

## INSTRUCTIONAL TASK DESIGN FOR MIXED-LEVEL EFL CLASSROOMS THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

**Nazarova Gulbahor Pirmanovna**

*Scientific advisor, Bukhara State University,*

*DSc in Philology,*

**Ablaeva Nihola Otabek kizi**

*2nd grade master student, Asia International University*

**Abstract:** *Mixed-proficiency classrooms present one of the most significant challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Students within a single class often exhibit vast disparities in linguistic competence, learning styles, and motivational levels. Traditional "one-size-fits-all" instructional methods frequently fail to meet the diverse needs of these learners, leading to disengagement among advanced students and frustration among beginners. This paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of Differentiated Instruction (DI) and proposes practical strategies for designing instructional tasks that cater to mixed-ability groups. By focusing on content, process, product, and learning environment, educators can create inclusive classrooms where every student is challenged appropriately. The study draws on current pedagogical research to provide actionable frameworks for task design, emphasizing scaffolding, tiered activities, and flexible grouping.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of global education, the heterogeneity of student populations has become the norm rather than the exception. In EFL contexts, this diversity is particularly pronounced. A single classroom may contain students who are near-native speakers alongside those who struggle with basic sentence structure. This phenomenon, known as "mixed-proficiency" or "multi-level" teaching, poses a complex dilemma for educators: how to ensure that all students make progress without leaving anyone behind or boring those who are ahead?

The traditional approach to language teaching, which often relies on uniform textbooks and standardized pacing, is ill-equipped to handle such diversity. When teachers deliver the same lesson to all students, they risk creating a "middle-ground" instruction that fails to challenge high achievers while overwhelming lower-level learners. This gap between instruction and student readiness can lead to decreased motivation, increased anxiety, and poor academic outcomes [1].

Differentiated Instruction (DI), a concept popularized by Carol Ann Tomlinson, offers a robust framework for addressing these challenges. DI is not a

specific set of strategies but rather a philosophy of teaching that proactively modifies curriculum, teaching methods, resources, and learning activities to maximize the growth of each individual student. In the context of EFL, DI requires teachers to be keen observers of their students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between the theory of differentiation and the practical reality of the EFL classroom. It specifically focuses on the design of instructional tasks. While much has been written about the general principles of DI, there is a need for concrete examples of how to redesign typical language tasks – such as reading comprehension, writing assignments, and speaking activities – to accommodate mixed proficiency levels. By examining the four key elements of differentiation (content, process, product, and environment), this paper provides a roadmap for teachers to create equitable and effective learning experiences.

#### Theoretical Framework: Understanding Differentiation in EFL

To effectively design tasks for mixed-proficiency classes, it is essential to understand the core components of Differentiated Instruction. Tomlinson identifies three primary student characteristics that teachers should consider when differentiating: readiness, interest, and learning profile [2].

Readiness refers to a student's current skill level and understanding relative to the learning goal. In EFL, this is often measured by proficiency levels (e.g., A1, B2, C1 according to the CEFR). However, readiness is not static; it varies by skill (a student may be advanced in reading but beginner in speaking).

Interest relates to topics or activities that engage the student's curiosity and passion. Leveraging interest can significantly boost motivation, which is crucial for language acquisition.

Learning Profile includes preferences for how information is processed (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) and environmental preferences (working alone vs. in groups).

In EFL classrooms, differentiation is often misunderstood as simply giving easier work to weaker students and harder work to stronger ones. This is a misconception. Effective differentiation ensures that all students work toward the same essential learning goals but via different pathways. For instance, if the goal is to understand the main idea of a text, all students must achieve this, but the complexity of the text or the support provided to access it may vary.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is central to this approach. Tasks should be designed to fall within each student's ZPD – challenging enough to require effort but supported enough to be achievable [3]. In a mixed-classroom, this means providing varying levels of scaffolding. Scaffolding might include

vocabulary lists, sentence starters, graphic organizers, or peer support. The key is that the scaffold is temporary and removed as the student gains independence.

### 3. Strategies for Designing Differentiated Instructional Tasks

Designing tasks for mixed-proficiency classrooms requires a shift from planning "what will I teach?" to "how will each student learn?". The following strategies outline how to differentiate the four key elements of instruction: Content, Process, Product, and Learning Environment.

#### Differentiating Content

Content differentiation involves adjusting what students learn or how they access the information. In EFL, this often manifests in the materials used.

**Tiered Texts:** One effective strategy is using tiered texts on the same topic. For a unit on "Environmental Protection," the teacher might provide three versions of a reading passage:

**Level 1 (Beginner):** A short, simplified text with high-frequency vocabulary and explicit headings.

**Level 2 (Intermediate):** A standard article with some complex sentence structures and idiomatic expressions.

**Level 3 (Advanced):** An academic journal excerpt or opinion piece with abstract concepts and nuanced arguments.

All students explore the same theme, but the linguistic demand is adjusted to their readiness level. Research indicates that when students can access content at their appropriate level, their comprehension and engagement increase significantly[4].

**Pre-teaching Vocabulary:** For lower-proficiency students, pre-teaching key vocabulary before a lesson can level the playing field. This might involve visual aids, definitions in the native language, or matching exercises. Advanced students, meanwhile, might be asked to predict the meaning of words from context or explore synonyms and connotations.

#### Differentiating Process

Process differentiation focuses on how students make sense of the ideas and skills being taught. This is where activity design becomes critical.

**Tiered Activities:** Tiered activities are tasks that focus on the same essential understanding but differ in complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness.

- Example (Grammar - Past Tense):

- Group A (Support): Complete fill-in-the-blank exercises with a word bank provided. Focus on regular verbs.

- Group B (Core): Write five sentences about what they did last weekend using a mix of regular and irregular verbs.

Group C (Extension): Write a short narrative story involving a mystery, requiring the use of past continuous and past perfect tenses to establish timeline relationships.

**Flexible Grouping:** Instead of permanent ability groups, teachers should use flexible grouping. Sometimes students are grouped by similar ability (homogeneous) for targeted instruction. At other times, they are grouped by mixed ability (heterogeneous) for collaborative tasks. In heterogeneous groups, advanced students can reinforce their knowledge by explaining concepts to peers (the "protégé effect"), while lower-level students benefit from peer modeling [5]. However, care must be taken to ensure that advanced students are not merely doing the work for others; roles within the group (e.g., recorder, reporter, timekeeper) should be rotated.

**Scaffolding Tools:** Providing graphic organizers is a powerful way to differentiate process. For a writing task, beginners might use a highly structured template with sentence starters (e.g., "I think that... because..."). Intermediate students might use a mind map to organize ideas. Advanced students might be given only a prompt and expected to structure their own argument.

#### Differentiating Product

Product differentiation allows students to demonstrate what they have learned in different ways. This respects diverse learning profiles and allows students to showcase their strengths.

**Choice Boards:** A choice board offers a menu of options for final assessments. For a unit on "Travel," students might choose to:

1. Write a travel blog post (Writing focus).
2. Create a video vlog reviewing a destination (Speaking/Visual focus).
3. Design a brochure with persuasive language (Reading/Writing/Design focus).
4. Conduct an interview with a "tourist" (Speaking/Listening focus).

Rubrics for these products should focus on the same linguistic criteria (e.g., accuracy, vocabulary range, coherence) but allow for different modes of expression. This autonomy increases student ownership and motivation.

**Varied Complexity in Output:** While the mode of output may vary, the expectation of quality should remain high. For lower-proficiency students, the length of the product might be shorter, but the accuracy and use of target language should still be emphasized. For advanced students, the expectation might include more sophisticated syntax and idiomatic usage.

#### Differentiating the Learning Environment

The classroom environment sets the tone for differentiation. This includes the physical arrangement and the psychological climate.

**Physical Space:** Arranging desks in clusters facilitates group work and peer tutoring. Quiet corners with noise-canceling headphones can support students who are easily distracted or who need focused time for reading. Access to technology (tablets, computers) allows students to work at their own pace using adaptive software that adjusts difficulty based on performance.

**Psychological Safety:** A differentiated classroom must be a safe space where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Teachers must cultivate a culture where differences are respected. Explicitly teaching students about DI—explaining why some students get different tasks—helps prevent feelings of unfairness. Students need to understand that "fair" does not mean "everyone gets the same thing," but rather "everyone gets what they need to succeed" [6].

**Practical Implementation: A Sample Lesson Plan**

To illustrate these concepts, consider a lesson on "Giving Advice" using modal verbs (should, ought to, had better).

**Objective:** All students will be able to give advice using appropriate modal verbs.

**Step 1: Input (Content Differentiation)**

- The teacher presents a scenario: "Your friend wants to improve their English."

- Group 1: Reads a dialogue with highlighted modal verbs and simple vocabulary.

- Group 2: Reads a blog post with advice columns, containing moderate complexity.

- Group 3: Analyzes a transcript of a podcast discussion on language learning strategies, identifying nuanced advice.

**Step 2: Practice (Process Differentiation)**

- Group 1: Completes a worksheet matching problems to advice sentences using a word bank.

- Group 2: Role-plays a conversation between two friends, using a provided checklist of modal verbs.

- Group 3: Debates the effectiveness of different learning methods, required to use counter-arguments and varied modal structures.

**Step 3: Production (Product Differentiation)**

Students choose one output:

- Create a poster with "Top 5 Tips for Learning English" (Visual/Written).

- Record a 1-minute audio message giving advice to a specific person (Oral).

- Write an email response to a pen-pal asking for help (Written/Formal).

**Assessment:** The teacher uses a unified rubric focusing on the correct use of modals, clarity of advice, and appropriateness of tone, adjusted slightly for linguistic complexity expectations per level.

#### Challenges and Considerations

While differentiated instruction is highly effective, it is not without challenges.

**Time and Preparation:** Designing tiered tasks and multiple materials is time-consuming. Teachers can mitigate this by collaborating with colleagues, sharing resources, and starting small – differentiating one lesson element at a time rather than overhauling the entire curriculum overnight.

**Classroom Management:** Mixed-ability activities can become noisy and chaotic. Clear routines, signals for attention, and established expectations for group work are essential. Technology can also help manage pacing, allowing students to move through tasks independently.

**Assessment Complexity:** Grading different products requires clear, flexible rubrics. Teachers must focus on growth and mastery of objectives rather than comparing students against each other. Formative assessment (ongoing checks for understanding) is more valuable than summative assessment in a differentiated classroom, as it informs immediate instructional adjustments.

**Equity Concerns:** There is a risk that lower-level students are consistently given remedial, low-cognitive tasks. Teachers must ensure that differentiation raises the ceiling for all students. Advanced tasks should not just be "more work" but "deeper thinking." Similarly, support for struggling students should aim for independence, not dependency.

### CONCLUSION

Designing instructional tasks for mixed-proficiency EFL classrooms is a complex but rewarding endeavor. Through the lens of Differentiated Instruction, teachers can transform diversity from a challenge into an asset. By differentiating content, process, product, and the learning environment, educators ensure that every student, regardless of their starting point, has access to meaningful learning experiences.

The key to success lies in proactive planning and a deep understanding of students' needs. Tiered activities, flexible grouping, and scaffolded support allow teachers to maintain high expectations for all learners while providing the necessary support to reach them. As EFL classrooms continue to grow in diversity, the ability to differentiate instruction will become an indispensable skill for educators. Future research should focus on the long-term impacts of DI on language acquisition rates and student self-efficacy, as well as the development of digital tools that automate aspects of differentiation. Ultimately, the goal is not just

to teach English, but to empower every learner to find their voice in a new language.

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