



TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR MIXED-LEVEL GROUPS THROUGH A DIFFERENTIATED APPROACH IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Ibragimova Dilbar Atkhamovna

Tashkent University of Economics and Pedagogy

Faculty of Languages and Preschool Education, Associate Professor

ORCID: 0009-0001-1794-5030

Email: dilbaribragimova1984@gmail.com

Abstract: *this article examines effective strategies for teaching English in mixed-ability groups through a differentiated instruction approach. The study highlights how varying learners' proficiency levels, learning styles, and pace influence classroom dynamics, and argues that differentiation creates more equitable and engaging learning environments. Key strategies such as tiered tasks, flexible grouping, scaffolded support, learning stations, and formative assessment are explored in detail.*

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, mixed-ability groups, English language teaching, tiered tasks, flexible grouping, scaffolding, learner autonomy, formative assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in mixed-ability groups has become an increasingly common challenge in contemporary language classrooms. Learners often differ significantly in their linguistic background, cognitive abilities, learning styles, motivation, and pace of acquiring new skills. These variations may hinder whole-class instruction if not addressed through intentional pedagogical strategies. Differentiated instruction offers a flexible and learner-centered approach that tailors teaching methods, materials, and tasks to students' diverse needs. By adjusting the level of support, complexity, and mode of engagement, teachers can create an inclusive environment where every learner progresses at an appropriate pace.

Differentiated instruction is rooted in learner-centered pedagogy, which considers individual differences as a natural element of the learning process rather than a challenge to be minimized. Theories such as multiple intelligences and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development emphasize the need to align instruction with each learner's developmental stage, cognitive characteristics, and readiness to learn [1]. In mixed-ability English classrooms, these principles require teachers to design lessons that vary in support, complexity, and engagement while keeping common learning goals for all students. Differentiation does not necessitate creating separate lessons for each learner; instead, it involves thoughtful adjustments within a shared framework so that every student can access the content meaningfully.

In practical classroom contexts, several strategies have proven effective for managing mixed-ability groups. One of the most widely used techniques is the



application of tiered tasks, which allow learners to work toward the same linguistic objective while completing activities of different difficulty levels. For example, students with limited proficiency may rely on sentence frames or visual cues, whereas advanced learners may be challenged to expand ideas using richer vocabulary and complex structures [2]. This approach guarantees inclusivity without lowering academic expectations. Another essential strategy is flexible grouping, where learners are arranged in various combinations—by proficiency, interest, or randomly—to encourage interaction, peer support, and exposure to different levels of language use. These groups remain fluid and temporary, allowing teachers to adapt them to the goals of each lesson and ensure balanced participation [3].

Scaffolding also plays a central role in differentiated instruction. By providing learners with instructional supports such as model texts, glossaries, graphic organizers, guided practice, and visual aids, teachers help them gradually build independence in their use of English. Scaffolding is especially crucial in mixed-ability groups, where lower-level learners may otherwise feel overwhelmed and disengaged. Learning stations and rotational activities further enrich differentiation by creating opportunities for students to engage in various tasks tailored to different skills or levels of cognitive demand. As learners rotate through stations focusing on reading, speaking, vocabulary building, or grammar, they experience autonomy and variety, helping maintain motivation and active involvement [4].

Formative assessment is another essential component of differentiated instruction. Through tools such as exit tickets, reflective checklists, mini quizzes, and brief oral feedback, teachers gain real-time insight into students' progress and challenges. This ongoing assessment allows instructors to make immediate instructional adjustments, provide targeted support, and identify students who require further enrichment or intervention [5]. As a result, formative assessment ensures instructional precision in diverse classrooms where student needs constantly shift.

The benefits of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability groups are widely recognized. Learners demonstrate improved linguistic outcomes because instruction aligns with their readiness and proficiency levels. Motivation increases when learners feel that tasks are achievable yet appropriately challenging, and autonomy grows as students take responsibility for their learning through choices and independent tasks. Most importantly, differentiation fosters an inclusive learning environment marked by equity, collaboration, and respect for diversity [6].

However, despite its advantages, differentiated instruction presents certain challenges. Effective implementation requires significant planning time, strong classroom management skills, and a thorough understanding of learner profiles. Teachers working in large classes or contexts with limited resources may find differentiation demanding. Nevertheless, these challenges can be mitigated through the use of digital tools, collaborative planning among teachers, and the gradual



introduction of small differentiation techniques rather than attempting to modify all lesson components at once [7]. Even minor adjustments—slight variations in materials, instructions, or pacing—can meaningfully enhance learning outcomes in mixed-ability English classrooms.

We propose the following recommendations and practical suggestions based on the findings of our research:

1. Regular differentiated lesson planning. It is advisable for teachers to develop at least two or three levels of tasks for each topic in advance. In this approach, lower-level learners are offered supportive activities aimed at reinforcing basic skills, intermediate learners are provided with developmental tasks, and advanced learners are engaged in complex, creative, and analytical activities. This ensures that every learner participates actively and remains motivated according to their individual proficiency level.

2. Flexible grouping and the use of digital tools. In mixed-ability groups, periodically reorganizing students and assigning tasks through various group combinations proves effective. Moreover, the use of interactive platforms, online exercises, audio-visual materials, and adaptive applications simplifies differentiated instruction, as digital tools can automatically offer personalized task levels tailored to each learner's needs.

3. Systematic implementation of formative assessment. Using short assessment tools—such as mini quizzes, reflection sheets, oral feedback, and “exit tickets”—in each lesson enables teachers to monitor students' progress in real time. This helps identify which learners require additional support and which ones are ready for more challenging tasks. Formative assessment thus serves as the driving force of effective differentiation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that differentiated instruction in mixed-ability English classrooms is an essential methodological approach that significantly enhances the effectiveness of teaching and learning. By considering learners' individual needs, learning pace, and language proficiency differences and by applying tailored tasks, flexible grouping, scaffolding, and formative assessment, teachers can create an inclusive, motivating, and sustainable learning environment. As a result, each learner progresses at an appropriate pace, actively engages in the learning process, and achieves higher outcomes.

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