions of the class had not interfered with students' behavior.

**Student Behavior**

As demonstrated during observations in the literacy class, there was no evidence of group work or peer work. On the other hand, there was ample evidence of using self-discipline, task behavior and students' participation. After the intervention, there was more evidence of student behavior related to differentiation mainly because students were able to work on their own and in small groups, which facilitated how and when students participated when doing different tasks.

**Teachers' Behavior**

Tomlinson (1999) conceived an idea in which the teacher, the content and the students form the parts of an equilateral triangle, which technically does not have any top. However, for differentiation purposes the teacher has to be the top of the learning triangle. In other words, the teacher is a leader who recognizes students as people. In addition, the teacher knows what to teach and modifies how students learn according to the content (Tomlinson & Cunningham, 2003). Bearing in mind that point of view, we decided to do a class observation focused on teachers' behavior and classroom routines in literacy and English classes. The tendencies of teachers' behavior in both literacy and English classes had been modified after class intervention. Only gathering information on students' interests, dreams and aspirations made a difference in the two intervened classes. That happened because we did not use the students' survey when planning the English class. That survey was used for the literacy class instead in order to develop differentiated activities based on students' likes, interests and multiple intelligences from Gardner (1993).

Taking into account that there is evidence of the desired teacher's behavior from the differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999), we could consider that there was also evidence of effective instruction: how, when, and why to teach the instructional strategies that guide teachers in looking at the students in small groups, rather than only

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as a whole class (Tomlinson & Cunningham, 2003). For that reason, observing the classroom routines could verify that piece of information. In sum, intervention helped develop differentiated instruction routines that assisted teachers in gathering information and using instructional strategies effectively, depending on students' readiness, needs, interests and learning profiles.

**Evidence of Differentiation**

When differentiating, students are able to choose. According to Gambrell (1996) and Graves (1994), choice is a motivating factor in reading and writing. Concerning content process and product, which according to Tomlinson (1999) constitute the main items of evidence of differentiation, there was little implementation of tasks in multiple modes, product assignments with multiple modes of expression or variety of assessment tasks. Additionally, before the intervention there was no evidence of a variety of reading levelsas most of the activities were based on a textbook and students did not work in groups.

During the intervention which consisted of the modification to the existing special needs class, the GANAG format as well as differentiated instruction was used to increase students' participation and impact reading comprehension skills, vocabulary acquisition, and writing production. The intervention significantly increased the evidence of differentiation.Those items that had the lowest range in the non-intervened classes (tasks in multiple modes, product assignments with multiple modes of expression and variety of assessment tasks, and choices about how to work) notably increased, allowing students opportunities to learn (Tomlinson, 1999).

Observations also showed evidence of differentiation in English class. Although there were significant changes, when compared with the literacy class, the English class had less impact. There may have been several reasons this happened: no pre-assessment survey was given before starting the class, and students presented the tasks in just one way, with Venn diagrams. In the case of the literacy class, the pre-assessment survey helped teachers know how students learned, and that is how decisions were made about different ways of presenting the products or the ways students demonstrate what they have learned (Tomlinson, 1999). Results showed that most students demonstrate their learning by building, reading and acting. Those pieces of information determined how students could present their graphic products through modeling, acting or writing when planning with differentiation.

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**Reading Comprehension and Writing**

In terms of lesson structure, there were three GANAG lessons in each unit. All the lessons focused on narrative text, since narrative texts allow interaction with new and known words and increase students' vocabulary levels (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007). In addition, there is ample documentation that correlates vocabulary knowledge with school success and reading comprehension (Anderson & Freedody; Anderson & Naggy; Backer, Simmons & Kate, as cited in Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007). Each lesson lasted three hours. There was co-teaching between the literacy and English teachers. Both teachers used narrative texts to develop reading comprehension skills and written production. The reading format was divided into pre-reading activities, during the reading and after the reading. During the pre-reading activities, students were able to make predictions about the topic. In the case of the English class, they did the pair and share activity in which students had different picture sequences about the story, "The Little Red Hen." Such predictions were given in Spanish since students lacked English vocabulary, as suggested by Wiggins and McTighe (2007). Although all students expressed that they had not read the story before, most of the predictions corresponded with the main topic of the story; however, there was no evidence of drawing inferences about how students felt about the topic. Still, students had opportunities to talk about the text with each other in order to give opinions and share predictions about the topic.

When doing the pre-reading activities in literacy class, the KWL Chart was used. Although the literacy teacher explained several times how to use the chart, it was difficult for students to complete it. In addition, the teacher presented a video about a folk tale, and students had to brainstorm about the video, which was also difficult for them. When reading, the teacher presented vocabulary using a vocabulary chart which helped students identify picture-word relations. There is no evidence of directly presenting the vocabulary in the literacy class. Both teachers asked questions to verify comprehension, clarify story elements and promote metacognition.

After the reading, in both classes students retold the stories – in the case of the English class, redoing the story sequence, and in the case of the literacy class through graphic organizers and diagrams. Additionally, in both classes, students compared the original story with other stories through Venn diagramming in English and through jigsaw readings they selected. Most of the text-to-life connections occurred in the literacy class. Since most of the population came from rural areas, they could tell anecdotes about legendary characters from their region and storytelling from their grandparents.

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In regards to the writing activities, there was no significant production in English due to the lack of vocabulary. In the case of the literacy class, there was evidence of using vocabulary when describing fictional characters. Moreover, students had the opportunity to choose and write a text. For that reason, three rubric formats were used for each written production. Although there were a lot of opportunities for written production, students were unclear on text structure.

## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to determine the impact of the differentiated instruction approach on the students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and writing performance, as well as on teachers' behavior and instruction. In line with this aim information was collected through interviews, surveys and class observations. Although the results demonstrated few incidences of differentiated instruction in written production, there was more evidence of higher incidence in reading comprehension skills (predicting, drawing inferences and identifying the parts of narrative texts).

The planned activities, especially those concerning evidence of differentiation, helped promote student interaction with the text and their life experiences. In other words, those activities helped students make connections. Graphic organizers and Venn diagrams demonstrated that students were able to identify the parts of narrative texts (tales and legends) and compare and contrast story elements. In addition, it was also evident, although students had acquired little vocabulary in English, that they were able to identify the parts of the story through a poster. In general, visual representation was useful in ensuring students' understanding of the text. Adding to that, taking into account that the *Procesos Básicos* students belonged to the struggling readers group because of their conditions (disrupted schooling, socioeconomic conditions), the use of Spanish when making predictions or giving opinions constituted a tool that also served to identify students' understanding (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007; Strickland, Ganske & Morrow, 2006; Tomlinson, 2003). Group work was also important in reading comprehension because it allowed students' interaction, sharing opinions and building reading skills together.

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In conclusion, this study shows that some of the findings from the literature reviewed relate to the findings of the action research. The studies reviewed, such as Sarroub (2007) and Windle and Miller (2012), refer to making connections as a tool that helps students understand and includes items from students' culture in the classes. Similarly, in

this study the selected reading text concerned tales and legends, which are folklore narrations that help students connect to the text and to the context. According to Taylor and Ysseldyke (2007), this allows students to make predictions about the text, which is a key element of reading comprehension.

Regarding differentiated instruction as described by Tomlinson (1999, 2003), choices help students improve their reading comprehension skills by allowing them to select readings and presenting their results according to their likes, abilities, and interest. This generates moments in which reading becomes an active process that allows students interact with others and the texts in meaningful ways. In other words, the use of reading strategies bring students opportunities to connect self with the text and with the context. In addition, as seen in this study, the use of graphic organizers and visual aids facilitate students' reading comprehension by helping them to identify the parts of narrative texts (tales and legends) and compare and contrast story elements and social interaction.

On the other hand, there are no findings in the literature about written production or vocabulary acquisition for struggling readers and writers, more specifically for IDPs. In general, as suggested by Sidhu & Taylor (2011), there is little research about IDPs since governments in general do not worry about this world-wide issue. However, as demonstrated by Windle and Miller (2012), classroom routines contribute to both students' literacy and their autonomy, as observed in this action research through pair and group work.

In terms of future research, these might include learning centers, and individual DIBELS and SNAP tests (Taylor & Ysseldyke, 2007) to validate data information through international skills tests. In addition, it is suggested that there should be more research about the topic to help determine the impact of home literacy and the influence of context on the vocabulary acquisition and written production process.

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**Author**

***Liliana Niño Santisteban** holds an undergraduate degree in Spanish and English from the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional de Colombia* and a Specialist's degree in Bilingual Education from the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana, ÚNICA*. She has been teaching for 12 years in public and private schools. She is currently teaching at the *Colegio Bililngüe IED* where she became interested in literacy process of the *Procesos Básicos* program. Her research interests include literacy and teaching.

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