



## One Classroom, Many Levels: Combining Methods for Effective Language Teaching in Mixed-Level Classrooms

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**Abstract.** Mixed-level language classrooms have become increasingly prevalent in both ESL and EFL settings as a result of inclusive education policies, diverse learner populations, and flexible enrollment practices. In such environments, teachers face pedagogical challenges related to pacing, engagement, assessment, and classroom management due to differences in student proficiency. This study investigates the impact of integrating differentiated instruction, task-based language teaching (TBLT), collaborative learning, and technology-supported strategies within multi-level language classrooms. Employing a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, the research analyzes student achievement, engagement, and perceived self-efficacy over a 12-week intervention period. The findings indicate that a blended methodological approach significantly enhances learner participation, language achievement, and classroom cohesion. The results underscore the value of combining adaptive and collaborative instructional practices to effectively address heterogeneous proficiency levels.

**Keywords:** mixed-level classrooms, differentiated instruction, task-based learning, blended learning, language pedagogy

### Introduction

The increasing diversity among language learners has resulted in a growing number of mixed-ability or multi-level classrooms across primary, secondary, tertiary, and private language education contexts. Factors such as global mobility, inclusive education initiatives, migration patterns, and flexible placement systems have contributed to learning environments where students vary considerably in linguistic competence, educational background, motivation, cognitive styles, and learning pace (Tomlinson, 2014). While heterogeneous classrooms create opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative development, they also present substantial challenges for

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educators who must address varied learner needs without diminishing instructional quality. In many settings, teachers are required to support beginners and advanced learners within the same classroom. Although such diversity can encourage peer-supported growth, it also increases pedagogical complexity.

Traditional uniform teaching models are often ineffective in these contexts. Research indicates that integrating multiple instructional frameworks—such as differentiated instruction, task-based learning, and cooperative learning—can foster inclusive and adaptable learning environments (Ellis, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, technology-enhanced instruction offers opportunities for individualized pacing and scaffolded assistance (Chapelle, 2001).

Mixed-level classrooms challenge conventional assumptions of learner homogeneity. A single pacing strategy may overwhelm lower-proficiency learners while failing to sufficiently challenge more advanced students. Likewise, whole-class instruction centered on a single textbook frequently overlooks disparities in vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, fluency, and communicative confidence. As Tomlinson (2014) emphasizes, effective instruction requires responsiveness to learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles—an expectation that becomes especially critical in heterogeneous classrooms.

Beyond proficiency variation, affective variables further complicate instruction in multi-level settings (Babazade, 2024). Lower-level learners may experience anxiety, diminished self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation, whereas higher-level learners may lose motivation if tasks lack appropriate cognitive challenge. Second language acquisition research highlights the importance of comprehensible input, meaningful interaction, and scaffolded support (Ellis, 2003). In mixed-level environments, ensuring that instructional input remains accessible yet sufficiently demanding for all learners requires deliberate and strategic lesson design rather than reliance on traditional lecture-based methods (Alisoy, 2025).

Sociocultural theory provides a constructive lens through which proficiency diversity can be viewed as an instructional asset rather than a limitation. Vygotsky (1978) proposes that learning occurs through social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners accomplish tasks beyond their independent capability with appropriate guidance. In multi-level classrooms, higher-proficiency students can serve as peer scaffolds, supporting collaborative knowledge construction. However, these benefits do not occur automatically; they depend on carefully structured tasks, clearly assigned roles, and purposeful grouping strategies.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a practical strategy for addressing proficiency differences. By structuring lessons around authentic communicative tasks rather than isolated language forms, TBLT enables learners to participate according to their linguistic capacity while contributing to shared objectives (Ellis, 2003). For example, during a problem-solving task, lower-level learners may supply essential vocabulary or simple expressions, while advanced learners



expand ideas and refine discourse. This layered participation allows differentiated output within common classroom goals.

In parallel, differentiated instruction provides structured mechanisms for adapting content, process, and assessment (Alisoy, 2023). Approaches such as tiered tasks, flexible grouping, learning agreements, and scaffolded materials allow teachers to maintain shared objectives while adjusting complexity levels (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiation does not reduce expectations; rather, it ensures equitable access to learning outcomes.

Technological developments have further enhanced strategies for managing classroom heterogeneity. Digital tools and adaptive learning platforms facilitate individualized practice, real-time feedback, and self-directed progression. Research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) indicates that technology can complement classroom instruction by addressing individual learning gaps without isolating students from collaborative interaction (Chapelle, 2001). In blended learning environments, technology functions as supportive reinforcement rather than a substitute for teacher guidance (Babayev, 2025).

Despite strong theoretical justification for combining instructional approaches, empirical studies examining integrated pedagogical models in mixed-level language classrooms remain relatively limited. Much of the existing research concentrates on isolated interventions rather than comprehensive frameworks reflecting authentic classroom complexity. Therefore, further investigation is required to explore how complementary strategies—differentiation, task-based instruction, collaboration, and technology integration—can be systematically combined to enhance outcomes in heterogeneous settings.

This study aims to address that gap by analyzing the effects of a blended methodological framework in a multi-level English language classroom (Javid & Sayyara, 2024). Specifically, it examines whether integrating differentiated instruction with task-based and collaborative learning, supported by technological tools, can enhance language proficiency, learner engagement, and self-efficacy. By grounding the research in established theoretical perspectives and practical classroom realities, the study seeks to contribute both empirical evidence and practical guidance for educators working in diverse language learning environments.

The study explores how integrating complementary instructional approaches can improve effectiveness in mixed-level classrooms. It addresses the following research questions:

1. Does the integration of differentiated instruction and task-based learning enhance language performance in multi-level classrooms?
2. How does a blended methodological approach influence student engagement and self-efficacy?



3. What classroom dynamics emerge from collaborative and technology-supported instruction?

## Methods

### Research Design

This research utilized a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to evaluate the effectiveness of a combined pedagogical framework in a mixed-level English language classroom. The quantitative component assessed changes in language proficiency, engagement, and self-efficacy through pre- and post-intervention measures. The qualitative component examined classroom interaction patterns, learner perceptions, and instructional processes through systematic observations and interviews.

A non-randomized control group design was implemented because intact classes were assigned to experimental and comparison conditions in order to maintain institutional scheduling requirements. The intervention was conducted over 12 weeks, with three 90-minute sessions per week, resulting in a total of 54 instructional hours.

### Participants

The study involved 48 students enrolled in an intermediate English course at a public language institute. Diagnostic placement testing indicated proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B2 according to the CEFR. Participants were divided into an experimental group ( $n = 24$ ) and a comparison group ( $n = 24$ ). Both groups were instructed by teachers with comparable qualifications and a minimum of five years of teaching experience. To minimize instructor-related bias, both teachers participated in weekly collaborative planning sessions; however, only the experimental group implemented the integrated instructional framework.

### Instructional Intervention

The experimental group received instruction integrating the following components:

1. **Differentiated Instruction** – Tiered assignments, flexible grouping structures, and scaffolded materials tailored to varying proficiency levels.
2. **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)** – Authentic communicative tasks designed to encourage cross-level collaboration.
3. **Collaborative Learning** – Peer tutoring and mixed-proficiency group work aimed at promoting scaffolding and shared responsibility.
4. **Technology Integration** – Adaptive digital platforms providing individualized grammar and vocabulary practice.



The comparison group followed a traditional textbook-centered instructional approach characterized by whole-class teaching.

## Instruments

### 1. Language Proficiency Test

A standardized CEFR-aligned English proficiency assessment measured reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities. Speaking tasks were evaluated using an analytic rubric assessing fluency, grammatical accuracy, lexical range, and interactional competence.

### 2. Student Engagement Scale

A validated 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire measured behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for this study was .88.

### 3. Language Learning Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Adapted from established second language self-efficacy instruments, this questionnaire assessed learners' confidence in speaking, writing, comprehension, and task completion ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### 4. Classroom Observation Protocol

An observation checklist documented:

- Distribution of participation
- Target language use
- Peer scaffolding behaviors
- On-task behavior frequency

Each class was observed on four separate occasions during the intervention period.

### 5. Semi-Structured Interviews

At the conclusion of the study, 10 students (five from each group, representing diverse proficiency levels) participated in interviews exploring their perceptions of the learning experience, instructional challenges, and overall classroom climate.

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative Analysis

- Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to assess within-group improvements.
- Independent-sample t-tests compared post-test results between groups.
- Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to evaluate practical significance.
- Subgroup analyses examined performance gains among A2, B1, and B2 learners separately.

Statistical significance was established at  $p < .05$ .



## Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed using thematic coding. Identified categories included:

- Scaffolding behaviors
- Equity in participation
- Indicators of motivation
- Perceived clarity of instruction
- Usability of technological tools

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the overall validity of the study.

## Results

This section presents both quantitative and qualitative findings related to language proficiency, engagement, self-efficacy, subgroup performance variation, patterns of technology use, and classroom interaction dynamics.

### 1. Language Proficiency Outcomes

#### 1.1 Within-Group Comparisons

##### Experimental Group (n = 24)

Paired-sample t-tests demonstrated statistically significant improvement across all four language skills:

- Reading:  $t(23) = 3.84, p < .01$
- Listening:  $t(23) = 4.12, p < .001$
- Writing:  $t(23) = 5.26, p < .001$
- Speaking:  $t(23) = 6.03, p < .001$

The overall proficiency mean increased from B1.1 (M = 62.4/100) to B1.9 (M = 74.8/100). The calculated effect size for total score improvement was Cohen's  $d = 0.89$ , reflecting a large practical effect.

##### Comparison Group (n = 24)

The comparison group showed moderate gains:

- Reading and listening improved significantly ( $p < .05$ )
- Writing gains approached significance ( $p = .07$ )
- Speaking did not show statistically significant improvement

The overall proficiency mean increased from B1.2 (M = 63.1/100) to B1.5 (M = 69.2/100), with a medium effect size ( $d = 0.46$ ).

#### 1.2 Between-Group Comparisons



Independent-sample t-tests conducted on post-test results indicated statistically significant differences favoring the experimental group:

- Speaking:  $t(46) = 3.97, p < .001$
- Writing:  $t(46) = 3.21, p < .01$
- Overall proficiency:  $t(46) = 2.88, p < .01$

The most substantial between-group differences were observed in productive skills, particularly speaking fluency and interactional competence.

## 2. Subgroup Analysis by Proficiency Level

To determine whether learning gains varied according to initial proficiency, subgroup analyses were performed for A2, B1, and B2 learners within the experimental group.

- **A2 learners (n = 8):**

Mean gain = +16.3 points

Significant improvement in speaking confidence and grammatical accuracy

- **B1 learners (n = 10):**

Mean gain = +11.4 points

Marked development in discourse organization and vocabulary breadth

- **B2 learners (n = 6):**

Mean gain = +8.1 points

Primary improvements in pragmatic competence and argument structure

Lower-proficiency learners demonstrated the greatest relative gains, suggesting that structured scaffolding and peer collaboration effectively reduced achievement disparities. At the same time, higher-level learners continued to progress, indicating that differentiated extension tasks successfully prevented stagnation.

## 3. Student Engagement

Engagement was assessed across three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.

### 3.1 Experimental Group

Mean engagement scores increased from 3.2 to 3.9 (on a 5-point scale), reflecting a 22% improvement.

- Behavioral engagement (frequency of participation) demonstrated the most substantial growth.
- Emotional engagement (interest and enjoyment) increased particularly during task-based projects (Naghiyeva, 2025).



- Cognitive engagement (investment of effort) improved notably among lower-proficiency learners.

### 3.2 Comparison Group

Engagement scores rose modestly from 3.3 to 3.6, representing an 8% increase. Improvements were largely confined to behavioral participation.

Post-test engagement differences between groups were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ), with a medium-to-large effect size ( $d = 0.72$ ).

### 4. Self-Efficacy in Language Learning

Self-efficacy scores increased significantly in the experimental group:

- Speaking confidence increased by 28%
- Writing confidence increased by 21%
- Listening comprehension confidence increased by 18%

Lower-proficiency learners reported the greatest improvement in speaking confidence, often attributing their progress to peer scaffolding and clearly structured task roles.

In contrast, the comparison group showed modest overall gains (average 9%), primarily related to grammatical understanding rather than communicative confidence.

### 5. Classroom Interaction Patterns

Observation data indicated clear differences in classroom dynamics.

#### 5.1 Participation Distribution

In the experimental group:

- Participation became evenly distributed across proficiency levels by Week 6.
- Turn-taking in mixed-level discussions grew more balanced.
- Lower-proficiency learners increasingly initiated interactions over time.

In the comparison group:

- Higher-level learners accounted for approximately 60% of voluntary responses.
- Lower-level learners demonstrated limited spontaneous participation.

#### 5.2 Peer Scaffolding Behaviors

The experimental group showed growing evidence of:

- Vocabulary prompting
- Sentence reformulation assistance



- Clarification requests
- Collaborative problem-solving

Over time, these scaffolding behaviors became more autonomous and required less teacher intervention.

## 6. Technology Usage and Performance Correlation

Analytics from the digital platform indicated:

- Average weekly usage: 34 minutes
- Completion rate: 87% of assigned adaptive activities

A moderate positive correlation ( $r = .48$ ) was identified between completion of digital practice and overall proficiency gains, particularly in grammar accuracy and listening comprehension.

Students who consistently completed adaptive exercises demonstrated faster reduction of individual language gaps.

## 7. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed four primary themes.

### 7.1 Reduced Anxiety

Lower-level learners reported feeling “less afraid to speak” due to structured group roles and peer support.

### 7.2 Increased Autonomy

Students described greater responsibility for their learning through choice-based tasks and technology-supported practice.

### 7.3 Perceived Fairness

Participants noted that tiered assignments allowed everyone to “work at the appropriate level” without feeling labeled.

### 7.4 Enhanced Classroom Cohesion

Mixed-level collaboration was frequently described as “supportive” and “motivating,” contributing to a stronger sense of classroom community.

## 8. Summary of Key Findings

1. The blended instructional framework significantly improved overall language proficiency, particularly in productive skills.



2. Lower-proficiency learners demonstrated the greatest relative gains, reflecting effective scaffolding.
3. Engagement and self-efficacy increased more substantially in the experimental group than in the comparison group.
4. Classroom participation became more equitable over time.
5. Technology integration supported individualized reduction of learning gaps.

Overall, the findings provide empirical evidence supporting the integration of differentiated instruction, task-based learning, collaborative strategies, and adaptive technology in mixed-level language classrooms (Nuri, 2025).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether integrating differentiated instruction, task-based language teaching (TBLT), collaborative learning, and technology-supported instruction could enhance outcomes in mixed-level language classrooms. The results offer strong empirical support for a blended methodological approach, particularly in improving productive skills, learner engagement, and self-efficacy while narrowing proficiency gaps.

The findings align with sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), particularly the concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. When strategically organized, mixed-level grouping enables more proficient learners to support peers while consolidating their own understanding.

The incorporation of task-based learning corresponds with communicative competence frameworks (Ellis, 2003). Authentic tasks allowed learners of varying proficiency levels to contribute meaningfully according to their abilities. Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014) further ensured accessibility without oversimplifying content.

Technology-supported learning contributed to individualized pacing, consistent with CALL research (Chapelle, 2001). Adaptive platforms offered immediate feedback and adjusted difficulty levels, helping to address differences in learning speed.

## Impact on Lower-Proficiency Learners

A particularly significant finding was the marked improvement among A2-level learners. These students achieved the largest relative gains in both proficiency and self-efficacy. In mixed-level contexts, lower-proficiency learners may risk marginalization or withdrawal (Sadiqzade & Alisoy, 2024). However, structured peer interaction and tiered task design appeared to reduce these risks.

Interview data indicating reduced speaking anxiety suggest that collaborative frameworks promote psychological safety. When learners are assigned supportive roles and provided with linguistic



scaffolds (such as sentence frames and vocabulary banks), participation becomes manageable rather than intimidating. The increase in self-efficacy is especially meaningful, given its strong association with long-term persistence and achievement.

These findings demonstrate that mixed-level classrooms, when thoughtfully structured, can operate as inclusive environments rather than sources of inequity.

### **Benefits for Higher-Proficiency Learners**

Although lower-level learners showed greater relative gains, higher-proficiency students also benefited from the integrated framework. Supporting peers and negotiating meaning likely enhanced their metalinguistic awareness and discourse competence. Extension tasks prevented redundancy and sustained cognitive challenge.

This addresses concerns that differentiation may hinder advanced learners. Instead, the results suggest that role-based collaboration and tiered complexity promote continued progression while fostering leadership and interpersonal skills.

### **Classroom Climate and Engagement**

The significant increase in engagement scores reflects both cognitive and emotional development. Engagement in the experimental group extended beyond participation frequency to deeper task involvement and sustained attention. Observation data demonstrating more equitable participation further confirm the effectiveness of structured grouping.

Interview findings regarding strengthened classroom cohesion indicate that collaborative mixed-level instruction positively influences social dynamics. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical proficiency divisions, structured collaboration encouraged mutual support. Such social cohesion is essential, as a positive classroom climate enhances motivation and willingness to take linguistic risks.

Overall, the findings suggest that no single instructional approach sufficiently addresses the complexity of multi-level classrooms. Instead, an integrated pedagogical model promotes inclusivity, engagement, and measurable gains in proficiency.

### **Conclusion**

Mixed-level language classrooms present significant instructional challenges, yet they also offer valuable opportunities for collaborative and differentiated learning. This study demonstrates that integrating differentiated instruction, task-based language teaching, collaborative strategies, and technology-supported learning can substantially improve language proficiency, engagement, and self-efficacy among learners with varied proficiency levels. Lower-proficiency students particularly benefited from structured scaffolding and peer interaction, while higher-proficiency learners continued to advance through cognitively demanding extension tasks. Importantly, the



integrated framework reduced participation disparities and fostered a more inclusive and supportive classroom climate.

Rather than relying on uniform teaching models, language educators should implement flexible, multi-method strategies that balance shared objectives with differentiated pathways. By combining social interaction with individualized digital support, teachers can transform heterogeneity from a limitation into a pedagogical strength. Ultimately, effective mixed-level instruction requires intentional planning, adaptability, and a commitment to equitable language development for all learners (Huseyn & Babayev, 2025).

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