

The Limitations of "One-Size-Fits-All" Instruction in Mixed-Ability ESL Classrooms: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: A qualitative case study was conducted to assess the impact of having all students receive identical lessons in ESL classes with mixed ability levels. The researcher conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with three ESL students who exhibited different levels of English proficiency. The purpose of the study was to evaluate how the three subjects reacted to receiving identical lessons at an identical rate, while serving as samples of the lessons provided to all ESL subjects. The researcher discovered that the best-performing student found the work boring, with no level of challenge. The intermediate student successfully completed the assigned task, but did not develop any further due to the limitations of remaining within her comfort zone. The lowest-performing student felt overwhelmed, confused, and afraid that, although the assigned task was inappropriate for him, he was unable to complete it successfully without additional assistance. Findings from this study demonstrate that the implementation of an identical lesson plan for all students does not adequately address the instructional needs of students exhibiting variable levels of English proficiency. Therefore, the study recommends adopting differentiated instruction, utilizing scaffolding, and varying the pace at which instruction occurs to better address the instructional needs of mixed-ability learners.

Keywords: mixed-ability ESL classroom, differentiated instruction, Zone of Proximal Development, student engagement, one-size-fits-all instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Mixed-ability classes represent a permanent and continuous nature of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction (Vygotsky, 1962; Tomlinson, 2001). Mixed-ability classes consist of students who have different backgrounds in English and what the students think they can achieve. The presence of multiple ability levels among students in a class is the rule, rather than the exception. Many schools do not have the resources, qualified staff, or targeted programs to offer specialized ESL instruction, resulting in classes containing students with a range of English proficiency, from beginner to nearly fluent. The mix of abilities in these classes occurs not only due to differing age and experience, but also because of access to and availability of exposure to English language and culture outside of the classroom, a variable amount of family support, and variable educational backgrounds. Understanding a mixed-ability class will change how the teacher will go about teaching; the goal will then be to teach students so that the teacher can utilize the differences, not eliminate them.

Many instructional systems have adopted a "one-size-fits-all" teaching model in mixed-ability classrooms (Tomlinson, 2001; Goyibova et al., 2025). Such instructional uniformity often overlooks learner readiness, interests, and learning profiles, despite evidence that effective teaching should adapt instruction to learners' diverse needs through flexible planning and ongoing assessment (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Due to limited resources such as rigid

curricula, large-class size and standardized testing schedules, many teachers have no choice but to move their whole class at one pace. Because they are expected to complete their objectives by the end of their lesson or unit, time constraints create additional pressure on teachers to do the same. In addition, many teachers are trained to use the same lesson plans and materials, rather than incorporating differing teaching strategies into their lessons. Consequently, all students receive and respond to the same tasks, explanations, and assessments in the same way, within the same timeframe. Although this approach makes lesson planning and classroom management easier for teachers in the short term, it may hide significant individual differences in their students that could affect learning.

This study focuses on the gap between the prescribed pace of lessons and the developmental, cognitive, and psychological differences among students. Each student's development is unique, which means they will all need different types and amounts of support to learn new language structures. In addition to developmental differences, leveraging cognitive variations to support student learning also requires an understanding of how each student thinks. Finally, psychosocial factors such as achievement, self-belief, fear, and cultural attitudes about participating in a classroom affect a student's willingness and ability to participate in and take risks in order to acquire a new language. When lessons do not account for these factors, lower-level students tend to become disinterested, overwhelmed, or dependent on rote

procedures; while advanced-level students tend to experience boredom, little to no challenge, and lack of development in higher order thinking skills. Therefore, lessons delivered at a single pace create both academic and psychological road blocks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Dörnyei, 2001); as a result, all students, regardless of their current learning level, have limited potential. Research on classroom effectiveness likewise suggests that student achievement increases when instruction is responsive to learner differences and incorporates appropriate feedback and challenge (Hattie, 2009).

There are two main questions addressed by the current research; both of them focus on how these processes are manifested as they happen in the classroom. The first question is regarding how different levels of pace by students working on the same project will affect their social and behavioral interactions with each other. This question will focus on how classroom processes at a micro-level (i.e., how differences in pacing will affect collaboration amongst peers, help-seeking behaviours, dominance dynamics, and social inclusion). For those students working at a slower pace, they may withdraw from their peers in their learning environment; they may also seek help more frequently from their peers and/or become disengaged from collaborative norms. Conversely, students who are working at a faster pace may not be engaged in collaborative efforts with their peers or may assume leadership roles within a group that shift the dynamic among peers working together. The second question is about how the 'one-size-fits-all' pedagogical model of instruction creates a gap in engagement between high- and low-achieving students, thus preventing those students from fulfilling their potential in their ZPD. This question is based on the Vygotskian framework and looks at whether utilizing uniform pacing will limit students' ability to engage in optimally scaffolded peer-to-peer interaction resulting in larger gaps between student participation in the same classroom and students' opportunities to learn and ultimately achieve.

Both pedagogically and socioculturally, this research seeks to examine the effect of using standardized instruction on engaging and affecting student behavior in order for educators to use that research to establish equitable educational practices, including flexible grouping, tiered assignments, formative assessment, and scaffolding targeted to students' individual needs. Educators that work in under-resourced settings especially benefit from the practical knowledge about inexpensive, but effective, adaptations. More broadly, as the study examines education equity issues in developing countries, it notes how undifferentiated instruction, often exacerbated by the dilemmas associated with high student-to-teacher ratios, limited specialist resources, and common accountability systems, leads to low levels of engagement for students in these settings. Understanding how and why standardized or one-size-fits-all approaches create gaps in engagement will help guide teacher preparation and educational policy efforts to reduce achievement gap inequities and to increase overall student success. Additionally, by documenting the psychological effects of

uniform instructional methods, such as decreased motivation and increased anxiety for language learners, this research demonstrates that the human cost of uniform instructional methods extends far beyond the academic performance of students.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the current model of traditional classroom instruction creates both psychological and academic barriers for learners at both ends of the performance continuum. Through three illustrative case studies of student experiences collected through qualitative observation and interviews, this research will demonstrate how using a single pace in instruction can (1) provide no meaningful challenges or opportunities for advanced learners to engage cognitively deeper; (2) create feelings of being overwhelmed for struggling students who needed more scaffolding and individualized feedback; and (3) alter social interactions among students and maintain inequality in learning opportunities based on peers' ability to learn from each other. Thus, documenting the negative outcomes resulting from the lack of differentiation and pacing in an ESL classroom context will provide evidence for re-evaluating differentiation and pacing as critical, achievable components of effective instruction versus as optional "add ons". The subsequent sections will describe the qualitative methodology used in this research, the classroom contexts observed and documented throughout the study, and the analytical framework used to interpret instances of student experience and engagement.

According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning is inherently a social process that is mediated by cultural tools and interaction (Vygotsky, 1962). Therefore, he argues against the notion that learning is a cognitive activity done in isolation. The ZPD is the key concept in this theory; it establishes the distance between what an individual has accomplished without support and how much improvement they will experience given support from others who have more advanced learning. Instruction should provide opportunities for learners to tackle tasks that fall within the ZPD so that they promote cognitive development through internalization via supported interactions with those providing instruction through modeling, scaffolding, or collaborative dialogue (Vygotsky, 1962). This principle closely aligns with the concept of scaffolding, whereby temporary instructional support enables learners to accomplish tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent capability (Bruner, 1983). If learners are provided with tasks that are too simple, they will not receive sufficient data and learning to sustain their future cognitive development; conversely, if learners are presented with tasks that are too hard, they will not be able to successfully execute them and will become frustrated with this process, which will limit their ability to benefit from the instruction they are receiving. The ESL environment requires that the tasks provided to learners extend their current level of language ability by providing the scaffolding necessary to support continued development of their language skills while

still allowing them opportunities to actively produce and solve problems.

Vygotsky's focus on social interactions is the basis for the establishment of cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and dynamic assessment methods in classrooms with children of mixed abilities (Vygotsky, 1962; Ellis, 2003). Similar recommendations have been proposed for English learners through instructional scaffolding that gradually transfers responsibility from teacher to learner (Walqui, 2006). When two or more students with differing levels of competence work together to solve a problem, one person can lead the other through the process of solving the problem. In this way, one student can help the other operate in the learner's zone of proximal development, or ZPD, even if they are at very different developmental stages: the struggling student receives help from the more capable student; and the more capable student is able to continue to learn and expand his/her own knowledge through the act of teaching someone else (a phenomenon referred to as the protégé effect). The ZPD, however, is not a static concept; it continually evolves as students learn and use new forms of language. Therefore, paying attention to how, when, and by whom students receive assistance is essential in a classroom where students work at very different rates and levels of ability. Teaching students in a uniform and/or at a single pace can result in lots of wasted time and teachers giving the wrong type of help at the wrong time: advanced learners may be given assistance they do not need and therefore not use the skills provided by the assistance; and less advanced learners do not receive assistance or the assistance provided is given at the wrong time, which causes them not to make progress.

The Paradox of Rapid Versus Slow Learning: Boredom and Anxiety

Current research has identified a conflict in SLA as learners exhibit emotional states from being too far ahead (i.e., bored) and receiving too little support (i.e., anxiety). As learners progress quickly through the curriculum and become adept at a higher level they often report boredom when the task does not provide cognitive or creative challenge (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). This state of boredom can limit sustained learner engagement in a task, diminish form choices, and limit the learner's opportunities for deeper learning. Conversely, learners experiencing tasks that are beyond their ability regularly report anxiety (i.e., linguistic, performance, or social) (Dörnyei, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This anxiety manifests through avoidance strategies, reduced risk taking, and surface level engagement focused on avoiding errors rather than experimenting with communication. Both boredom and anxiety create emotional barriers to providing meaningful experiences, as well as developing the feedback loops necessary for language acquisition (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Dörnyei, 2001).

Research has demonstrated a curvilinear relationship between task challenges and emotions: tasks are most engaging and produce the best learning gain if they are moderately challenging and provide learners with enough assistance to be successful. When tasks are too difficult or straightforward, however, these opposite extremes lead to

negative emotions being experienced by learners in relation to the task. In an ESL classroom where students are of mixed ability levels, providing a lesson at the same pace can simultaneously lead to boredom for some students and anxiety for others. The coexistence of boredom and anxiety among group members has a detrimental effect on whole class teaching as emotions significantly influence cognitive processes such as attention, working memory, and metacognitive regulation. Emotions also influence social interactions and dynamics among learners; anxious students may choose to withdraw from cooperative learning activities or ask for assistance less often, while bored students may take over an activity superficially or choose to completely withdraw from participation. To ensure learners experience both boredom and anxiety, therefore, teaching strategies must incorporate a wider variety of supports and challenges rather than treating all students in a homogeneous manner.

The Psychology of Motivation in ESL

Language learning motivation is dynamic and rooted in different contexts. While intrinsic/extrinsic is helpful, is not sufficient. Newer ideas focus on situational motivation. Situational motivation includes task specifics and the learning context (e.g. class environment, perceived ability level and how much a learner fits into the social environment). Self Determination theory (SDT) proposes learners are most motivated when they are satisfied in three areas of need: autonomy, ability and relatedness; and these three needs are impacted by how well a task is appropriate to the learner's abilities at that moment (Dörnyei, 2001). In addition, Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis similarly argues that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners receive comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence. When the task is too easy, a learner receives little sense of ability from completing the task, whereas if it is too difficult, their sense of ability will decrease and their motivation will likewise, decrease (Dörnyei, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Lastly, tasks that provide learners with some choice and/or a meaningful way in which to use the language will foster a learner's sense of autonomy and promote increased motivation in the long term. When teaching in a mixed ability classroom, how adequately a task matches the demand of the task with the current capacity of the learner will regulate motivation; therefore, teachers need to be mindful of how they structure cooperative tasks as a standard learn will generally favour the average learner leaving learners who do not match the average degree of difficulty with inappropriate levels of mastery and relevance to their role in the class.

Motivation is constructed within our society also. When learners have a voice and feel they belong within the learning community, they are generally more likely to put in effort and remain committed to achieving success despite challenges. This social aspect can be associated back to Vygotsky's work, where collaboration and working together as equal members and legitimate contributors to the learning community can build learner motivation due to increased opportunities for relatedness as well as providing the conditions for developing scaffolded competence. In a low-resource context, the impact on learner motivation is

exacerbated due to external factors such as extremely large classes, an emphasis on exam-oriented accountability, a lack of adequate resources that make learners feel restricted in their own autonomy and/or severely limit the opportunity for meaningful choice when completing a task. Thus, the intentional planning of instructional tasks and designs can enhance the ability to maintain learner motivation over time.

Differentiated Instruction (DI): Content, Process, Product

Differentiated Instruction (DI) offers educators a unified teaching philosophy to bridge the gap between the theory and the application of teaching in a classroom (Tomlinson, 2001). Contemporary models also emphasize the integration of formative assessment as a continuous process for identifying learner readiness before adjusting content, process, and product (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013). It is based on the idea that teachers should anticipate the need for flexibility in their teaching methodologies and therefore differentiate three main areas that influence their instruction; content (what the students learn), process (how they learn), and product (how their learning is demonstrated). By way of example, students can access the same objectives at varying levels of complexity through tiered reading selections, teaching key vocabulary before doing actual assignment, or providing different mediums by which to receive the material (e.g., video, auditory, visual). The Process of DI also allows teachers to differentiate the level of support (scaffolding), pacing and complexity of instruction; e.g., students who are learning together or alone, graphic organizers, and extension activities for more capable students. Finally, students can demonstrate their mastery in multiple ways (e.g., presentations, written assignments, or creative projects) and still demonstrate higher-level cognitive ability even though the presentation formats vary widely.

Through using ZPD concepts, DI creates intentional connections between learner needs and the support they receive by offering tiered task options that will place each learner's work within or just above their ZPD in order to create the "just right" amount of challenge and support required to grow (Tomlinson, 2001; Vygotsky, 1962). Additionally, DI helps alleviate the paradox of boredom and anxiety by providing multiple entry points into a learning task; that is, advanced learners will receive added complexity and enrichment, while struggling learners will receive additional scaffolds and time to complete the task. Finally, DI is not simply providing accommodations; DI requires careful planning (anticipatory planning), ongoing assessment and monitoring (formative assessment), and flexible classroom management. In resource-poor situations, DI can be implemented using low-cost strategies (e.g., stations, choice menus, peer-assisted learning, and teacher-designed scaffolds) to redistribute teacher attention without requiring small class sizes or large amounts of materials.

The common conclusion of socio-cultural theory, the emotional impact of boredom, the theory of motivation, and the DI framework is that effective teaching of English as a second language in mixed-ability classes must provide individual challenge and support in order to promote growth,

interest and long-term motivation. Much literature highlights how using a single pace for students negatively impacts these objectives through a misalignment between the level of challenge presented by tasks and the amount of social support available to students (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Tomlinson, 2001). Additionally, there is limited empirical research that examines the micro-processes of how variations in pacing result in different social behaviors during collaborative tasks (Goyibova et al., 2025). Most of the existing research focuses on relatively affluent contexts. Very little is known about the use of low-cost DI adaptations in classrooms with large class sizes with high-stakes exams, and how teachers' beliefs about fairness and efficiency shape the implementation of DI. The need for qualitative case study research to better understand classmates' social interactions and teachers' decisions during group work has created a demand to investigate student and teacher emotional reactions in real settings in order to offer regionally specific recommendations.

This literature review provides a basis for both theoretical and empirical investigations into the effects of utilizing a one-size-fits-all instructional model in mixed-ability ESL classrooms. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the socio-cultural view of mediated learning are used to explain why development is hindered through mismatched pacing; research regarding emotions and passion/disappointment demonstrate how such mismatched pacing produces learners adversely; and differentiated instruction is presented as a practical, theoretical and logical alternative to allow for diversity while also working towards common learning goals. Based on these foundations, this study examines classroom interactions and students' experiences in ESL settings with limited resources by focusing on the use of differentiated instruction to close the engagement gap for ESL learners and enable each learner to reach their maximum potential.

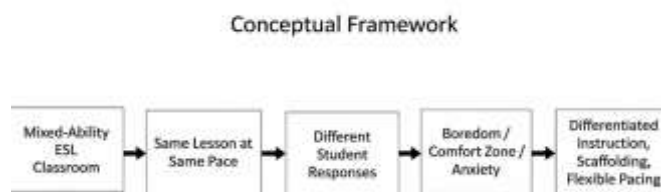


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research examined the limitations of standardized instruction for ESL classes that include a variety of student abilities through a case study research design. The use of a qualitative method allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of their students' experiences, classroom behaviour, and reactions to their teaching through in-depth exploration, rather than using statistical measures. In the case study design, the researcher was able to compare the responses of three different types of students to the same learning task in the same classroom environment.

Participants

The participants were three purposely chosen students based on their individual levels of proficiency in English and responsibility in the classroom. Each student was placed into one of three categories of abilities based on their level of proficiency and how quickly they were able to process information (Level 1: high-capability, rapidly processing learner; Level 2: average learner; Level 3: extremely limited in completing work independently). In order to ensure that the students' identities remain confidential, all three students were assigned pseudonyms (Lin-Lin, Su-Su, Tun-Tun) that will be used throughout the research study.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were utilized to complete this research study: a semi-structured interview and a behavioral engagement observation checklist. The design of these instruments addresses the second research question that deals with students' engagement and learning within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Both instruments were created to collect verbal and behavioral data from the study participants so the researcher may assess not only the participants' verbal responses (what they said about the task) but also their behavior (how they behaved during the learning experience).

The semi-structured interview was the primary tool used in the study because it provides researchers with an opportunity to give all participants the same core questions while allowing opportunity for follow-up questions, should the need arise. The semi-structured interview is appropriate for qualitative research as it allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. The interview questions addressed the difficulty level of the task, level of support from the teacher, emotional response to the task, and match of the difficulty level of the task to the students' level.

The Behavioral Engagement Observation Checklist will also act as an additional instrument to record observable behaviours during the class period, such as: attention, level of participation, level of persistence, asking for assistance, symptoms of boredom or confusion and completion of tasks. Observations are key in qualitative research as they allow a researcher to compare what learners say they are doing when asked verbally with what they actually do, observable behaviours, in a classroom setting.

Interview Questions

The semi-structured interview questions include:

1. What was your opinion of the task that was assigned during class?
2. Do you believe this was too easy, too hard, or just right for your level of ability?
3. Which portions of the task were you able to complete independently?
4. Which portions of the task required the assistance of either your teacher or your fellow classmates?
5. What new knowledge did you acquire from this task?
6. How did you feel about performing the task?
7. Was your current English level aligned with the type of task you were given?
8. What type of support would help you complete this task more effectively on future occasions?

The questions were used to measure whether the task was located within, below, or above the student's current ZPD, and to understand how each student felt about the emotional and academic aspects of the task.

Observation Checklist Indicators

This checklist of observations included the following areas of focus.

- The student maintained focus on the task assigned.
- The student requested assistance when necessary.
- The student either completed the task by themselves or used support to help them get through it.
- The student displayed boredom, confusion and/or frustration while trying to complete the task.
- The student was actively involved in the lesson.
- The student either refused to attempt the task or appeared to possess confidence.

The indicators listed allowed the researcher to assess how engaged the learners were in the activity, and to decide whether they were sufficiently capable of completing the task successfully.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred within a 3 week short period of collecting data by observing learners participating in an English assignment through classroom observations of the same task being completed by multiple learners at the same time. An observation sheet was used to observe each learner in the classroom and record behaviours of the individual learner in relation to engagement during the lesson. After completing the lesson, each learner participated in an one-on-one semi-structured interview in a non-judgmental environment to ensure that they felt comfortable and safe so that they were able to provide adequate responses to interview questions. The observational data collected about the learners

and the interview data collected will be used to provide a comprehensive picture of each learner's entire experience.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized descriptive narrative analysis of the data collected. Each participant was analyzed individually, with the researcher providing an overview of how the behaviors or emotions and the amount of support needed by each student changed in relation to the teacher's instruction and the task. Subsequently, the researcher looked at the three individual cases together to identify similarities and differences regarding the student's responses. The researcher's focus in conducting this analysis was to compare student engagement and ZPD as they relate to task difficulty and instruction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As reflected in the findings of this study, the use of a one size fits all approach to learning resulted in differing levels of engagement and response of the three participants based upon their level of English proficiency and the amount of instructional support provided by the teacher. While all of the students completed the same classroom task in the same amount of time, their level of engagement, confidence and emotional responses to the task were noticeably different from each other. The observational data and interview data collected both indicate that the pace of instruction was not appropriate for the individual needs of the students, based on each student's ZPD.

Lin-Lin - The Advanced Learner

Data from observations revealed that she completed her assignments quicker than any other kid in the class. Early on in class, after finishing her work she became restless, looked around the room and even disrupted other students. Once she was finished and had no other cognitive challenge left, she appeared disinterested. Lin Lin stated during her interview that since the activity was too easy for her, she was bored at having completed it before the rest of her classmates. Thus, it can be concluded that the activity was not presenting enough cognitive challenge to Lin Lin since it was below her ZPD.

Additionally, based on these findings, we can conclude that when advanced learners are provided with very basic instruction (too easy), they will lose motivation to learn, which will ultimately lead to them not using the target language in an effective manner, becoming either distracted or inactive. It supports the notion of learners needing to be given activities that are challenging enough to allow for academic and cognitive growth yet not so difficult as to lead to feelings of frustration.

Su-Su: The Intermediate Learner

Su-Su's participation throughout the task was slow yet not very high. Overall, she was able to complete the assignment within the expected amount of time; however, she did not put in any extra effort or try to use higher-level language in her writing. According to the observational checklist, Su-Su was quiet, followed the directions provided, and remained within the basic requirements for this assignment. In the interview, Su-Su stated that while she was able to complete the task and the task was manageable, she was not motivated to try to do more.

These results indicate that Su-Su stayed within her comfort zone. This lesson was not too simple or difficult for Su-Su, but it also did not challenge her to grow. Thus, she reached a ceiling effect, meaning she could successfully complete the task but lacked the challenge to continue to grow. When considering ZPD, the task may have been within Su-Su's current ability, but without additional scaffolding or extension activities, she was unable to progress from this level to another.

Tun-Tun: The Basic Learner

Tun-Tun struggled significantly with the task. The observation data shows that he struggled to begin the task and often appeared confused while seeking extra help from the teacher repeatedly. He did not finish all parts of the task independently. He showed signs of indecision and low confidence. In his interview, he stated that the task was difficult for him to do, and he felt nervous because he could not easily follow the lesson.

Tun-Tun's performance demonstrates that he was working on a task outside of his zone of proximal development, without any support; therefore he became frustrated and less inclined to participate. This also supports the idea that if a learner is required to work on a task above their current capabilities without any support, they may develop anxiety towards the task and stop participating. Rather than succeeding at something new, these learners may begin to disengage from the task.

Overall Interpretation

In the examination of three cases, we can see that the same lesson had three distinct learning experiences. Lin-Lin was frustrated due to a lack of challenge; Su-Su was able to engage reasonably well with the lesson; and Tun-Tun was overwhelmed. The data supports the notion that no single pace of instruction can meet the needs of mixed ability learners. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between engagement and achievement and how well the learning activity is matched to the learner's developmental level.

As a result, this study shows that all instruction delivered in a single fashion creates an engagement gap within the ESL classroom. In addition, varying levels of students will require a variety of supports, challenges, and paces in order to be successful learners within their Zone of Proximal Development. As such, this study also supports the need for differentially designed instruction, scaffolding, and flexible classroom practices.

Table 1: Summary of Student Responses

Student	Proficiency Level	Task Performance	Emotional Response	ZPD Position
Lin-Lin	Advanced learner	Completed the task quickly and became distracted after finishing	Bored and restless	Below ZPD
Su-Su	Intermediate learner	Completed the task within the expected time but did not extend her learning	Comfortable but unmotivated	Near ZPD
Tun-Tun	Basic learner	Struggled to complete the task independently and needed repeated help	Confused and anxious	Above ZPD

begins to diminish (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). A mixed-ability class will typically mean that an advanced ELL is physically present, but is missing out on the cognitive advantage of being allowed to use his/her abilities through extension, enrichment, and higher-level thought using language.

Su-Su's case highlights another issue; while she performed the task well, she did not feel challenged enough to pursue advanced options. Thus, "acceptable" but not necessarily "optimal" would describe the task's difficulty level. Su-Su's level of independence was likely near her capability, but she has experienced no growth or support in the form of additional instruction or developmental activities; therefore, her performance will likely stay the same over time. This is significant because, while Su-Su appears to function adequately, if she continues to receive the same curriculum, she will likely not continue to make progress.

Tun-Tun's situation serves as an example of what happens when someone is given an activity that is above their level without the proper support to be successful. He found it hard to get started or ask for help, but he did demonstrate his low self-esteem and anxiety in addition to these difficulties. Research on foreign language anxiety indicates just like Tun-Tun experienced, students often negatively withdraw from their learning due to being overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them. In order for Tun-Tun to successfully participate; he needed more support; he was missing scaffolding, entry points at a lower level, and guided practice (Vygotsky, 1962). Because of this lack of support the lesson became a barrier instead of an opportunity to learn.

In conclusion, the three cases demonstrate how using a standard pace in the ESL classroom causes an engagement gap for learners who are at different levels of ability. Each learner experienced a different level of engagement and motivation as they participated in the same lesson: one experienced boredom, one experienced limited progress, and one experienced anxiety. This demonstrates that having one plan to meet the needs of all students does not work. Additionally, this study reinforces the idea that in order to be motivated, students must feel like what they are being asked to do is at their level and is appropriate for them socially. If learners feel either not challenged enough or too challenged, their willingness to participate and learn decreases.

There are also practical implications to these findings for teachers. Teachers should use differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, guarantees of peer support, and scaffolding in order for classroom tasks to be responsive to the differences between learners (Tomlinson, 2001). For example, advanced learners may receive extension tasks, intermediate learners may receive guided but open-ended tasks, and struggling

DISCUSSION

The results of this research illustrate that individualized instruction is a more effective strategy than one-size-fits all instruction for teaching heterogeneous groups of students in ESL classrooms, since it provides for learners' differences in ability level, pace of learning, and the amount of assistance needed to complete a task. In the sample that provided data for this research, all three students were engaged in the completion of the same task in the same classroom; however, their experiences with respect to the aforementioned task were all different. Lin-Lin felt bored due to the low cognitive demand of the task; Su-Su continued to work within a limited comfort zone of performance; and Tun-Tun experienced feelings of confusion and anxiety due to the excessive cognitive demand of the task along with a lack of appropriate assistance from the teacher and peers. These Student Participants' experiences support Vygotsky's theory, which states that learning occurs best when the instruction is appropriate for the learner's ZPD.

The situation that Lin-Lin found herself in represents way too frequently how advanced learners will disengage from an activity if they feel they don't have sufficient levels of difficulty or challenge. After completing the task in question, Lin-Lin displayed excessive restlessness indicating that the activity was below her ZPD. This matches existing studies regarding boredom and second-language acquisition in that when a learner engages in too easy of a task, and is not encouraged to use higher-level thought processes, motivation

learners may receive sentence frames, a model of the task, and a detailed plan for how to complete the task. Such strategies are particularly important in resource-poor classrooms where the size of the enrollment and the amount of classroom materials make it difficult to provide individual help to learners. Even minor changes will help students in classrooms to work more effectively within their zone of proximal development.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated how one-size-fits-all instruction limits English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in mixed-ability classrooms, using three student representatives, Lin-Lin, Su-Su, and Tun-Tun. It was discovered that learners with different proficiencies experience different forms of disengagement or limited participation from participating in the same tasks at the same speed. Specifically, while Lin-Lin was bored because he was not challenged by the activity; Su-Su was comfortable but did not progress to higher performance levels; and Tun-Tun felt confused and anxious because he was not yet capable of the activity and received little to no support. Based on these results, standardized instruction is not adequate at responding to different learner needs in mixed-ability ESL classrooms. Engagement is directly related to the relationship between learners' readiness and task difficulty. If instructions provide students with tasks that are either too easy or too hard for them to complete correctly and on time, then they lose interest in their work or feel unsuccessful at their attempts to complete the task. In both cases, learning is being compromised. To overcome this concern, the research indicates that teachers should provide instruction that is aligned with each student's ZPD so that each learner receives adequate assistance and challenges to accomplish his or her goal and the amount of effort required to achieve that goal.

The findings raise some important implications for teaching. ESL teachers need to stop using one-size-fits-all lessons for all students, and instead utilize differentiated instructional techniques such as tiered assignments, flexible grouping, peer tutoring, guided practice, sentence frames, and extension activities (Tomlinson, 2001; Goyibova et al., 2025). These types of instructional techniques have been found to help advanced students remain challenged, help intermediate students to become more independent, and assist struggling students to demonstrate increased confidence in their ability to complete the assignment. Additionally, teachers should consider the limited resources available when attempting to enhance student learning by making minor adjustments in pacing, task design, and teacher support for class assignments. Making such adjustments has been shown to create significant improvements in the level of student engagement and overall success within the classroom.

The results indicate that mixed ability instruction is not an isolated problem but rather just another part of the normal ESL curriculum. Teacher training programs need to prepare teachers to understand their learners as individuals and how to differentiate instruction appropriately. This is particularly true in developing countries; large class sizes and

scarce resources often lead teachers to use homogeneous instruction, making it more efficient at times than heterogeneous instruction - but - such instruction is less likely to lead to learning for many students.

The limitations of this study include its small sample size (only 1 classroom); therefore, the findings from this study may not be applicable to other ESL settings. However, the objective of qualitative research studies is not to generalize; instead, they aim to provide an in-depth understanding of an individual setting. Future studies might want to examine these subjects using larger, multiple sites/study levels/areas of skill (speaking, writing, etc.) to see if the same patterns appear in additional settings.

This research indicates that flexible teaching styles are a fundamental way to promote learner engagement, motivation, and progress. While a simplified teaching method is beneficial, it does not effectively meet the needs of different levels of learners. Therefore, ESL teachers should become facilitators of learning by adjusting their instruction based on the student's ability level instead of simply delivering the same lesson to all learners in the same manner.

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