

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN MIXED-ABILITY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Vafoyeva Mahbuba Rustam kizi

English language teacher of Polytechnic College №1

in Karmana district, Navoi Region, The Republic of Uzbekistan

Annotation: This study examines differentiated instruction in mixed-ability English classrooms and its impact on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Key Words: differentiated instruction, mixed-ability classrooms, English language teaching, student engagement

Аннотация: Исследование посвящено дифференцированному обучению в разноуровневых классах английского языка.

Ключевые слова: дифференцированное обучение, разноуровневые классы, преподавание английского языка, вовлеченность студентов

Annotatsiya: shbu tadqiqot aralash qobiliyatli ingliz tili sinflarida differensial ta'limning samaradorligini o'rganadi.

Kalit so'zlar: differensial ta'lim, aralash qobiliyatli sinflar, ingliz tili o'qitish, talaba faolligi

Introduction. Modern English language classrooms are increasingly diverse in terms of learners' abilities, backgrounds, learning styles, and levels of language proficiency. This diversity has led to the widespread emergence of mixed-ability classrooms, where students with significantly different needs are taught together. In such contexts, traditional uniform teaching approaches often fail to support all learners equally, resulting in disengagement among weaker students and lack of challenge for more advanced learners. Consequently, educators are required to adopt flexible and inclusive teaching approaches that respond to individual differences while maintaining common learning objectives.

Differentiated instruction has gained prominence as a pedagogical response to these challenges. It is grounded in the principle that students learn best when instruction is adapted to their readiness levels, interests, and preferred learning modes. In English language teaching, differentiated instruction allows teachers to vary tasks, materials, pacing, and assessment to ensure meaningful participation for all learners. This approach is especially important in mixed-ability classrooms, where linguistic gaps can strongly influence motivation and achievement. Therefore, examining differentiated instruction in mixed-ability English classrooms is essential, as it addresses key issues of equity, engagement, and effectiveness in language education.

Previous research has extensively discussed differentiated instruction as a learner-centered approach. Scholars have emphasized that differentiation involves systematic adjustments to content, learning processes, expected outcomes, and classroom environments. In language education, studies have shown that learners progress at different rates and require varying levels

of support and challenge. Research in second language acquisition highlights that exposure, practice, and feedback must be tailored to individual learner needs in order to be effective.

Empirical studies in English language teaching contexts indicate that differentiated strategies such as flexible grouping, tiered tasks, scaffolded instruction, and varied assessment tools contribute positively to student engagement and achievement. Researchers have also found that differentiation helps reduce anxiety among lower-level learners while preventing boredom among advanced students. Moreover, differentiated instruction supports inclusive education by valuing learner diversity rather than viewing it as a problem. These findings collectively demonstrate that differentiation is not an optional strategy but a necessary component of effective teaching in mixed-ability English classrooms.

Despite strong theoretical support for differentiated instruction, gaps remain in practical and empirical research. Many studies focus on general education settings and provide limited classroom-based evidence from English language teaching contexts. Additionally, research often describes differentiation strategies without examining how teachers manage planning demands, time constraints, and large class sizes.

Another underexplored area concerns students' perspectives. While differentiation is assumed to benefit learners, fewer studies investigate how students of different proficiency levels perceive differentiated tasks and assessment. This lack of learner-centered evidence creates a need for further research that explores both teacher practices and student experiences in real mixed-ability English classrooms.

The present study is conducted in mixed-ability English classrooms where students demonstrate varying levels of language proficiency. The main aim is to investigate how differentiated instruction influences student engagement and learning outcomes. The study focuses on differentiated tasks, materials, and assessment practices used during English lessons.

This study is justified by the growing demand for inclusive and effective teaching approaches in English language education. It offers practical insights for teachers working in mixed-ability classrooms and contributes to the improvement of instructional quality and learner engagement.

Methodology. The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability English classrooms, with particular attention to its impact on student engagement and participation. The study aimed to identify how instructional adaptations influence learners with different proficiency levels.

A mixed-methods research design was adopted to obtain comprehensive data. Quantitative data were collected through student surveys, while qualitative data were gathered via classroom observations and teacher interviews. This approach allowed for triangulation and increased the reliability of the findings.

Instructional materials included tiered worksheets, leveled reading texts, differentiated speaking tasks, and flexible assessment rubrics. Research instruments consisted of Likert-scale questionnaires, structured observation checklists, and semi-structured interview guides.

The study was conducted over eight weeks. Pre-intervention surveys were administered to measure baseline engagement. Differentiated instruction strategies were then implemented, followed by classroom observations and interviews. Post-intervention surveys were used to measure changes in engagement.

Results. To examine the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability English classrooms, a student survey was administered before and after the instructional intervention. The survey involved 60 students and measured engagement across three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = very low, 5 = very high). The purpose of the pre-intervention survey was to identify baseline engagement levels, while the post-intervention survey aimed to measure changes following the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies.

Pre-intervention results revealed moderate engagement overall. Behavioral engagement scores indicated that many lower-level students were hesitant to participate actively, while higher-level students often dominated classroom activities. Emotional engagement scores suggested mixed motivation levels, with some learners experiencing anxiety or lack of confidence. Cognitive engagement was relatively low, as students tended to rely on surface learning strategies rather than deeper analytical or creative language use.

Post-intervention findings demonstrate a clear improvement across all engagement dimensions. Students reported increased participation in tasks adapted to their proficiency levels. Emotional engagement showed substantial growth, as learners expressed greater confidence and enjoyment in lessons. Cognitive engagement also increased, indicating enhanced focus, problem-solving ability, and meaningful language use. These findings align with previous research suggesting that differentiated instruction supports learner engagement in diverse classrooms (Tomlinson, 2014).

Table 1. Student Engagement Survey Results Before and After Differentiated Instruction

Engagement Dimension	Pre-Intervention Mean	Post-Intervention Mean	Mean Difference
Behavioral Engagement	3.0	4.1	+1.1
Emotional Engagement	2.9	4.2	+1.3
Cognitive Engagement	2.8	4.0	+1.2

Note: Engagement levels were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very low, 5 = very high).

From the data in Table 1, it is clear that differentiated instruction had a positive effect on all aspects of student engagement. The most striking result to emerge from the data is the significant increase in emotional and cognitive engagement, particularly among lower-proficiency learners. Importantly, higher-level students also reported sustained interest and challenge, suggesting that differentiation benefited the entire class.

Discussion. The findings support existing research on the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. However, limitations include the challenge of measuring engagement accurately and the increased planning time required for teachers. Despite these challenges, differentiated instruction proved to be a valuable approach in mixed-ability English classrooms.

Conclusion. In conclusion, differentiated instruction plays a vital role in addressing learner diversity in mixed-ability English classrooms. By adapting content, process, and assessment, teachers can create inclusive learning environments that support all learners. Future research should explore long-term effects and teacher professional development.

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