

**Volume 7. Issue 2**  
**Article 8.**

**Putting Students' Differences in Perspectives:  
An Introduction to the Individual Developing Model**

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**Abstract**

The individualized program aims to teach according to students' needs and abilities. However, the notion that aims to create one lesson plan for each student causes drawbacks from teachers. In the generalized curriculum system, teachers often struggle in deciding when and where to treat students as special individuals. This paper introduces the Individual Developing Model which can assist teachers to discover and develop students' individual differences in the generalized curriculum settings without having to design individual lesson plan for every student. This model comprises three stages – the Discovery Stage, Differentiation Stage and Developing Stage. From discovering to developing students' differences, this paper outlines a series of methods and activities which can be applied to general classroom settings.

**Key Words:** Individual Developing Model, Discovery Stage, Differentiation Stage and Developing Stage,

## **1.0 Introduction**

Since the 1960s, there have already been suggestions for individualized programs. Cronback (1967, cited by Bolvin, 1991:189) has proposed to attend to students' differences though individualized lesson objectives with varied instructions and resources. In language teaching, present programs such as student-centered learning, self-instruction learning (Dickinson, 1987) and communicative language teaching (CLT) are among the approaches that support student needs' analysis and personalization. Individualized program, according to Altman's definition (Altman, 1977:76-77, quoted by Tudor, 1996) is as below:

“[It]...is one in which the structure of the program – i.e. presentation and composition of content, role definition of teacher and learner, system of evaluation – is allowed to be flexible in an effort to accommodate, to the extent possible, the interests, needs and abilities of individual learners.”

The core of the program is thus to teach according to individual student's “interests, needs and abilities”. Individualized program has created awareness among teachers so that to treat every student as special individual inside and outside the class. Aside from academic achievement, teachers are becoming more ready to accept other capabilities as part of students' specialties. These capabilities range from vocational skills to talents in all aspects of life (arts, music, etc.).

Despite this positive change of attitudes among teachers, there are still drawbacks towards the individualized program. One of the reasons that causes drawbacks is the notion of designing individual lesson plan for every student (Bolvin, 1991:189). Such notion has added burdens as well as pressure to teachers' responsibilities. The situations become more complicated in countries in which the population is high. The large number of students in each class causes the designing of individual lesson plan a burden to teachers.

Other than that, the generalized curriculum, which targets at assumed groups of learners,

has not set aside special instructions for individualized program. Finnochiaro and Brumfit (1983) are of the view that generalization of language planning is a must at the planning level. This has carried much truth because curriculum planning is not the matter of planning for an individual but for the whole nation. Since this is the scenario, the discovery of individual differences depends largely on the teachers in actual classroom practices. This is because educational practitioners especially the teachers are the ones who interact most with the students. This makes them the most suitable candidates in discovering students' individual differences.

In light of these problems, this paper proposes a model that can assist teachers to carry out the individualized program in the classroom. This model is called the Individual Developing Model. There are three stages in his model, namely the Discovery Stage, Differentiation Stage and Developing Stage.

The advantages of using the Individual Developing Model are:

- a) It helps teachers to work along the generalized curriculum and at the same time not burdening teachers with individual lesson plan.
- b) It explains how teachers can use information about students to help students to self-discover their specialties.
- c) It represents a methodology that explains the relativity of students' self-discovery and teachers' dominancy (that is, it hypothesizes that the development of students' self-discovery reduced teachers' dominancy in teaching and learning).

Before we look at how the Individual Development Model works, we need to examine the kind of students' information that teachers need as basic input for the model. In the next section we outline some of the differences that teachers can discover from each student.

## **2.0 Individual Differences**

The differences of every student provide the necessary information for a teacher. In our model, these differences form the bases from which changes can take place. These changes include task instructions, groupings and material selections. In this section, we outline four

aspects of individual differences – aptitudes, motivation, personalities and learning styles and strategies.

### **Aptitudes**

Carroll defines aptitude as the “capability of learning a task” (1981, cited by Ellis, 1994:494). This capability is an additional advantage in language learning but it does not guarantee one’s achievement (Ellis, 1994). Nevertheless, to be able to discover learners’ aptitude (or lack of it) helps to explain their success (or lack of it) in language learning (Williams and Burdens, 1997).

Examples of language aptitudes are memory for new vocabulary, the ability to memorize new sounds and to understand how words function grammatically (Lightbown and Spada, 1993:37). These capabilities are observable in the classroom. Other than that, aptitudes in study skills, leadership and organization skills can also materialize through working in groups, joining school associations and organizing outdoor activities. In teaching and learning, students’ aptitudes provide hints of which teachers can use in selecting activities to develop students’ capabilities. One example of activity is A-Word-A-Day which takes only a few minutes of the lesson. This activity helps to develop students with aptitude in learning new vocabulary and at the same time acts as an enrichment activity to the rest of the students.

### **Motivation**

Other than aptitude, students also show differences in their learning motivation. Williams and Burden (1997:94) define motivation as “a state of temporary or prolonged goal-oriented behavior which individuals actively choose to engage in”. This is to see motivation as being long-termed and short-termed motivation. Another way of categorizing motivation is to see it as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Deci (1975:23, quoted by Brown, 1993:155) defines intrinsic motivation as the learners’ willingness “to engage in the activities for their own sake”. This kind of motivation will bring about “internally rewarding consequences, namely feelings of competence and self determination”.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to behaviors encouraged by external factors such as rewards, praises and encouragement. Maslow (1970, cited by Brown 1993:156) places intrinsic motivation as being long-termed and more “superior” than extrinsic motivation. This is because intrinsic motivation is usually more lasting than extrinsic motivation. In teaching and learning, to be able to generate motivation is not the end of a teacher’s task. Students need encouragement and guidance to find and retain a long-termed motivation, which is usually developed from students’ interests and desires.

Aside from that, Gardner (1985) has also categorized motivation into two main social dimensions - the integrative motivation and the instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is associated with the learners’ intention of blending with the cultures of the native-speakers. Comparatively, instrumental motivation is related to the view that to be competence in a language provides economical and practical advantages. These advantages include better career prospects and chances of promotion.

### **Personalities**

The third type of differences is personalities. According to Ely’s model of language proficiency development (Ely, 1986, cited by Skehan, 1989:108), “language class sociability” and “language class risk-taking” are among the personality traits that contribute to classroom participation (which then leads to language proficiency). Language class sociability refers to “gregariousness, people orientation and fear of isolation” whereas risk-taking is impulsivity or having “the need for excitement and change” (Eysenck, 1965, quoted by Skehan, 1989:100). These two types of personalities belong to the extroversion category. Ellis (1994) has hypothesized that this type of learners is more likely to perform better in interpersonal skills. In the language classroom, they tend to respond better to activities which demand more spontaneous speaking skills.

Introversion, on the contrary, refers to personality trait that prefers secured tasks and “avoids excitement” (Eysenck and Chan, 1982:154, quoted by Ellis, 1994:520). These ‘secured tasks’ include traditional grammar practice and choral reading. Ellis’ hypothesis (1994) is that the introverted learners are more likely to succeed academically in language

learning.

Despite these hypotheses (regarding the characteristics of the different personality types), we suggest teachers to depend upon their own evaluation in observing learners' behaviors.

### **Learning Styles and Strategies**

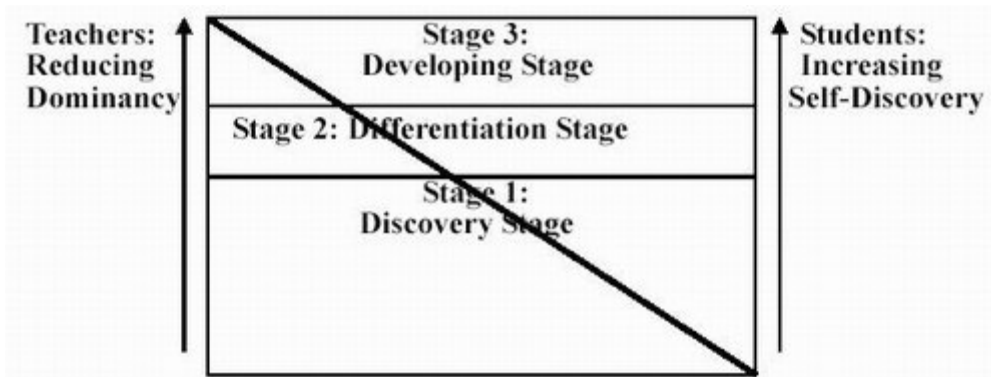
Lastly, students also differ from their learning styles and strategies. Brown (1994:104) defines style as “a term that refers to consistent and rather enduring tendencies or preference within an individual”. Each learner practises certain learning styles consciously or unconsciously. Among a group of learners, some learn better with pictures and diagrams (visual learners) and some absorb knowledge faster by participation (kinesthetic learners). Knowing the differences in learning styles, teachers can adjust their explanation when monitoring learning in small groups.

Learners' learning styles affect their learning strategies. Brown (1994:104) sees learner strategies as the “special methods of approaching a problem or task” and every strategy as a “battle plan” that deals with a particular problem. For instance, mind-mapping (representation of ideas in diagram) is one of the memory strategies in Oxford's taxonomy which is preferred by visual learners (Oxford, 1990). On the other hand, reading aloud is more suitable for auditory learners (those who learn better by hearing or listening). Understanding students' learning strategies helps teachers in choosing suitable activities for different learners.

### **3.0 The Individual Developing Model**

The Individual Developing Model is a teaching and learning model that aims to develop students' differences through real classroom tasks. This model contains three stages:

- a) Discovery Stage
- b) Differentiation Stage
- c) Developing Stage



**Diagram 1: The Individual Developing Model**

This model uses students' differences as the basic input of knowledge for teachers. The discovery of differences occurs at the Discovery Stage (Stage 1). At this stage, teachers' dominancy is at the strongest. This is because students are yet to find out their capabilities and learning goals. Therefore, teachers hold the responsibility in helping students to find out their specialties.

At the Differentiation Stage (Stage 2), teachers devise lessons to suit students' interests, personality and capabilities. At this stage too, teachers continue to recognize the differences in each student. More inputs about students can be obtained while carrying out activities in the class. While teachers are in the process of discovering students' differences, students get to know more about themselves too. This model suggests that the increase of students' self-discovery causes reduction in teachers' dominancy. This is because students are becoming clearer of their interests, capabilities and learning motivation. Thus, they can make decision on matters such as topics to focus on, division of time for learning and organization of activities.

At the highest level (Developing Stage), teachers are working towards learners' training. At this stage, students are aware of their wants and needs. They gradually learn to make decision towards what to choose for their goals. This is the stage in which teachers' dominancy is at the minimum. The development from Stage 1 to 3 varies between individuals. Some students attain self-discovery faster than the others. Hence, the Developing Stage aims to instill a self-directed learning attitude into the students so that

they can continue to self-discover even after they have proceeded to another level of life.

In the next section, we will look how this model applies to classroom teaching.

#### 4.0 Applications in the Classroom

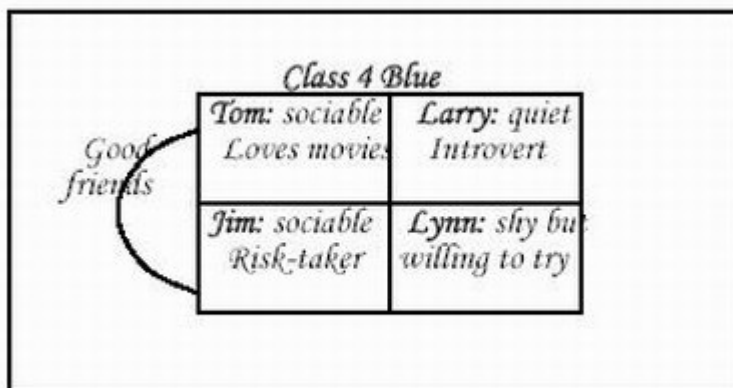
##### Stage 1: Discovery Stage

At the discovery stage, teachers first find out about students' individual differences. We suggest five methods for this stage.

##### Observation

Observation is the simplest way to find out about students' personality and learning strategies. Through students' interaction with one another, the way they speak, the topics they discuss and their responses towards others' comments, teachers can predict students' personality types. For example, an extrovert tends to be more sociable than an introvert. An introvert usually displays shyness, quietness and attentiveness in class.

Other than that, learning strategies can be observed through students' note-taking, revising techniques and memorizing skills. For instance, one who must read aloud in the memorization stage tends to be an auditory learner. Upon recognizing students' differences, teachers can make short notes about them. For classes in which seating positions are fixed, teachers can use the below method in marking students' differences:



**Diagram 2: Records of Students' Differences**

The recording of students' individual differences is important because these inputs provide clues for lesson planning at the second stage.

### **Questionnaires**

The second method that we suggest is using questionnaires. The use of questionnaires helps "to get language learners to self-report their attitudes or personal characteristics" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991:35). Questionnaires can also be used to find out students' learning motivation. The below shows an example of the question asked in finding out students' learning motivation:

Rate the following answers from 1 to 5 (1- most important reason and 5 – least important reason):

1. Why do you want to learn English?

- \* To find better job in the future.
- \* To be able to communicate with foreigners.
- \* To want to study in overseas.
- \* To want to score well in examinations.
- \* \_\_\_\_\_ ask(s) me to learn English. (Please state who)

The data gathered from questionnaires can be tabulated for references of teachers. In identifying individual differences, teachers may not want to use anonymous identity in the questionnaires. Unless the questions require personal comments from students regarding a certain issue (of which students are afraid to speak out of), anonymous identity can be avoided.

### **Assessments**

Though traditional, assessment is a way to find out about students' readiness in learning a language. Assessment helps to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in a particular area. In some cases, students' aptitudes (especially the capability in constructing grammatical structures) are made apparent in assessment. Nevertheless, aptitudes such as

talents in arts and music may not be immediately identified in language classroom. These aptitudes often materialize while carrying out activities inside or outside the class.

### **Information Feedback**

Information feedback is in a way similar to questionnaires. However, they differ in that information feedback can appear in the form of expressing thoughts and expressing opinions. This method can be used to identify students' personality as well as their capability to reason. For instance, teachers can ask students for their opinions after viewing a videotape show on family violence. Through observation of students' emotions such as anger, aggression or fears, teachers learn more about students' personality. Teachers can also find out about students' maturity of thoughts through information feedback. This method can also be used at the Differentiation Stage to continue to discover about students' differences.

### **Psychology Tests**

Other than that, psychology test such as personality tests can provide guidelines for teachers to identify personality types. However, teachers have to bear in mind that psychology tests are not always accurate and teachers should not rely too much on the tests' results.

### **Stage 2: Differentiation Stage**

As shown in Diagram 1, students' self-discovery does not end after Stage 1. It progresses and is in continuous development from Stage 1 to 3. Therefore, teachers can discover more about students' differences while carrying out activities in Stage 2. Teachers' knowledge of the students are renewed and refreshed every time new differences are found. In this section, we look at how the information obtained in Stage 1 helps differentiation of students' needs at Stage 2.

### **Gradation of Tasks**

Once teachers have found out about students' differences, teachers can devise activities according to students' needs. The first differentiation method that teachers can use is gradation of tasks. Gradation of tasks refers to the use of tasks graded from categories such

as easy, average to difficult, depending on the language proficiency of the students. The use of graded tasks benefits not only the lower achievers but also those with special capabilities.

Below is an example of graded tasks to teach the vocabulary terms ‘generation’, ‘generation gap’, ‘pop’ and ‘traditional’. The terms and their meanings are taken from Unit Four ‘Three Generations’ of the Taiwanese textbook Senior High School English Book 1. (1999). Tai Nan: Nan-I. Pages 53 to 66:

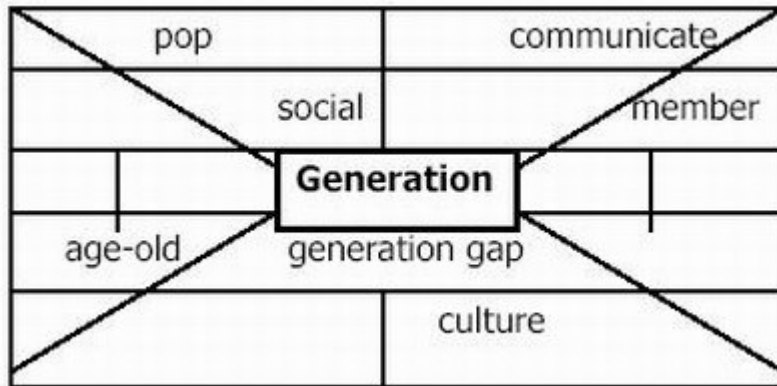
Difficulty Levels and Examples of Tasks	
<b>Easy</b>	
<i>After you have listened to the passage, <b>match</b> the meaning to its term in the following list (without referring to your textbook):</i>	
a) generation	1. differences which divide two generations
b) generation gap	2. about old customs and beliefs
c) pop	3. age groups
d) traditional	4. modern and popular
<b>Average</b>	
<i>After you have listened to the passage, <b>guess</b> the meanings of the following terms (without referring to your textbook):</i>	
a) generation _____	
b) generation gap _____	
c) pop _____	
d) traditional _____	
<b>Difficult</b>	
<i>After you have listened to the passage, <b>write out</b> the meanings of the following terms. After that, <b>make a sentence</b> to show how each term is used (without referring to your textbook):</i>	
a) generation _____	
Example:	
b) generation gap _____	
Example:	
c) pop _____	
Example:	
d) traditional _____	
Example:	

**Table 1: An Example of Task Gradation**

The easier task differs from the more complicated task in terms of the cues given for each term, the length of time for completion and the cognitive demands of each task. To be able to teach according to students’ needs is the aim of Stage 2. The use of graded tasks allows students to learn at different paces. The use of more challenging tasks for the advanced students can avoid the feelings of boredom and demotivation in learning.

### Varieties of Teaching Aids

The second differentiation method makes use of variable teaching aids. Teaching aid is an important part of pedagogy. The choice of teaching aid affects students in the learning process. For example, the use of a Web diagram such as the following helps visual learners to summarize the vocabulary learnt under a particular topic.



**Diagram 3: An Example of a Web Diagram**

(The vocabulary terms above are taken from Unit Four ‘Three Generations’ of the Taiwanese textbook Senior High School English Book 1. (1999). Tai Nan: Nan-I. Pages 53 to 66.)

In order to attend to students with different learning style and strategies, teachers can vary class activities by using different teaching aids. For auditory learners, the use of radio programs in English classes accelerates teaching and learning. In schools that are equipped with computer laboratories, radio programs can be replaced by CD-ROM. There are many types of teaching CD-ROM on the market that can assist students to practice speaking and listening skills.

Other suggestions of teaching aids (and the types of students they cater for) are listed in the table below:

Types of Teaching Aids	Individual Differences	Types of Topics/Skills/ Grammatical Expressions
Maps, charts and diagrams	Visual learners	Directions, comparison of data
Paintings and drawings	Visual learners, artistic students	Descriptions, persuasive expressions (selling of items)
Action games	Kinesthetic learners, extroverts	Descriptions, different grammatical topics
Banking forms, subscription forms, order forms and application forms	Instrumentally motivated learners	Vocabulary (signature, serial number, account number, quantity, etc.)
Crosswords puzzles	Introvert students (sometimes can be used in competition for extrovert learners as well)	Vocabulary

**Table 2: Examples of Teaching Aids for Different Learners**

The suggestions above are not exhaustive and neither they are absolute. The actual designing of lessons still has to depend upon particular groups of learners. Teachers should try out different teaching techniques so that there are chances for every student to develop individually.

### **Homogenous and Mixed-ability Groupings**

Another way of catering for students' needs is through groupings. Grouping is one of the commonest ways of organizing students in the classroom. There are many types of groupings, namely random groupings, groupings according to seating positions and groupings according to social cliques. In this section, we focus mainly on homogenous and mixed-ability groupings.

Green et al (1996:137) are of the view that “group members should be homogeneous in terms of both linguistic ability and personality type”. This helps to encourage “substantial and coherent contribution” in the learning process. In some schools in Britain, students are grouped differently for different subjects. As a result, students have to change classrooms (either to the higher or lower grades classes) depending on their capability in a particular subject. In this paper, we suggest students to be grouped according to the objectives of every lesson – homogenous at some lessons and mixed-ability at others.

For tasks such as drama presentations, it is unfair to group the introverts into a group and the extroverts into another. In this case, a mixed-ability grouping is more suitable. Nevertheless, in project work such as field research, homogenous groupings help students

to enjoy being each other's company. However, there are also cases when students with the same personality type that cannot work together. Therefore, teachers hold the responsibility of being observers as well as decision-makers in the classroom.

In term of personal study groups, students with the same learning style can be grouped together. For instance, visual learners who prefer notes in the diagrams or mind-mapping format can exchange notes with one another. This helps student to build up learning skills as well as cooperative learning. Furthermore, to categorize students into groups can also avoid the trouble of designing individual lesson plan for each student.

### **Journal Writing**

The next differentiation method is journal writing. The type of journal that we suggest here does not refer to the compiled articles that are published for academic purposes. Journals in the classroom refer to students' reflections towards a particular issue or literary work. This type of journal is usually used in Literature class for students to express their thoughts and opinions. It is not a private document but its contents can be shared between students and teachers as a way to communicate and exchange ideas.

Below is an example of a journal entry:

**Wednesday, 12 June**

**The poem: The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost**

*Today we discussed this poem in the class. I was enlightened by the poet's decision in choosing the road that nobody has used. In real life, very often, I feel too risky to try out something that is totally new to me.*

*Though I am interested in dancing, I don't think I can dance on the stage in front of the audience. It's a new path to me...*

From this example, we can notice the writer's personality – that this student is not a risk-taker type. Through reading students' journal, teachers obtain information about students' interests and needs. From the journal above, teachers can investigate whether that

particular student has an aptitude in dancing. A deeper understanding of students' differences helps to direct teachers in developing these differences either inside or outside the classroom.

Other ways that teachers can encourage students to express themselves are through discussion on poems, dramas and societal issues. Through expressing thoughts and opinions, students develop their own identities, which is what we aim for in Stage 3.

### **Stage 3: Developing Stage**

Stage 3 is the stage in which students have slowly started to appreciate their own differences. They will also learn to respect others' differences. At this stage, students' self-discovery is at the maximum, which brings about minimizing of teachers' instructions and dominancy.

At Stage 3, we suggest two ways to help teachers to further develop students' differences. The main purpose of this stage is to instill confidence into the students so that they continue to self-develop even after they have left school.

### **Autonomous Learning**

The first way that we suggest for developing students' differences is through autonomous learning. Autonomous learners are those who can self-direct and develop own commitments in learning without waiting for instructions from others. These students show their own organization toward learning, revising and doing library research.

In training learners to become autonomous learners, teachers need to instill a self-directed attitude into the learners. Teachers need to inform students why is autonomy beneficial to them. Reducing students' dependency on teachers is the first step in autonomous learners' training.

To start autonomous learning in the classroom, we suggest teachers to give more chances for students to make decision. Teachers can start from small matters such as allowing

students to make notes by using their own styles, letting students choose a topic for discussion and even encouraging self- and peer- corrections in exercises. Other than that, teachers can bring students to the self-access centers which are available in most libraries.

Students learn how to use radios, televisions and other materials for self-learning. At this stage, teachers become the facilitators who keep monitoring students' progress. Factors such as students' age and levels of maturity provide hints for teachers the degree of autonomy they can impose upon the students. Once students have adopted an autonomous learning style, they can bring with them the same attitudes in facing challenges in life such as challenges in learning new skills at work place. Autonomy also aims to produce students who know how to handle new knowledge by adjusting to their own learning styles.

### **Learning Contract**

The second way that we can use to develop students' differences is via learning contracts. The learning contracts that we suggest in this paper are different from those that teachers 'make' students to produce in order to achieve certain goals in language learning. The difference in our proposal is that we opt for more freedom for the students in making the contracts. Here, we suggest two types of contracts:

#### *a) Self-motivated Contract*

Self-motivated contract is a contract for the students themselves in which they set their own goals in learning. This contract need not be shown to any one. It is a contract that students can keep for their own reference. The overall purpose is to trust students in goal-settings. The types of conditions in the contracts can be skills-developing or examination-driven.

Since we have discussed autonomous learning, this is a step to further pursuit learner autonomy in learning. Nevertheless, teachers have to be aware that this type of contract is more suitable for matured learners. For younger learners, teachers can consider setting more specific condition such as 'I must finish five books by the end of this month'.

#### *b) Contracts with Others*

'Others' can be peers, parents or anybody as long as the person is whom the students trust. The aim of this contract is to develop a 'mentoring' relationship between the learners and someone they trust. 'Mentoring' relationship is a kind of supportive relationship between two or more individuals in terms of problem-solving, academic building and being each other's company. At Stage 3, our model entrusts upon the learners to be dependent in setting learning goals. This brings about the gradual reduction of teachers' dominance from Stage 1 to 3. The methods and activities suggested for the Individual Developing Model is summarized as below:

### **Suggested Methods and Activities in the Individual Developing Model**

#### **Stage 1: Discovery Stage**

- \* Observation
- \* Questionnaires
- \* Assessments
- \* Information Feedback

#### **Stage 2: Differentiation Stage**

- \* Gradation of Tasks
- \* Varieties of Teaching Aids
- \* Homogeneous and Mixed-ability Groupings
- \* Journal Writing

#### **Stage 3: Developing Stage**

- Autonomous Learners
- Learning Contract

### **Table 3: Suggested Methods and Activities for the Individual Developing Model**

## **4.0 Conclusion**

The examples of methods and activities listed in this paper are not exhaustive and neither are the individual differences in section 2.0. Nevertheless, they provide an overview of the ways in which teachers can attend to individual students' needs in a general curriculum

setting. Our suggestion of the Individual Developing Model distinguishes students according to individual similarities and differences. This helps to reduce teachers' burden especially toward the notion of designing single lesson plan for every student in the class. The activities suggested in this paper are practical for actual classroom use. Teachers only need to put more thoughts and attention to each student in order to maximize every potential in every student.

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