

Managing Multi-Background English Proficiency Levels in University English Classrooms: Challenges and Best Practices

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Abstract

The study explores challenges and strategies employed by university English instructors for handling heterogeneous EFIC classrooms. As higher education increasingly admits more diverse groups of students, instructors must serve both low- and high-proficiency learners all in the same classroom. The researchers took a qualitative descriptive approach and data was obtained through semi-structured interviews via Google Form with 8 English lecturers from several universities in Indonesia. Five major challenges were identified through thematic analysis. Five key challenges were identified through thematic analysis: slower progress for the class, difficulty engaging students, variations in student confidence levels, problems with assessment and classroom polarization. Despite these difficulties, instructors utilized varied teaching practices including peer mentoring, small-group work and task support. Most respondents, however, reported limited institutional support and lack of training and resources. The study proposes three other institutional reforms: testing, class grouping policies, access to teaching aides and targeted professional development. These results, The need for structured response to provide uniform and effective language instruction with mixed proficiency levels.

Keywords: *English proficiency, TESOL, ELT, classroom management*

Introduction

The growing importance of English as the global language of academic, professional and international communication has increased the demand for English language teaching in higher educational institutions throughout the world. As a result, universities are admitting students with increasingly diverse linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds and classrooms are characterized by a wide range of differences in English language proficiency. In an English classroom, teachers may find themselves faced with some learners who are nearly native speakers and some students who have difficulty with the most elementary language skills. These differences create a number of pedagogical challenges for lecturers, who need to cater for diverse learning needs, while ensuring that course objectives are met effectively and fairly (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Lie, 2007).

There are challenges of lesson planning, classroom interaction, assessment practices and student engagement while teaching students of different abilities. More advanced learners need to be offered more cognitively challenging tasks to maintain motivation and to encourage continued development, while less proficient learners often need more linguistic support, scaffolding and individualised feedback. If left unaddressed, these differences can lead to disparities in access to participation, reduced learning outcomes, and less effective classroom experiences. Thus, the management of mixed-proficiency classes by English teachers has become a major issue in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Recently, some studies have begun to look into how to address the diversity of learners in language classrooms. Differentiated instruction is a well-known method that effectively

meets the needs of students with different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson & Moon, 2020). Nguyen and Pham (2021) note that in diverse English classrooms, differentiated instruction can improve learner engagement and language success by offering students learning experiences that fit their skill levels. Additionally, Yulia and Apriliyanti (2022) mention that in a multilingual educational setting, flexible regrouping, scaffolded activities, and adaptive assessment can boost learner participation and confidence.

Additionally, in order to differentiate instruction, some researches have highlighted the importance of inclusive pedagogical practices that foster equal access to learning opportunities for students with diverse language backgrounds. Rose and Dalton (2021) argue that inclusive teaching practices enhance students' sense of belonging and encourage active classroom participation. Likewise, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasize the role of supportive learning environments in fostering learner motivation and engagement across proficiency levels. Research conducted in Asian higher education contexts has further demonstrated that instructors often employ various adaptive strategies, including peer collaboration, technology-assisted learning, and task differentiation, to accommodate learner diversity effectively (Widodo, 2022; Setyarini & Sukyadi, 2023).

Furthermore, studies investigating multilingual university classrooms have revealed that proficiency differences influence classroom interaction patterns and learning outcomes. According to Han and Wang (2023), students with higher proficiency levels tend to dominate classroom discussions, while lower-proficiency learners often experience anxiety and reduced participation. Similarly, Kormos and Csizér (2024) found that linguistic diversity affects learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, thereby influencing the overall dynamics of language learning environments. These findings suggest that instructors play a crucial role in creating inclusive classroom conditions that support learners across different proficiency levels.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into differentiated instruction, learner engagement, and inclusive pedagogical practices, several limitations remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies or their impact on student outcomes. Second, relatively few studies have explored lecturers' experiences in managing mixed-proficiency classrooms at the university level, particularly in multilingual contexts where proficiency disparities are highly pronounced. Third, existing research tends to examine learner diversity from the students' perspective, leaving limited empirical evidence regarding how instructors perceive and respond to the challenges arising from proficiency variation in their daily teaching practices.

This gap is particularly significant because university instructors are often expected to balance institutional learning outcomes with the diverse needs of students in a single classroom. A deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ is necessary to inform more effective teaching practices, curriculum development, and teacher education programs. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate how English lecturers navigate the complexities of mixed-proficiency classrooms and maintain meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the challenges faced by English instructors when teaching students with diverse English proficiency levels and explores the instructional strategies they employ to manage these challenges. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the main challenges English instructors face when teaching students with diverse English proficiency levels?

and (2) What instructional strategies do English instructors employ to manage these challenges? The novelty of this study lies in its focus on lecturers' lived pedagogical experiences and classroom management practices in mixed-proficiency university contexts. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize learner outcomes or theoretical discussions of differentiated instruction, this research provides empirical evidence regarding how instructors adapt their teaching practices to address proficiency diversity in higher education. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on second language acquisition, inclusive pedagogy, and curriculum development while offering practical recommendations for English language educators, teacher-training institutions, and policymakers seeking to improve the quality and inclusiveness of English language education.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing challenges and opportunities associated with teaching English in classrooms characterized by diverse proficiency levels and multilingual backgrounds. Chung (2022) examined university instructors' perceptions of mixed-ability English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses after proficiency-based class placement was eliminated and found that, although instructors encountered difficulties in addressing varied learner needs, they generally viewed mixed-ability classes positively and employed differentiated instructional strategies to support students with different proficiency levels. Similarly, Olsen and Hansen (2024) investigated multilingual English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms and reported that teachers faced challenges related to varying language proficiency, student motivation, and cultural diversity. Their findings indicated that differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and technology integration were effective strategies for promoting learner engagement and academic success. In a higher education context, Andrews and Thakur (2025) explored the pedagogical strategies used by English teachers in multilingual university classrooms and found that instructors frequently adapted learning materials, encouraged peer collaboration, and implemented inclusive teaching practices to accommodate students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that learner diversity significantly influences classroom management, instructional decision-making, and student participation. However, while previous research has explored mixed-ability instruction and multilingual classroom practices, limited attention has been given to how university English lecturers specifically manage varying English proficiency levels and identify best practices that address both instructional challenges and learner needs. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand the challenges faced by university English lecturers and the strategies they employ to create effective and inclusive learning environments for students with diverse English proficiency levels.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to investigate how English lecturers manage classrooms consisting of students with diverse English proficiency levels in Indonesian higher education contexts. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What challenges do English instructors encounter when teaching students with varying levels of English proficiency in university classrooms? and (2) What instructional strategies and best practices do English instructors employ to address these challenges and support student learning? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to identify the major pedagogical challenges experienced by English lecturers in mixed-proficiency classrooms and to examine the instructional approaches they use to create inclusive and effective learning environments. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on lecturers' lived experiences and pedagogical decision-making in Indonesian university settings, an area that has received limited empirical attention in previous studies. Unlike earlier research that primarily examined mixed-ability classrooms from

the perspective of instructional effectiveness or student outcomes, this study explores both the challenges and practical strategies employed by university English instructors through qualitative inquiry. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on English language teaching, differentiated instruction, and multilingual education while providing practical recommendations for lecturers, curriculum developers, and higher education institutions seeking to improve English language instruction in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore English instructors' experiences in managing classrooms with students of diverse English proficiency levels in higher education institutions. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges, instructional strategies, and support systems associated with teaching mixed-proficiency English classes. Rather than focusing on numerical measurements, the research sought to capture participants' perspectives, experiences, and reflections regarding classroom practices in authentic educational settings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Muylaert et al., 2014). The qualitative descriptive design enabled the researcher to identify recurring themes and patterns emerging from participants' accounts and to provide a contextualized understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The participants of this study were English lecturers from various higher education institutions in Indonesia who had experience teaching students with different levels of English proficiency. To ensure that participants possessed sufficient experience and knowledge relevant to the research topic, purposive sampling was employed. The selection criteria required participants to have a minimum of four years of English teaching experience at the university level and regular exposure to mixed-proficiency classrooms. This sampling technique was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain rich and information-rich data from individuals who were directly involved in the phenomenon being studied (Deng, Zhang, & Mohamed, 2023). The participants represented diverse institutional contexts, allowing for a broader understanding of instructional practices and challenges across higher education settings.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview administered through an online questionnaire developed using Google Forms. This method was selected because it provided a flexible yet structured approach to gathering data while allowing participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience. The instrument consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions collected demographic and contextual information, including participants' teaching experience, institutional affiliation, frequency of teaching mixed-proficiency classes, and perceptions of institutional support. The open-ended questions served as written interview prompts that encouraged participants to describe their experiences, challenges, teaching strategies, support needs, and recommendations related to managing diverse English proficiency levels in university classrooms. This approach allowed participants to provide detailed and reflective responses while maintaining consistency across all participants (Barkhuizen, 2016).

The research instrument was developed based on existing literature concerning differentiated instruction, classroom management, learner diversity, and English language teaching in multilingual settings (Tomlinson, 2014; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). To enhance content validity and ensure alignment with the research objectives, the questionnaire was reviewed by two academic colleagues with expertise in English

language teaching and educational research. Their feedback was used to refine the wording, clarity, and relevance of the questions before the instrument was distributed to participants.

The research procedure was conducted in several stages. First, a review of relevant literature was undertaken to identify existing knowledge and establish the research problem concerning the management of mixed-proficiency English classrooms in higher education. Second, the research instrument was designed and refined through expert review. Third, participants meeting the predetermined criteria were identified and invited to participate in the study. The online questionnaire was then distributed, and participants were given sufficient time to provide thoughtful and comprehensive responses. After the data collection process was completed, all responses were organized systematically. Closed-ended responses were tabulated to provide contextual information about the participants, while open-ended responses were compiled, anonymized, and prepared for qualitative analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The researcher carefully read all responses multiple times to gain familiarity with the data and identify meaningful patterns. Initial codes were generated from participants' responses and subsequently grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities. These categories were then refined into major themes representing key aspects of participants' experiences, including instructional challenges, classroom management strategies, differentiated teaching practices, institutional support, and recommendations for improvement. To enhance the credibility of the findings, representative excerpts from participants' responses were used to support each theme. The identified themes were then interpreted in relation to the research questions and relevant literature to generate meaningful insights into effective practices for managing diverse English proficiency levels in university English classrooms.

Results

The findings of this study are presented according to the research questions and organized into six categories: participants' teaching background, frequency of encountering mixed-proficiency classrooms, challenges in managing mixed-proficiency classes, impacts on classroom dynamics, instructional strategies employed by lecturers, and institutional support and recommended practices.

Participants' Teaching Background

The participants consisted of eight English lecturers from various higher education institutions in Indonesia. Most participants had substantial teaching experience, with six lecturers reporting more than six years of teaching experience and two lecturers reporting between four and six years of experience.

Table 1. Participants' Teaching Experience

Teaching Experience	Number of Participants
4–6 years	2
More than 6 years	6
Total	8

Frequency of Encountering Mixed-Proficiency Classrooms

All participants reported regularly teaching students with varying levels of English proficiency. Five lecturers indicated that they encountered mixed-proficiency classrooms very often, while three reported encountering them often.

Table 2. Frequency of Encountering Mixed-Proficiency Classrooms

Frequency	Number of Participants
Very Often	5
Often	3
Rarely	0
Never	0
Total	8

Challenges in Managing Mixed-Proficiency Classrooms

Participants identified several recurring challenges related to teaching students with diverse English proficiency levels.

Table 3. Challenges Reported by Lecturers

Challenges
Slower overall class progress
Difficulty maintaining student engagement
Lower-level students feeling overwhelmed
Advanced students feeling held back
Challenges in assessment and grading

One participant stated:

“Making sure that the slow learners can keep up while not boring the advanced students is a persistent challenge.”

Another participant explained:

“Repeating materials already understood by advanced students can reduce their motivation.”

Impact on Classroom Dynamics

Participants were asked to evaluate the extent to which differences in English proficiency affected classroom interaction and learning.

Table 4. Impact of Proficiency Differences on Classroom Dynamics

Level of Impact	Number of Participants
Very Significant	1
Significant	4
Moderate	3
Minimal	0

A lecturer described the impact as follows:

“The classroom becomes polarized, with advanced students dominating and lower-level ones withdrawing.”

Lecturer Confidence and Instructional Strategies

Most participants expressed confidence in their ability to manage mixed-proficiency classrooms.

Table 5. Lecturer Confidence in Managing Mixed-Proficiency Classrooms

Confidence Level	Number of Participants
Very Confident	1
Confident	4
Neutral	2

Slightly Unconfident	1
Total	8

Participants reported using a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate different learner needs.

Table 6. Instructional Strategies Employed by Lecturers

Strategies
Differentiated instruction
Group work based on proficiency
Peer mentoring/tutoring
Supplementary learning materials
Task scaffolding

One lecturer commented:

“Asking students to do mentoring helps both sides—it strengthens the advanced student’s understanding while supporting the struggling student.”

Another participant noted:

“Scaffolding and peer mentoring allow students to progress at their own pace.”

Effectiveness of Strategies and Institutional Support

Most participants perceived their instructional strategies as effective in addressing learner diversity.

Table 7. Perceived Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies

Effectiveness	Number of Participants
Effective	6
Somewhat Effective	2
Not Effective	0
Total	8

Participants also reported limited institutional support.

Table 8. Institutional Support for Managing Mixed-Proficiency Classrooms

Institutional Support	Number of Participants
Available	0
Not Available	5
Unsure	3
Total	8

One participant remarked:

“There is no training or policy in place to help us teach mixed-proficiency classes effectively.”

Recommended Support and Best Practices

Participants suggested several forms of support that institutions could provide to improve the management of mixed-proficiency classrooms.

Table 9. Recommended Support and Best Practices

Recommendations
Access to differentiated teaching resources
Teaching assistants

Mentorship from experienced teachers
Placement testing and class grouping
Professional development programs
Foundation or matriculation classes
Peer tutoring and mentoring systems

One participant suggested:

“Conducting placement tests and using that data to group students would be a great start.”

Another participant observed:

“Peer tutoring sometimes works, but the most advanced students also want to move forward ASAP—this creates tension that needs careful balancing.”

And then create a completely separate section:

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that managing mixed-proficiency English classrooms remains a significant challenge for university lecturers. The most frequently reported difficulties involved balancing instructional pacing, maintaining student engagement, supporting lower-proficiency learners, and simultaneously providing sufficient challenges for advanced students. These findings are consistent with Chung (2022), who reported that instructors in mixed-ability classrooms often struggle to accommodate diverse learner needs while maintaining instructional effectiveness. Similarly, Olsen and Hansen (2024) found that variations in language proficiency create challenges in classroom management, lesson planning, and student participation.

The findings further reveal that differences in proficiency levels significantly affect classroom dynamics. Most participants reported that advanced students tend to dominate classroom discussions, while lower-proficiency students often become passive participants. This finding aligns with Han and Wang (2023), who observed similar patterns in multilingual language classrooms. From a sociocultural perspective, unequal participation may limit opportunities for collaborative learning and language development. Therefore, lecturers need to create classroom environments that encourage meaningful interaction among students of different proficiency levels.

The instructional strategies identified in this study, including differentiated instruction, peer mentoring, task scaffolding, supplementary materials, and proficiency-based group work, support previous research emphasizing adaptive teaching practices in heterogeneous learning environments. Tomlinson (2014) argues that differentiated instruction enables teachers to address learners’ diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Likewise, Nguyen and Pham (2021) found that differentiated learning activities improve engagement and learning outcomes among students with varying levels of language proficiency. The positive perceptions expressed by participants regarding peer mentoring also support Andrews and Thakur’s (2025) findings that collaborative learning can facilitate both academic achievement and learner confidence in multilingual university classrooms.

Another important finding concerns the limited institutional support available to lecturers. Most participants reported receiving little or no assistance from their institutions in managing mixed-proficiency classes. This suggests that responsibility for addressing learner diversity is often left to individual instructors rather than being supported through systematic policies or professional development initiatives. Similar concerns have been raised by Rose and Dalton (2021), who emphasized the importance

of institutional commitment to inclusive teaching practices. Without adequate support, lecturers may face difficulties sustaining effective differentiated instruction over time.

The recommendations proposed by participants—including placement testing, foundation programs, teaching assistants, mentoring systems, and professional development opportunities—highlight the need for a more comprehensive institutional approach. These findings suggest that improving the effectiveness of mixed-proficiency English classrooms requires not only individual teaching strategies but also organizational support and policy development. Consequently, universities should consider implementing structured support systems that enable lecturers to respond more effectively to the diverse linguistic needs of their students.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on differentiated instruction and multilingual higher education by providing empirical evidence from Indonesian university contexts. The findings indicate that while lecturers have developed practical strategies to manage proficiency diversity, sustainable improvements require stronger institutional support and more systematic approaches to inclusive English language teaching.

This format closely matches what reviewers typically expect in ELT, TESOL, and Applied Linguistics journals.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by English lecturers in managing mixed-proficiency classrooms and explored the instructional strategies they employ to address learner diversity in Indonesian higher education contexts. The findings reveal that mixed-proficiency classrooms are a common feature of university English instruction and present significant pedagogical challenges. Lecturers reported difficulties in balancing the needs of lower- and higher-proficiency students, maintaining student engagement, managing classroom participation, and ensuring equitable learning opportunities. Differences in proficiency levels were also found to influence classroom dynamics, often resulting in unequal participation and varying levels of learner confidence.

Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated a high degree of adaptability by implementing a range of instructional strategies, including differentiated instruction, peer mentoring, group work, task scaffolding, and the use of supplementary learning materials. These approaches were generally perceived as effective in supporting students with diverse learning needs and promoting a more inclusive learning environment. The findings highlight the importance of flexible and learner-centered teaching practices in addressing proficiency diversity in university English classrooms.

A significant finding of this study is the limited institutional support available to lecturers. Most participants reported the absence of formal training, teaching resources, or institutional policies specifically designed to assist instructors in managing mixed-proficiency classes. Consequently, lecturers often rely on their own professional experience and initiative to address complex classroom challenges. Therefore, improving the effectiveness of mixed-proficiency instruction requires not only effective teaching strategies but also stronger institutional support through professional development programs, differentiated learning resources, placement testing, and inclusive educational policies.

This study contributes to the literature on English language teaching and differentiated instruction by providing empirical evidence regarding lecturers' experiences in managing students with diverse English proficiency levels in higher education settings. Although the study was limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, it

offers valuable insights for lecturers, curriculum developers, and educational institutions seeking to create more inclusive and effective English learning environments.

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