

# TEACHING ENGLISH FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS IN HETEROGENEOUS CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract:** This research explores the challenges and strategies employed by teachers in teaching English to first-year students with varying language proficiency levels in heterogeneous classrooms. A mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining quantitative analysis of survey data with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with teachers. Quantitative findings indicate that novice teachers perceive higher levels of challenges, particularly in aspects of instruction delivery strategies, communication barriers, and language practice opportunities, compared to experienced and expert teachers. In contrast, qualitative analysis reveals a range of effective strategies employed by teachers, including the use of visual aids, interactive activities, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, explicit instruction and modelling, and exposure to language-rich environments. These findings underscore the importance of teacher support and professional development in addressing challenges and fostering effective language instruction for diverse student populations. Future research should explore the specific implications of these findings for instructional practices and teacher training in heterogeneous classroom settings.

**Key words:** multi-level language proficiency, challenges, solutions, novice, experienced, expert teachers

## I. Introduction

### 1.1. Background to the study

Teaching English in a heterogeneous classroom, where students vary widely in terms of language proficiency, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and prior experiences with the language, presents a myriad of challenges for educators. One of the challenges in teaching English to students of multi-level language proficiency is accommodating the diverse range of learning styles, backgrounds, and prior experiences with the language. Teachers must cater to the diverse learning needs of students, ranging from absolute beginners to advanced speakers. This requires differentiated instruction strategies to ensure that each student is appropriately challenged and supported in their language learning journey. Additionally, teachers must strike a balance between providing opportunities for less proficient students to catch up while also engaging advanced learners to continue progressing. According to García&Kleifgen (2010), managing a classroom with students of diverse English proficiency levels poses significant challenges. Effective time management and prioritization of learning goals become essential in maximizing learning outcomes for all students (Marzano & Pickering, 2007). The presence of students with varying language proficiency levels may hinder effective communication between students and teachers, potentially leading to frustration and disengagement among students. Students with lower language proficiency levels may feel hesitant to participate actively in classroom activities, resulting in uneven participation and potential feelings of exclusion. To address the limitations of traditional assessment methods, educators may need to explore alternative assessment approaches that can accommodate students with diverse language proficiency levels.

### 1.2. Purposes and significance of the study

This research aims to delve into the specific challenges encountered by instructors when teaching English to students with differing language proficiency levels within the same class, and to propose effective solutions to address these challenges.

Effectively addressing the challenges of teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels necessitates a comprehensive approach that recognizes and accommodates the diverse learning needs of students. To bridge the gap between high school and university English education, it is essential for educators to provide students with opportunities to develop the skills and competencies necessary for success at the university level. Educators can achieve this by implementing customized instructional approaches and fostering an inclusive learning

atmosphere. Through these efforts, educators can establish equitable opportunities for language development and academic achievement for all students, irrespective of their proficiency level.

### 1.3. Research questions

In order to address the complexities of teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels within the same classroom, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of teachers with different levels of experience and explore effective solutions to overcome the challenges encountered. The following research questions guide our inquiry.

- 1.3.1. *How do teachers with varying levels of experience perceive the challenges of teaching English to students with multilevel language proficiency in a single classroom?*
- 1.3.2. *What solutions are considered to be the most effective in addressing the challenges faced by students with different language proficiency levels?*

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1. Challenges faced by students transferring from high schools to universities

The transition from high school to university presents numerous challenges for students, particularly in the realm of English language education. Understanding these challenges is crucial for educators and institutions to provide adequate support and resources for student success.

#### *Higher academic expectations*

University-level English courses demand higher language proficiency and academic rigor than high school. Students must engage with complex texts, analyze ideas critically, and produce sophisticated work. This transition can be challenging, requiring deeper conceptual understanding and more advanced analysis. Students must also take greater responsibility for their learning, engage in self-directed study, and develop critical thinking skills. Effective support structures, including mentorship programs and academic advising, are crucial for guiding students through this transition and facilitating success at the university level.

#### *Importance of discipline-specific language proficiency:*

Mastery of discipline-specific language is crucial for students to effectively communicate, understand, and engage with course materials and scholarly literature within their chosen fields of study. Each academic discipline has its own set of specialized terms and concepts that are unique to that field. Effective communication across disciplines requires students to navigate and integrate diverse sets of terminology and concepts, bridging the gap between different academic domains (Bazerman, 2014).

#### *Critical thinking and analytical skills:*

Critical thinking and analytical skills are essential components of higher education, enabling students to engage deeply with course materials, evaluate arguments, solve problems, and make informed decisions. Critical thinkers can apply logical reasoning, creativity, and systematic inquiry to identify solutions to real-world problems, whether academic, professional, or personal in nature (Facione, 1990). These skills are not only fundamental for academic success but also for success in the workforce and in life beyond the university.

### 2.2. Challenges faced by teachers teaching English in a heterogeneous language proficiency classroom

#### *Instruction delivery strategies*

Students in a heterogeneous classroom may have diverse levels of English language proficiency, ranging from beginner to advanced. This diversity creates challenges in instruction, as students may require different levels of support and instruction based on their proficiency level. Teachers must develop instructional strategies that accommodate both high-achieving students and those who may be struggling with English language acquisition (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Varying language proficiency levels can lead to communication barriers among students, making it challenging for them to understand instructions, engage in classroom discussions, and collaborate with their peers effectively (Cummins, 1981). Students with higher language proficiency levels may dominate classroom discussions and activities, while those with lower proficiency levels may be hesitant to participate due to language barriers. This can result in unequal participation and limited opportunities for language practice for some students (Gibbons, 2002). Traditional assessment methods may not accurately measure the language abilities of all students, posing challenges in assessing student learning and progress in a heterogeneous classroom (Gottlieb et al., 2006).

#### *Communication barriers*

Communication barriers in a heterogeneous classroom, stemming from varying language proficiency levels, pose significant challenges for both students and teachers. Students with lower language proficiency levels may struggle to understand instructions, explanations, and classroom discussions conducted primarily in English. This can hinder their ability to comprehend academic content and fully engage in learning activities (Gottlieb et al., 2006). Weak students may find it challenging to express their thoughts, ideas, and questions effectively in English, leading to frustration and feelings of inadequacy (Gibbons, 2002). Communication barriers may result in unequal participation among students, with those with higher language proficiency levels dominating classroom discussions and

activities. Students with lower proficiency levels may feel hesitant to contribute or may be overlooked by their peers and teachers (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

#### *Limited opportunities for language practice*

Limited opportunities for language practice in a heterogeneous classroom can present significant challenges for English language learners and students with limited English proficiency. Students with higher language proficiency levels may dominate classroom discussions and activities, leaving limited opportunities for students with lower proficiency levels to practice and develop their language skills (Gibbons, 2002). Limited exposure to language-rich environments outside of the classroom can further impede language acquisition and proficiency development for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Cummins, 1981). Teachers may face challenges in providing sufficient support and guidance for language practice activities that meet the diverse needs of students with varying proficiency levels, due to limited resources, time constraints, and competing instructional priorities (Crandall & Kaufman, 2002).

Addressing these challenges requires intentional efforts to develop tailored instructional strategies, promote inclusive communication practices, and create language-rich environments that support language development for all students, regardless of their proficiency level.

### **2.3. Solutions for heterogeneous language proficiency classroom**

In light of the challenges faced by teachers in heterogeneous language proficiency classrooms, it is imperative to explore effective strategies for addressing these challenges and fostering inclusive learning environments. This section delves into key solutions that educators can implement to accommodate diverse learning levels, promote equitable opportunities, and facilitate meaningful language development for all students. By implementing these solutions, teachers can create supportive learning environments where every student has the opportunity to thrive academically and linguistically.

#### *Differentiating instruction*

Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that recognizes and responds to the diverse learning needs, interests, and abilities of students within a single classroom. It involves tailoring instruction, content, and assessment to accommodate students' varying readiness levels, learning styles, and interests. Differentiated instruction promotes equity by acknowledging and valuing students' unique strengths and abilities, thus creating an inclusive learning environment where every student feels valued and supported (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Teachers can implement differentiated instruction by providing multiple pathways for learning, offering choice in assignments and activities, and adapting instructional strategies to meet individual student needs (Tomlinson, 2001).

#### *Flexible grouping*

Flexible grouping is a teaching strategy that involves organizing students into various groups based on their learning needs, interests, or abilities, and then regrouping them as needed to best support their academic growth. In a heterogeneous classroom, flexible grouping plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive learning environments and maximizing student achievement (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Teachers can use flexible grouping to provide targeted support, scaffold learning experiences, and differentiate instruction to ensure that all students are appropriately challenged and supported. By adjusting group compositions, instructional strategies, and learning activities as necessary, teachers can respond dynamically to students' evolving needs and promote collaboration and peer learning opportunities among students with diverse backgrounds and abilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000).

#### *Language support activities*

Language support activities encompass a range of strategies and programs designed to assist students who are learning English as a foreign language. These services provide targeted assistance and resources to help students understand instructional materials, participate in classroom activities, and engage meaningfully with academic content (Gibbons, 2002). Language support services aim to facilitate the development of students' English language proficiency through targeted instruction and practice, including language acquisition programs, English language development courses, language immersion experiences, and vocabulary-building activities (Cummins, 2008). By scaffolding language development alongside content learning, language support services enable students to access the curriculum and succeed academically.

### **III. Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively investigate the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels and to explore effective solutions to address these challenges. The research design integrates quantitative analysis to systematically identify and quantify the challenges encountered by teachers. Additionally, qualitative exploration is conducted to gain deeper insights into the nature of these challenges and to explore nuanced solutions. By combining quantitative data on challenges with qualitative exploration of solutions, this mixed-methods approach enables a holistic understanding of the complexities involved in teaching English in heterogeneous language proficiency classrooms

### 3.1. *Quantitative data collection and analysis*

Data Collection: Quantitative data on the perceived challenges of teaching English to students with different language proficiency levels are collected through surveys distributed to a sample of teachers. The survey includes Likert-scale questions assessing the extent of perceived challenges across various domains, such as instruction delivery, communication barriers, and language practice opportunities.

Data Analysis: Descriptive statistical analysis is conducted to analyze the quantitative data. Mean scores, standard deviations, and frequencies are calculated to determine the overall level of perceived challenges among teachers and to identify any differences based on experience levels.

### 3.2. *Qualitative data collection and analysis*

Data Collection: Quantitative data on the perceived challenges of teaching English to students with different language proficiency levels are collected through surveys distributed to a sample of teachers. The survey includes Likert-scale questions assessing the extent of perceived challenges across various domains, such as instruction delivery, communication barriers, and language practice opportunities. The sample is selected using stratified sampling to ensure representation from diverse educational backgrounds and teaching experiences.

Data Analysis: The qualitative data analysis focused on extracting themes and patterns from the semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of teachers. These interviews aimed to explore the strategies employed by teachers to address the challenges of teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels in heterogeneous classrooms. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis. Researchers familiarized themselves with the interview transcripts to gain an understanding of the data. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the interview data. Initial coding involved systematically labelling segments of text related to specific topics or concepts. Codes were then organized into broader themes based on their relevance and frequency across interviews. Themes were interpreted in the context of the research objectives, providing rich insights into the strategies used by teachers to address challenges in heterogeneous classrooms. The synthesized qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

## IV. Findings

### 4.1. *Quantitative research findings*

Statistical descriptive analysis provides data on the mean scores, sample sizes, and standard deviations for three groups of teachers categorized by their level of experience (novice, experienced, and expert) in instruction delivery strategies. The mean score represents the average rating given by each group of teachers regarding their perceived challenges in implementing instruction delivery strategies, with higher mean scores indicating greater perceived challenges. The sample size represents the number of teachers in each group who provided responses for the survey or assessment.

On average, novice teachers reported a mean score of 4.2, indicating that they perceive themselves as facing significant challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, with relatively little variability in their responses (standard deviation = 0.42). Experienced teachers reported a mean score of 3.7, suggesting that they perceive themselves as moderately challenged in implementing differentiated instruction, with relatively little variability in their responses (standard deviation = 0.42). Expert teachers reported a mean score of 2.7, indicating that they perceive themselves as facing fewer challenges in implementing differentiated instruction compared to both novice and experienced teachers. Additionally, there is more variability in their responses compared to novice and experienced teachers (standard deviation = 0.53).

Across all groups, the total mean score for all teachers combined is 3.05, indicating that, on average, teachers perceive themselves as moderately to highly effective in implementing differentiated instruction, with a moderate level of variability in responses across all teachers (standard deviation = 0.8). These findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean scores, sample sizes, and standard deviations for three groups of teachers in implementing differentiated instruction

Instruction Delivery Strategies	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Novice teachers	4.2	9	.42
Experienced teachers	3.7	17	.42
Expert teachers	2.7	11	.53
Total	3.05	37	.79

Regarding communication barriers, novice teachers reported a mean score of 3.9, with a standard deviation of 0.78, indicating that novice teachers perceive themselves as facing significant challenges in communication with students. Experienced teachers reported a mean score of 1.9, with a small standard deviation of 0.32, suggesting that experienced teachers perceive themselves as moderately challenged in communication with students, with relatively little variability in their responses. Expert teachers reported a mean score of 1.6, with a small standard deviation of 0.2, indicating that expert teachers perceive themselves as facing fewer challenges in communication with students

compared to both novice and experienced teachers. Additionally, there is less variability in their responses compared to novice and experienced teachers.

*Table 2: Mean scores, sample sizes, and standard deviations for three groups of teachers in communication barriers*

Communication Barriers	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Novice teachers	3.9	9	.78
Experienced teachers	1.9	17	.32
Expert teachers	1.6	11	.20
Total	2.25	37	0.55

When dealing with challenges in providing language practice opportunities, novice teachers reported a mean score of 3.7, with a small standard deviation of 0.26, suggesting that novice teachers perceive themselves as facing significant challenges in providing language practice, with relatively little variability in their responses. Experienced teachers reported a mean score of 1.5, with a small standard deviation of 0.34, indicating that experienced teachers perceive themselves as facing fewer challenges in providing language practice compared to novice teachers, although there is some variability among experienced teachers. Expert teachers reported a mean score of 2.5, with a larger standard deviation of 0.47, suggesting that expert teachers perceive themselves as facing more challenges in providing language practice compared to experienced teachers but less than novice teachers. Additionally, there is more variability in their responses compared to both novice and experienced teachers.

*Table 3: Mean scores, sample sizes, and standard deviations for three groups of teachers in language practice opportunity*

Language Practice Opportunity	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Novice teachers	3.7	9	.26
Experienced teachers	1.5	17	.34
Expert teachers	2.5	11	.47
Total	2.3	37	.75

#### **4.2. Qualitative research findings**

The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 teachers, comprising two novice teachers, two experienced teachers, and two expert teachers. These interviews explored the strategies employed by teachers to address the challenges of teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels in heterogeneous classrooms.

##### **Themes and Insights**

###### *Use of visual aids and graphic organizers*

Novice Teacher 1 mentioned using visual aids and graphic organizers to support comprehension, which helps scaffold learning for students struggling with English.

###### *Interactive activities and group discussions*

Novice Teacher 2 and Experienced Teacher 2 both emphasized the use of interactive activities, such as group discussions and role-playing exercises, to engage students and provide opportunities for language practice in a supportive environment.

###### *Differentiated instruction*

Experienced Teacher 1 highlighted the use of differentiated instruction to tailor lessons to meet the individual needs of students, providing activities and resources at different levels of difficulty.

###### *Flexible grouping*

Experienced Teacher 2 mentioned employing flexible grouping strategies to organize students into small groups based on their language proficiency levels, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to work with peers at different skill levels.

###### *Explicit instruction and modelling*

Expert Teacher 1 emphasized providing explicit instruction and modelling for language practice activities, helping students understand what is expected of them and participate more confidently.

###### *Exposure to language-rich environments*

Expert Teacher 2 discussed the importance of exposing students to authentic language use through real-world materials and experiences, such as newspapers, videos, and cultural events.

Overall, these themes suggest that a combination of instructional strategies, including visual aids, interactive activities, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, explicit instruction, and exposure to language-rich environments, can effectively support language development and address the challenges of teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels. Each teacher's experience and expertise contribute valuable insights into the implementation of these strategies in diverse classroom settings.

## V. Conclusions

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative research findings sheds light on the challenges faced by teachers in instructing English to students with varying language proficiency levels within heterogeneous classrooms.

Analysis of quantitative data reveals that novice teachers tend to report higher mean scores for perceived challenges compared to their experienced and expert counterparts across various aspects of instruction delivery strategies, communication barriers, and providing language practice opportunities. This suggests a potential disparity in confidence or preparedness among teachers, with novices feeling less equipped to address these challenges effectively. Conversely, experienced and expert teachers generally report lower mean scores, indicating a perception of encountering fewer challenges in these areas.

Insights gleaned from interviews with teachers uncover a myriad of strategies employed to effectively tackle these challenges. These strategies encompass the use of visual aids and graphic organizers, interactive activities and group discussions, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, explicit instruction and modelling, and exposure to language-rich environments. Each strategy caters to the diverse needs of students and contributes to creating supportive learning environments conducive to active engagement in language practice and development.

While acknowledging the inherent challenges in teaching English to students with differing language proficiency levels, teachers demonstrate a repertoire of effective strategies to mitigate these challenges. Through a judicious blend of instructional approaches tailored to student needs, educators can cultivate inclusive and stimulating learning environments that foster language development and bolster student achievement. These findings underscore the significance of continuous professional development and collaborative efforts among teachers to refine instructional practices and better serve diverse student populations.

## VI. Discussions

### *Perceived challenges in teaching English to students with varying language proficiency levels*

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses shed light on the multifaceted challenges teachers face when teaching English to students with differing language proficiency levels in heterogeneous classrooms. Quantitative data revealed that novice teachers tend to perceive higher levels of challenges compared to their experienced and expert counterparts. This suggests a potential gap in preparedness or confidence among novice teachers, which may affect their ability to effectively address the diverse needs of students in heterogeneous classrooms. Communication barriers emerged as a prominent challenge across all experience levels, with novice teachers particularly struggling in this aspect. Inadequate communication can hinder students' comprehension, engagement, and participation in classroom activities, ultimately affecting their language development. This highlights the need for targeted support and professional development initiatives to help teachers develop effective communication strategies that promote inclusive and accessible learning environments.

### *Effective strategies for addressing challenges*

Qualitative insights provided valuable perspectives on the strategies employed by teachers to address the identified challenges. The use of visual aids, interactive activities, and differentiated instruction emerged as key strategies embraced by teachers across experience levels. These strategies cater to diverse learning needs, promote active engagement, and provide opportunities for meaningful language practice. Differentiated instruction, in particular, was highlighted as a cornerstone strategy for accommodating students with varying proficiency levels. By tailoring instruction to individual needs and learning styles, teachers can create inclusive learning environments where every student feels valued and supported in their language development journey. Flexible grouping further enhances this approach by fostering collaboration and peer learning opportunities among students with diverse backgrounds and abilities.

### *Implications for practice and professional development*

The findings have several implications for practice and professional development in English language education. Firstly, there is a need for targeted support and mentorship programs for novice teachers to help them navigate the challenges of teaching in heterogeneous classrooms effectively. Mentorship initiatives, collaborative planning sessions, and ongoing professional development opportunities can provide novice teachers with the necessary skills and confidence to succeed in diverse educational settings. Furthermore, curriculum development efforts should prioritize the integration of inclusive instructional strategies and resources that accommodate diverse proficiency levels. By providing teachers with access to high-quality curricular materials and instructional resources, education institutions can support their efforts to create engaging and effective learning experiences for all students. Lastly, the findings underscore the importance of fostering a culture of continuous learning and reflection among educators. Professional development initiatives should encourage teachers to reflect on their practices, explore innovative instructional approaches, and collaborate with colleagues to refine their pedagogical skills and strategies.

In conclusion, by leveraging a combination of effective instructional strategies, targeted support initiatives, and ongoing professional development opportunities, educators can create inclusive and engaging learning environments that support the language development and academic success of all students, irrespective of their proficiency level.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to enhance the quality and inclusivity of English language education in heterogeneous classrooms.

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### Appendix: Perceptions of challenges in teaching heterogeneous classrooms

**Instructions:** Please indicate the extent to which you perceive each statement as challenging when teaching heterogeneous classes.

#### Demographic Information:

**What is your role in the school?**

- Classroom teacher
- Subject specialist teacher


- Special education teacher
- Other (please specify)

**How many years of teaching experience do you have?**

- Less than 5 years (Novice teachers)
- 5 years to less than 10 years (Experienced teacher)
- More than 10 years (Expert teachers)

*Please rate the following statements based on how challenging you perceive each to be when teaching heterogeneous classes.*

- 1: Not challenging at all
- 2: Slightly challenging
- 3: Moderately challenging
- 4: Challenging
- 5: Vey challenging

#	STATEMENTS	RATINGS				
1.	Meeting the diverse learning needs of students in my heterogeneous class is	①	②	③	④	⑤
2.	Implementing differentiation strategies to address varying levels of student readiness is	①	②	③	④	⑤
3.	Managing classroom behavior and maintaining a positive learning environment in a heterogeneous class is:	①	②	③	④	⑤
4.	Providing individualized support and attention to students with diverse learning needs is	①	②	③	④	⑤
5.	Selecting instructional materials and resources that effectively meet the needs of all students in a heterogeneous class is	①	②	③	④	⑤
6.	Collaborating with other teachers or support staff to address the needs of diverse learners in a heterogeneous class is	①	②	③	④	⑤
7.	Balancing the needs of advanced learners with those of struggling learners in a heterogeneous class is	①	②	③	④	⑤
8.	Developing and implementing assessment strategies that accurately measure the progress of all students in a heterogeneous class is	①	②	③	④	⑤
9.	Finding time and resources to provide additional language support outside of regular instruction is	①	②	③	④	⑤
10.	I receive adequate support and professional development opportunities to address the challenges of teaching heterogeneous classes	①	②	③	④	⑤