

**DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN INCLUSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
CLASSROOMS: SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

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Abstract: This article investigates the design, implementation, and outcomes of differentiated instruction (DI) strategies in inclusive English language teaching (ELT) classrooms. Following IMRAD structure, the study reviews existing empirical literature, synthesizes key findings from international research bodies, and presents a framework for applying differentiation to content, process, product, and learning environment. The research draws on evidence from UNESCO, OECD, the British Council, and seminal scholars including Tomlinson, Hattie, Vygotsky, and Krashen to argue that differentiated instruction is not an optional enhancement but the methodological core of equitable ELT practice. The article identifies five learner diversity dimensions — linguistic proficiency, learning style, cognitive profile, cultural background, and disability status — and maps specific DI strategies to each. Results affirm that when applied systematically, DI significantly improves academic engagement, language output quality, and learner self-efficacy across all student populations, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

Keywords: differentiated instruction, inclusive ELT, diverse educational needs, special educational needs, universal design for learning, CEFR, formative assessment, scaffolding, tiered tasks, culturally responsive teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION.

1.1 Background and Rationale.

The contemporary English language classroom is, by every empirical measure, a profoundly heterogeneous space. Learners arrive with differing first languages, varying levels of prior exposure to English, diverse cognitive and sensory profiles, and backgrounds shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic factors of extraordinary variety. UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994)¹ established the foundational principle that inclusive education requires schools to accommodate this diversity rather than demand conformity to a single pedagogical norm. Yet three decades later, the gap between inclusive policy and classroom practice remains wide. UNICEF data indicate that children with disabilities are 42% less likely to have foundational reading skills compared to their non-disabled peers² — a disparity that is, in significant part, a product of teaching methods that continue to address a hypothetical average learner rather than the actual individuals present in the room.

Differentiated instruction (DI) — systematically defined by Carol Ann Tomlinson as the proactive adjustment of content, process, product, and environment in response to learner

¹ UNESCO. Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. Paris: UNESCO, 1994. 50 p.

² UNICEF. Disability Inclusive Education Basics. New York: UNICEF, 2020. 44 p.

readiness, interest, and learning profile³ — represents the most widely researched and operationally tractable framework for bridging this gap. In English language teaching specifically, DI intersects with established second language acquisition (SLA) theory, communicative language teaching methodology, and contemporary disability studies to produce a rich, multidimensional pedagogical toolkit. The purpose of this article is to synthesise that toolkit, ground it in empirical evidence, and present actionable recommendations for ELT practitioners working in inclusive settings.

1.2 Research Questions.

This article addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What theoretical frameworks best explain the relationship between differentiated instruction and successful inclusive ELT outcomes?
- RQ2: What specific DI strategies have demonstrated empirical effectiveness for learners with diverse educational needs in English language classrooms?
- RQ3: How can ELT teachers systematically implement DI across the four dimensions of content, process, product, and learning environment?
- RQ4: What assessment and feedback practices best support differentiated ELT in inclusive settings?

1.3 Scope and Significance

The scope of this article encompasses learners aged 10–18 in formal ELT settings, with particular attention to five categories of diversity: (1) varying English language proficiency (A1–C1 on the CEFR scale⁴); (2) differing cognitive profiles, including dyslexia, ADHD, and autism spectrum conditions; (3) physical and sensory disabilities; (4) diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; and (5) socioeconomic disadvantage. The article does not aim to provide clinical guidance on specific disability management but focuses specifically on pedagogical strategies within the competence of the trained ELT professional.

The significance of this inquiry cannot be overstated. As English continues to function as the dominant language of academic publication, international commerce, and digital communication, equitable access to high-quality ELT constitutes a matter of global social justice. Teachers who lack DI competency inadvertently reproduce and amplify existing inequalities; those who possess it become powerful agents of educational equity.

2. METHODS.

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a systematic narrative literature review methodology. Rather than conducting original empirical data collection, the research synthesises existing published evidence from peer-reviewed journals, international organisation reports, and seminal scholarly monographs. This approach is appropriate given the breadth of the research questions, the

³ Tomlinson, C.A. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. 2nd ed. Alexandria: ASCD, 2014. 196 p.

⁴ Council of Europe. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2001. 260 p.

maturity of the DI literature, and the goal of producing a comprehensive, practice-oriented synthesis rather than testing a specific narrow hypothesis.

2.2 Source Selection Criteria

Sources were selected according to the following inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed empirical studies or meta-analyses published in SSCI or Scopus-indexed journals between 1978 and 2024.
- Reports from authoritative international bodies with direct relevance to ELT and inclusive education (UNESCO, OECD, British Council, Council of Europe, UNICEF).
- Foundational theoretical monographs that undergird current DI and inclusive ELT practice (Vygotsky, Krashen, Tomlinson, Gardner, Rose & Meyer).
- Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on tertiary education, did not address English as the target language, or were published in non-indexed venues without significant citation impact.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework organises evidence around Tomlinson's four-dimensional DI model (content, process, product, environment)⁵, cross-referenced with three theoretical lenses: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)⁶ for scaffolding logic; Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis⁷ for SLA-specific DI rationale; and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework⁸ for systemic proactive design principles. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences⁹ is also used to map learner profile categories to instructional modalities. This multi-lens framework allows the analysis to account simultaneously for cognitive, affective, linguistic, and structural dimensions of inclusive ELT.

2.4 Ethical Considerations.

As this study involves no primary data collection involving human participants, standard ethical obligations regarding consent and confidentiality do not apply. All cited sources are publicly available and properly attributed. The article takes an explicitly emancipatory stance — aligned with disability studies and critical pedagogy — in treating learner diversity as a normative feature of all classrooms rather than a deviation requiring correction.

⁶ Vygotsky, L.S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. 159 p.

⁷ Krashen, S.D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982. 202 p.

⁸ Rose, D.H., Meyer, A. *Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age: Universal Design for Learning*. Alexandria: ASCD, 2002. 215 p.

⁹ Gardner, H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. 440 p.

3. RESULTS.

3.1 Theoretical Evidence: Why Differentiation Works in ELT

The theoretical case for DI in ELT rests on a convergent body of evidence from multiple research traditions. From SLA theory, Krashen's Input Hypothesis provides the most direct argument: language acquisition is optimised when input is comprehensible and pitched at $i+1$ — one level above the learner's current competence¹⁰. In a classroom where learners span three or four CEFR levels, maintaining comprehensible input for every individual simultaneously requires, by logical necessity, some form of differentiation. Without it, input is comprehensible only to the median learner, leaving beginners overwhelmed and advanced learners under-stimulated — both conditions that the Affective Filter Hypothesis identifies as inimical to acquisition.

Vygotsky's ZPD framework reinforces this argument from a developmental psychology perspective. The ZPD is defined as the cognitive space between a learner's independent performance level and their potential performance level under expert or peer guidance¹¹. Reuven Feuerstein's elaboration of mediated learning experience — the process by which a skilled mediator frames, bridges, and transcends learning tasks — provides a pedagogical operationalisation of ZPD that maps directly onto scaffolded DI strategies¹². Crucially, both frameworks treat the teacher's role not as information transmission but as dynamic calibration of challenge and support — precisely the cognitive disposition that underlies effective differentiation.

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences¹³, while subject to ongoing debate regarding its neurological claims, provides a heuristically powerful map of the diverse channels through which learners can engage with and demonstrate linguistic knowledge. Gardner's eight intelligences — linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist — correspond closely to the repertoire of instructional modalities that comprehensive DI employs. When an ELT teacher designs tasks that allow learners to engage with vocabulary through song (musical), movement (bodily-kinesthetic), visual mapping (spatial), and peer dialogue (interpersonal), they are simultaneously satisfying DI's "multiple means of engagement" principle and providing empirically superior input to diverse learners.

3.2 Empirical Evidence: Effectiveness of DI Strategies

John Hattie's meta-analytic synthesis of educational research — the largest of its kind, incorporating over 800 meta-analyses and 50,000 individual studies — provides the most

¹² Feuerstein, R. Mediated Learning Experience. Jerusalem: Hadassah-Wizo-Canada Research Institute, 1980. 280 p.

comprehensive empirical benchmark for DI-related strategies¹⁴. Of direct relevance to DI in ELT, Hattie identifies the following interventions with effect sizes (d) substantially above the 0.40 "hinge point" that distinguishes impactful from routine instruction: formative evaluation (d = 0.90), feedback (d = 0.73), teacher-student relationships (d = 0.72), classroom discussion (d = 0.82), and direct instruction combined with guided practice (d = 0.59). All of these represent core components of systematic DI delivery.

The OECD's comprehensive analysis of equity in education further documents that achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged learners — including those with SEN — are significantly narrower in school systems that prioritise high-quality, inclusive classroom instruction over separate remedial tracks¹⁵. The report found that schools with the smallest equity gaps shared several common characteristics: strong instructional leadership, teachers with high professional autonomy, and a culture of collaborative professional learning — all conditions that support the development and sustainability of DI practice.

The British Council's 2021 study of inclusion in ELT contexts across 14 countries found that learner engagement was markedly higher in classrooms where teachers used at least three distinct instructional modalities per lesson and provided explicit choice in how learners demonstrated their learning¹⁶. The study also found that teachers who received structured training in DI reported significantly higher professional confidence and lower burnout rates — suggesting that DI capacity-building benefits not only learners but teachers themselves.

3.3 DI Across the Four Dimensions in ELT Contexts

3.3.1 Content Differentiation

Content differentiation in ELT refers to the adaptation of what learners are expected to learn — the vocabulary, grammar structures, texts, and topics — to match individual readiness levels and linguistic backgrounds. The CEFR provides the most globally accepted framework for calibrating content complexity¹⁷, offering performance descriptors across six proficiency levels (A1–C2) and across all four language skills. In an inclusive ELT classroom, content differentiation might involve providing the same thematic unit (e.g., environmental sustainability) through an A1-level illustrated text for emerging learners, a B1-level news report for intermediate students, and an authentic C1-level academic article for advanced learners — all addressed to identical communicative goals.

For learners with dyslexia, content differentiation includes font adjustments (Arial or OpenDyslexic at 14pt minimum), increased line spacing, pastel background paper, and the provision of audio versions of all written texts. Research consistently shows that these relatively low-cost adjustments improve reading fluency and comprehension for dyslexic learners without

¹⁴ Hattie, J. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. London: Routledge, 2009. 378 p.

¹⁵ OECD. *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012. 164 p.

¹⁶ British Council. *Inclusion and Diversity in ELT*. London: British Council, 2021. 62 p.

disadvantaging others¹⁸. For learners with autism spectrum conditions, content differentiation prioritises predictable text structures, literal language, and pre-taught contextual vocabulary — reducing the cognitive load of novelty while preserving intellectual challenge.

3.3.2 Process Differentiation

Process differentiation addresses how learners engage with content to make sense of it. In ELT, this primarily concerns the design of tasks and activities — their cognitive demand, their social configuration, their sensory mode, and the degree of scaffolding they embed. Tiered task design is the most systematically researched process differentiation technique: a single communicative objective (e.g., describing personal routines) is operationalised as three or four tasks of increasing complexity, and learners are assigned to tasks on the basis of diagnostic assessment data rather than arbitrary grouping.

Scaffolding — operationally defined as temporary, adjustable support structures that are progressively removed as learner competence grows — is the process-level mechanism through which Vygotsky's ZPD is activated in the classroom¹⁹. In inclusive ELT, scaffolding tools include: sentence frames and sentence starters for writing tasks; word banks and vocabulary mats for productive language use; graphic organisers for reading comprehension and text production; think-alouds and worked examples for grammar instruction; and structured questioning sequences that model inferential reasoning. Crucially, these scaffolds benefit learners with SEN disproportionately while imposing no cognitive cost on more independent learners, who simply choose not to use them.

Cooperative learning structures — including Think-Pair-Share, Jigsaw, and collaborative writing — activate the peer mediation function implicit in the ZPD and generate language practice opportunities that no single teacher can replicate for every individual. The research literature on cooperative learning in ELT contexts, reviewed comprehensively by Richards and Rodgers²⁰, consistently reports benefits for both language development and social inclusion — particularly for learners from minority cultural backgrounds who may feel marginalised in whole-class, teacher-fronted interaction patterns.

3.3.3 Product Differentiation

Product differentiation enables learners to demonstrate their English language competence through multiple modalities, reducing the extent to which assessment of language ability is confounded by performance limitations unrelated to language — a particular concern for learners with motor impairments, writing disorders, speech difficulties, or high social anxiety. Where a traditional test might require only a written composition or an oral presentation, a differentiated assessment suite might include: audio or video recordings, illustrated storyboards with captions, collaborative digital posters, role-played dialogues, or annotated multimodal portfolios.

¹⁸ Tomlinson, B. (Ed.). *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 480 p.

²⁰ Richards, J.C., Rodgers, T.S. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 358 p.

Black and Wiliam's seminal research on formative assessment²¹ demonstrates that the most consequential assessments are not those used to rank or sort learners but those used to inform the teacher's next instructional move and the learner's self-regulation. Portfolio assessment — in which learners curate evidence of their language development over time — is particularly powerful in inclusive ELT because it foregrounds growth rather than absolute performance level, documents the diverse pathways through which different learners achieve competence, and supports the metacognitive development essential for autonomous language learning.

Graham and Hebert's research on writing-to-read²² further supports the inclusion of writing-integrated tasks across all modalities as assessment products: learners who write about what they have read in English demonstrate deeper comprehension and stronger vocabulary retention than those assessed through recognition tasks alone. This finding has particular relevance for content differentiation, as tiered writing tasks can simultaneously serve as both learning experiences and valid assessments of language development.

3.3.4 Learning Environment Differentiation

The physical and affective environment of the ELT classroom constitutes the fourth and, in some respects, most foundational dimension of differentiated instruction. Florian and Black-Hawkins argue that the most inclusive classrooms are characterised not by a set of specific techniques but by a particular professional orientation: the teacher's genuine belief that every learner is capable of meaningful participation and that any failure of participation reflects a design problem rather than a learner deficit²³. This orientation creates the psychological safety that Krashen identifies as the prerequisite for a permeable Affective Filter — the emotional condition under which language acquisition is possible.

Physically, learning environment differentiation encompasses flexible seating arrangements that allow for independent work, pair work, and small group collaboration without disruptive transitions; acoustic management strategies (carpets, sound-absorbing panels, quiet zones) for learners with auditory processing difficulties; lighting adjustments for learners with visual sensitivities; and wheelchair-accessible movement patterns throughout the room. Ainscow and Booth's Index for Inclusion²⁴ provides a comprehensive audit tool through which schools can systematically evaluate the inclusivity of their physical and social learning environments and identify priority areas for development.

²¹ Black, P., Wiliam, D. *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*. London: King's College, 1998. 22 p.

²² Graham, S., Hebert, M. *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*. New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2010. 64 p.

²³ Florian, L., Black-Hawkins, K. *Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy*. *British Educational Research Journal*. 2011. Vol. 37, No. 5. P. 813–828.

²⁴ Ainscow, M., Booth, T. *The Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*. Bristol: CSIE, 2002. 101 p.

At the affective level, culturally responsive environment-building — drawing on Luis Moll's concept of "funds of knowledge"²⁵ — involves actively incorporating learners' home languages, cultural references, and lived experiences into classroom content and interaction patterns. For multilingual learners in ELT settings, this approach is particularly powerful: Cummins' research on additive bilingualism²⁶ demonstrates that validating and building on learners' first language competencies, rather than treating them as interference, produces substantially stronger English development outcomes than English-only immersion policies.

4. DISCUSSION.

4.1 Synthesis: An Integrated DI Framework for Inclusive ELT

The evidence reviewed above supports the construction of an integrated framework for DI in inclusive ELT that operates across five learner diversity dimensions and four instructional design dimensions. The five learner diversity dimensions identified in this study — linguistic proficiency, learning style, cognitive profile, cultural background, and disability status — are not mutually exclusive; most learners present combinations of multiple diversity factors simultaneously. Effective DI therefore requires not sequential attention to each factor but a holistic, proactively designed instructional architecture in which flexibility is embedded as a structural feature rather than added as a post-hoc accommodation.

This architecture is best described by the UDL framework's three principles²⁷: multiple means of representation ensure that content reaches every learner through a channel they can access; multiple means of action and expression ensure that every learner can demonstrate competence in a format that does not penalise unrelated difficulties; and multiple means of engagement ensure that every learner encounters sufficient motivational relevance to sustain investment in English language development. When these three UDL principles are applied through Tomlinson's four DI dimensions with explicit reference to Krashen's proficiency calibration logic and Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, the result is a pedagogical framework both theoretically robust and operationally practical.

4.2 Challenges and Limitations

Several significant challenges to DI implementation in inclusive ELT must be acknowledged. First, time: systematic differentiation requires substantially greater lesson preparation time than standardised whole-class teaching. Research consistently identifies workload as the primary barrier cited by teachers who are philosophically committed to inclusion but struggle to implement it consistently. Second, class size: DI is considerably more manageable in classes of 15–20 students than in the 30–40 student classes common in many contexts. Third, training: the majority of pre-service ELT programmes devote insufficient time to DI methodology, leaving many in-service teachers attempting to develop these skills in isolation without expert support.

²⁵ Moll, L.C. et al. Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*. 1992. Vol. 31, No. 2. P. 132–141.

²⁶ Cummins, J. *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2000. 314 p.

Fourth, assessment systems: in many educational contexts, high-stakes standardised examinations create powerful incentives to "teach to the test" in ways that are fundamentally at odds with differentiated, learner-responsive instruction. Until assessment reform accompanies pedagogical reform, individual teachers operating in examination-driven systems will face structural disincentives that no amount of professional motivation can fully overcome. These systemic factors are not arguments against DI but arguments for the policy changes — in teacher education, class size, and assessment design — necessary to make DI the norm rather than the exception.

4.3 Implications for Professional Development

The evidence base reviewed in this study has direct and substantial implications for ELT teacher professional development. Hattie's research²⁸ identifies teacher professional development with a focus on learning intentions and success criteria as one of the highest-yield investments available to school systems ($d = 0.51$). For inclusive ELT specifically, the most effective professional development models are those that combine theoretical input with structured lesson study cycles — collaborative processes in which teachers plan, observe, and analyse differentiated lessons together. The British Council's training frameworks²⁹ identify co-teaching and collaborative lesson planning between mainstream ELT teachers and SEN specialists as particularly effective, generating the complementary expertise necessary for genuinely inclusive instructional design.

5. CONCLUSION.

This article has demonstrated, through systematic review of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, that differentiated instruction is the methodological cornerstone of equitable, effective inclusive ELT. The convergent evidence from Tomlinson's DI framework, Vygotsky's developmental theory, Krashen's SLA research, the UDL principles, and the empirical syntheses of Hattie, the British Council, and the OECD points consistently toward a single conclusion: when English language teachers design instruction with proactive flexibility across content, process, product, and environment, all learners — including those with the most complex educational needs — achieve higher levels of English proficiency, engagement, and self-efficacy than they do under standardised whole-class approaches.

The article's specific contributions include: (1) a multi-theoretical account of why DI works in ELT contexts; (2) a comprehensive mapping of DI strategies to five learner diversity dimensions; (3) empirical substantiation of DI effectiveness from authoritative international research; and (4) an honest account of the systemic barriers that prevent wider implementation. Five concrete recommendations emerge from this synthesis:

Teacher education programmes at all levels should mandate DI competency modules, including supervised practicum experience in inclusive settings, as a non-negotiable graduation requirement.

– School systems should adopt UDL as the structural design philosophy for all ELT curricula, lesson planning templates, and assessment frameworks, embedding flexibility at the systemic rather than individual teacher level.

– Assessment reform should prioritise portfolio, performance-based, and multimodal evidence of language competence alongside — and eventually in place of — uniform high-stakes written examinations.

– National professional standards for ELT teachers should explicitly include differentiated instruction competencies, ensuring that classroom observations, appraisal systems, and continuing professional development are aligned with inclusive pedagogical practice.

– Educational research agendas should prioritise large-scale studies of DI outcomes in diverse ELT contexts, generating the context-specific evidence base needed to inform policy and practice beyond the predominantly Anglophone settings that currently dominate the literature.

The inclusive ELT classroom — genuinely designed to welcome, challenge, and celebrate every learner — is not a utopian ideal. It is an achievable pedagogical reality, and differentiated instruction is its primary instrument. The question is no longer whether DI works but whether educational systems are willing to invest in the conditions that allow it to work at scale.

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