DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN A MIXED ABILITY ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This study investigated the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in mixed-ability ESL classrooms, focusing on the perspectives of Malaysian pre-service teachers. The research aimed to explore impacts of wide proficiency level gaps in a classroom towards DI implementation by looking into teachers' perceptions and finally analyzing the benefits and drawbacks of DI in these types of classrooms. A quantitative survey design was employed, utilizing a close-ended questionnaire distributed to 100 pre-service teachers from an Institute of Teacher Education, selected via purposive sampling. The findings revealed that participants possessed a high level of understanding and held positive perceptions of DI, recognizing its benefits in adapting content, process, and assessment to cater to diverse learners. They acknowledged that DI fosters an inclusive environment, increases student motivation, and promotes peer collaboration. However, significant challenges were reported, including the considerable time required for lesson preparation, difficulties in classroom management, and the complexity of fair assessment. These challenges were exacerbated in classrooms with wide proficiency-level gaps, which hindered the consistent and effective application of DI. The study concludes that while pre-service teachers value DI as a pedagogical approach, its successful implementation is constrained by practical difficulties related to large class sizes and extreme student diversity. Implications for teacher training and classroom streaming policies are discussed.

***Keywords*:** differentiated instruction, mixed-ability classrooms, proficiency level gaps, pre-service teachers.

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneliti penggunaan strategi pengajaran terbeza (Differentiated Instruction, DI) dalam bilik darjah pengajian Inggeris keupayaan pelbagai dalam kalangan guru pelatih di Malaysia. Tujuan kajian ini dilakukan adalah untuk menilai kesan menggunakan pengajaran terbeza terhadap murid yang mempunyai jurang prestasi akademik yang luas di dalam sesuatu kelas, dengan meneroka pendapat guru, dan menganalisis kebaikan dan keburukan pengajaran terbeza dalam situasi kelas tersebut. Berpandukan objektif ini, kajian ini menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan tinjauan kuantitatif melibatkan

100 guru pelatih opsyen pengajian Inggeris melalui soalan selidik tertutup. Responden dipilih daripada Institut Pendidikan Guru menggunakan pensampelan bertujuan, khusus kepada guru pelatih yang telah menyelesaikan sekurang-kurangnya praktikum fasa pertama. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa guru pelatih mempunya tahap pemahaman yang tinggi serta persepsi yang positif terhadap penggunaan pengajaran terbeza, khususnya dalam menyesuaikan kandungan, pelaksanaan, dan penilaian bagi memenuhi keperluan pelajar yang pelbagai. Walaubagaimanapun, kekangan seperti pengalaman mengajar yang terhad dan pengurusan masa, ditambah dengan bilangan pelajar yang ramai serta jurang prestasi akademik yang luas, masih dapat menjejaskan pelaksanaan pengajaran terbeza secara konsisten. Secara keseluruhannya, walaupun guru pelatih sedar akan kepentingan menggunakan pengajaran terbeza dalam bilik darjah, cabaran yang dihadapi sering menghalang pelaksanaannya secara berkesan. Jadi, dapatan dari kajian ini berharap dapat membantu guru dalam menguruskan jumlah pelajar yang besar dan untuk penggubal polisi untuk mengubah sistem bilik darjah supaya jurang prestasi dalam sesuatu kelas tidak terlalu besar dan terkawal.

Kata kunci**:** pengajaran terbeza, kelas keupayaan pelbagai, jurang prestasi akademik, guru pelatih

INTRODUCTION

The one-size-fits-all teaching approach is increasingly ineffective in modern ESL classrooms, which are characterized by students from diverse backgrounds and varying proficiency levels (Umar & Aziz, 2024). Differentiated instruction (DI), a classroom teaching strategy pioneered by Tomlinson (2022), stated that it was possible to identify a particular teaching style to achieve maximum student achievement. DI moves beyond the traditional single-goal model, allowing teachers to set multiple, tailored learning objectives to ensure that all students, from struggling to advanced learners, can access and engage with the curriculum effectively (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021). Pupils also differ in their cultural backgrounds, learning habits, motivation, and personalities, which makes it difficult for teachers to use one teaching approach that fits everyone.

Despite its theoretical appeal, the practical implementation of DI presents significant challenges, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms with wide proficiency level gaps. Chea & Kuon (2024) reported that teachers often faced difficulties in handling mixed ability classrooms as they need to create multiple tiers of activities for a single lesson as it is time consuming and keep confusing the pupils. Other researchers also highlighted that many teachers have negative perceptions towards the use of DI as they find it rather distracting than helpful in the learning process (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021). Hajis & Othman (2024) on the other hand argued that the big number of students in a classroom may be caused by the lack of infrastructure in

schools which result in overwhelming proficiency level difference in a lesson. They also emphasize that teachers often struggle to set suitable learning targets when weak and advanced pupils are placed together, which may cause low achievers to become unmotivated and high achievers to feel restricted. Recent systematic reviews of differentiated instruction research indicate that although DI has been widely studied, the literature remains fragmented and limited in high-quality empirical evidence, with few studies that directly investigate the influence of large proficiency level differences on instructional outcomes hence suggesting that a critical gap exists in understanding the specific impact of large proficiency-level disparities on the successful execution of DI (Husin & Adnan, 2025).

This study, therefore, aims to bridge the gap by investigating pre-service teachers' experiences with DI in such contexts. The researcher belief that the classroom distribution system immensely affects the teaching and learning effectiveness, hence finds the need to address the issue. The rationale for this research lies in its potential to inform optimal classroom distribution policies. Ensuring pupils are placed in a conducive environment is essential because inappropriate grouping may hinder both teacher performance and pupils' learning progress. By exploring the challenges posed by wide proficiency gaps, this study provides evidence that can help policymakers and school administrators create more manageable and effective learning environments. The significance of this study extends to teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and policymakers, offering insights that can refine teacher training programs and classroom streaming practices to enhance both teaching efficacy and student learning outcomes.

Key limitation of this study is its focus on pre-service ESL teachers in a primary school context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported survey data also introduces the potential for respondent bias. Secondly, the scope of this study focused on the impacts of big proficiency level differences grouping in the implementation of DI. It did not focus on the suitability of the content of DI's influence on its successful implementation in the mixed-ability classroom. For data collection method, the use of survey questionnaires on teachers might have limited the perception that pupils and school administrators might have had on the effectiveness of DI in mixed-ability classrooms.

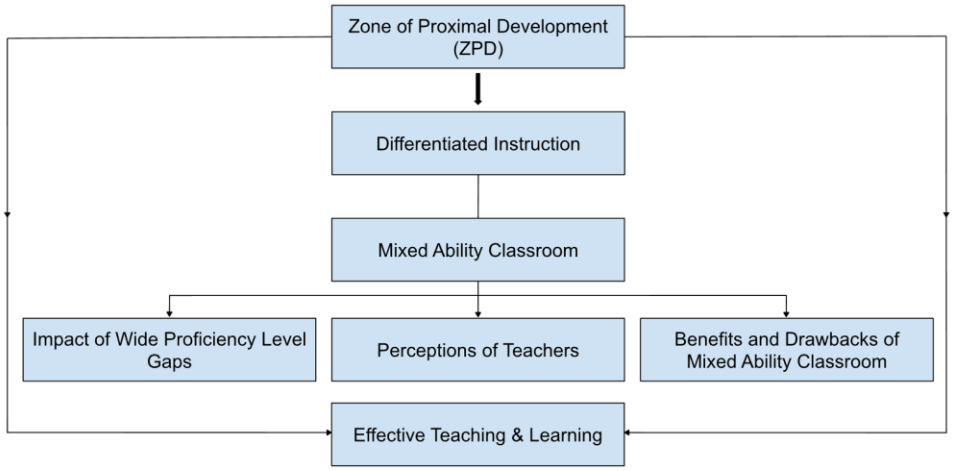
The research aims to i) explore the impact of varying proficiency level gaps on the successful implementation of DI in primary ESL classrooms, ii) explore teachers' perceptions in implementing DI in mixed-ability ESL classrooms, iii) analyze the potential benefits and drawbacks of DI in heterogeneous versus homogeneous classroom settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The modern ESL classroom is often a mixed-ability environment, characterized by clear differences in language proficiency, learning styles, and motivation among students (Bellil, 2020; Adhikary, 2023). They often came from diverse environments which affected their ability to adapt to learning content in the classroom. These differences can make lesson preparation more challenging for teachers. DI is widely advocated as a solution, defined as a teaching approach that maximizes student learning by meeting them where they are and carefully follow their individual pace to help with the learning process (Umar & Aziz, 2024). DI demands additional tasks from the teachers as they participate in adapting content, process, and product to match their diverse students' abilities (Tomlinson, 2022). It shifts the focus from pupil management to catering to individual learning abilities, acknowledging each learner as unique (Abramova & Mashoshina, 2021).

While the benefits of DI are well-documented, research also highlights considerable implementation challenges. These include the overwhelming preparation required for tiered tasks, insufficient teacher training, and difficulties in classroom management (Hajis & Othman, 2024). Previous study often investigated other factors that presumably affect DI implementation such as time constraint, classroom size, and infrastructure limitation. However, a specific underexplored area is how the scale of the proficiency gap itself acts as a critical barrier. Most studies address mixed ability as a general condition, without critically examining the point at which the range of abilities becomes unmanageable for effective implementation of DI. This study investigates the impact of wide proficiency disparities on DI's practicality and success from the perspective of pre-service teachers.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



This study is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which posits that optimal learning occurs when students are challenged with tasks that are slightly beyond their current ability but can be mastered with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. This theory is intrinsically linked to Differentiated Instruction (DI), which aims to tailor instruction to meet students at their individual readiness levels and scaffold their learning to reach their ZPD. However, when proficiency differences are extreme, teachers may struggle to provide appropriate scaffolding for every pupil, making it impossible to keep all pupils within their ZPD during a single lesson. The study leverages this framework to analyze whether excessively wide proficiency gaps in a classroom push some learners beyond their ZPD, thereby hindering the effective application of DI (Wibowo et al., 2025). The framework can be directly visualized in Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a survey design to obtain comprehensive data on pre-service teachers' perspectives regarding the use of differentiated instruction (DI) in mixed-ability ESL classrooms. This design was selected for its efficiency in collecting data from a large sample, allowing for the generalization of findings within the pre-service teacher population (Abramova and Mashoshina, 2021).

The respondents consisted of 100 full-time pre-service teachers enrolled in Institute of Teacher Education in Malaysia. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that all respondents had completed Practicum Phase 1. This was crucial because only participants with actual classroom teaching experience were capable of providing meaningful insights into the challenges of applying DI in real school contexts. The respondents experience teaching primary ESL classrooms during their practicum period, giving them firsthand exposure to the realities of mixed-ability teaching. Their experiences contributed valuable information on DI implementation, classroom diversity, and proficiency gaps, as these issues often emerge prominently during direct teaching practice.

The main instrument used in the study was a structured online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire was adapted and adopted from established instruments developed by Abramova and Mashoshina (2021) ensuring relevance and alignment with existing DI frameworks. The final questionnaire consisted of three major sections designed to address each research question. Section B focused on the impact of proficiency gaps, Section C explored teachers' perceptions toward DI, and Section D examined the benefits and drawbacks of DI in both heterogeneous and homogeneous settings. The instrument included 5 points Likert-scale items for measuring levels of agreement and multiple-choice questions for demographic information. This structure enabled the

researcher to quantify the respondents' responses, analyse trends, and assess the internal consistency of the constructs measured.

Following its development, the questionnaire underwent a pilot study to evaluate its validity and reliability prior to full-scale deployment. The test was conducted among 30 pre-service teachers who shared similar characteristics with the main sample. The pilot study revealed a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.895. This indicated that the items were coherent and reliably measured the intended constructs. Feedback from the pilot test led to minor revisions such as rewording ambiguous statements and adding brief clarifications to certain items. Content validity was further reinforced through expert review by specialists in ESL education and DI, who evaluated the alignment between the questionnaire items and the research objectives.

Data collection was carried out entirely online to allow convenient access for participants across different practicum placements. The Google Forms link was distributed via WhatsApp and Telegram, platforms commonly used by pre-service teachers. This approach increased the response rate and ensured timely data collection. Once collected, the data were transferred into SPSS version 29 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarise participants' responses and provide insight into central trends across the three research questions. The analysis procedures enabled the researcher to interpret pre-service teachers' perspectives systematically, providing a strong empirical foundation for the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that pre-service teachers generally hold positive perceptions of differentiated instruction and acknowledge its importance in supporting diverse learners in mixed-ability ESL classrooms. However, the results also demonstrate that large proficiency gaps present major obstacles to successful implementation, particularly in lesson preparation, classroom management and fair assessment.

Table 1

Impact of wide proficiency level gaps on DI implementation data analysis

Items	Mean (M)	(SD)
I find it challenging to design lessons that meet the needs of both low and high proficiency students.	4.01	0.893
The wider the proficiency gap, the harder it is to achieve lesson objectives.	4.23	0.79
Mixed-ability classrooms require significantly more preparation for each lesson.	4.56	0.499
Students at lower proficiency levels often struggle to keep up, even with modified materials.	3.89	0.952
High-proficiency students lose interest when content is simplified for others.	4.29	0.782
I need to create different versions of the same task to support learners at various levels.	4.59	0.605
It is difficult to maintain classroom pace with large proficiency differences.	4.43	0.671
Textbook materials are not suitable for pupils across a wide range of abilities.	4.01	1.115
Students with lower proficiency levels need more individualized support during DI lessons.	4.61	0.601
It is difficult to assess all students fairly in a mixed-proficiency classroom.	4.49	0.703
In large-gap classes, students do not progress at the same rate despite DI.	4.18	0.857
I often modify tasks to stretch higher-level students beyond the standard outcomes.	4.1	0.937
Differentiation becomes less effective when there are more than three proficiency tiers in one class.	4.08	1.032
Group activities are harder to manage when students' language levels vary widely.	3.94	1.043
In classes with smaller proficiency gaps, I can implement DI more effectively.	4.5	0.689
Pupils benefit most when learning tasks are just slightly beyond what they can do alone.	4.21	0.715
I often support pupils with prompts or guidance to help them complete slightly difficult tasks.	4.48	0.643

Table 1 explored challenges faced by pre-service teachers when applying DI in classes with large proficiency differences. The reliability value of 0.774 shows that the items were measured consistently. The overall mean score

of 72.60, together with a low standard deviation, indicates a high level of agreement among respondents that wide proficiency gaps create major obstacles. Items with the highest mean scores showed clear concerns. Respondents strongly agreed that lower proficiency students require more individualized attention (M = 4.61) and that teachers often need to prepare several versions of the same task to meet different learners' needs (M = 4.59). These results reflect the heavy preparation workload that DI demands, especially in large-gap classrooms.

Respondents also agreed that mixed-ability classes make it difficult to maintain lesson pace (M = 4.43). High-proficiency students tend to lose interest when content is simplified, while lower-proficiency students struggle even when materials are modified. Teachers also agreed that learning improves when tasks are slightly beyond what students can do independently, supporting the need for careful differentiation. Assessment was another concern, with high agreement that assessing fairly in wide-gap classes is challenging (M = 4.49). Respondents also noted that achieving lesson objectives becomes more difficult when proficiency gaps widen.

Items with lower mean scores were related to classroom management. Although some pre-service teachers said group activities became harder to manage (M = 3.94), the high standard deviation suggests differing experiences. Similar variation appeared in responses about whether textbooks were unsuitable for mixed-ability classes. Even though these items scored lower, the variability indicates inconsistent classroom realities among pre-service teachers.

Table 2
Teachers' perception on using DI in mixed ability ESL classroom data analysis

Items	Mean (M)	(SD)
I believe DI helps students learn more effectively in mixed-ability classes.	4.57	0.537
Creating multiple-tiered activities for one lesson is time-consuming.	4.48	0.81
I feel confident in applying DI strategies during my teaching practice.	3.83	0.9
I received sufficient training on how to use DI in the ESL classroom.	3.7	0.882
I feel supported by my mentor or supervisor when implementing DI.	4.25	0.857
It is difficult to maintain classroom control when using multiple DI strategies.	4.25	0.925

I believe DI increases pupil motivation and participation.	4.38	0.776
I struggle to identify suitable materials for students with different proficiency levels.	3.64	1.106
I often feel overwhelmed by the preparation that DI requires.	4.24	0.866
I try to group students in ways that allow peer support between different ability levels.	4.39	0.65
I believe students learn from each other when working in mixed-ability groups.	4.45	0.716
Differentiating tasks allows each pupil to feel successful at their level.	4.52	0.703
I use pupil interests and learning preferences when designing DI tasks.	4.44	0.641
My DI lessons usually support students in achieving learning outcomes that challenge them.	4.39	0.618
I find it easier to differentiate tasks for reading and vocabulary than for writing or speaking.	4.14	0.954
I adjust my questioning strategies according to students' language ability.	4.53	0.559
I believe DI fosters a more inclusive learning environment.	4.51	0.541
I find it difficult to differentiate effectively under time constraints.	4.32	0.803

Table 2 examined teachers' perceptions toward DI, with a reliability score of 0.750 and an overall mean of 77.03. This indicates generally positive attitudes toward DI's value and effectiveness. The highest mean score (M = 4.57) showed strong belief that DI helps students learn more effectively. Respondents also agreed that they adjust questioning strategies according to learners' proficiency levels, demonstrating understanding of adaptive teaching practices. Many items reflected positive perceptions of DI's benefits. Respondents believed DI fosters inclusion (M = 4.51), allows each student to succeed at their level (M = 4.52), and enhances motivation and participation. They also viewed mixed-ability groups positively, agreeing that students learn from one another and benefit from peer support.

However, several challenges were also highlighted. Many respondents agreed that creating multi-tiered activities is time-consuming (M = 4.48) and overwhelming (M = 4.24). Classroom control was also considered difficult when several DI strategies were used at once. These challenges reflect the heavy workload associated with DI. Lower mean scores were recorded for confidence and training. Respondents expressed only moderate confidence in applying DI (M = 3.83) and felt they had not received enough training (M = 3.70). This implies that although pre-service teachers value DI, they are uncertain about applying it independently. The lowest mean score (M = 3.64) indicated varying views on finding suitable materials for different proficiency levels.

Table 3
Benefit and drawbacks of mixed ability classroom settings data analysis

Items	Mean (M)	(SD)
I believe DI is more effective in homogeneous classrooms than heterogeneous ones.	3.44	1.274
Heterogeneous groups allow students to learn from each other naturally.	4.29	0.608
Homogeneous classes are easier to plan and manage when applying DI.	4.16	0.873
Low-proficiency students feel more confident when grouped with peers at the same level.	4.02	0.964
High-proficiency students benefit from helping their peers in mixed-level groups.	4.46	0.642
Heterogeneous groups encourage meaningful peer collaboration.	4.36	0.674
Homogeneous classrooms limit the opportunities for peer scaffolding.	3.73	1.09
Grouping students with similar levels helps me teach efficiently.	3.95	0.925
I believe DI is essential regardless of the classroom grouping style.	4.54	0.593
Mixed-ability classrooms support pupils' social and communication development.	4.49	0.659
It is easier to conduct fair assessments in homogeneous classrooms.	4.29	0.769
DI is more successful when students are exposed to various levels of input and interaction.	4.32	0.649
Students feel less anxious in classes with peers of similar ability.	4.27	0.723
I believe mixed-ability settings enhance students' empathy and cooperation.	4.44	0.686
Lessons in homogeneous classes are more streamlined and easier to execute.	4.37	0.706
Heterogeneous groups provide more opportunities for students to stretch their abilities with guidance.	4.32	0.566
I am confident in applying DI in homogeneous classrooms than in heterogeneous ones.	3.93	1.047

Table 3 examined perceptions of DI in different classroom grouping styles. The scale showed high reliability (α = 0.796), and the overall mean score indicated positive views toward DI across both group types. The highest scoring items showed that respondents believed DI is essential in any classroom (M = 4.54) and that mixed-ability classes support students' social and communication development (M = 4.49). Respondents also agreed that

high-proficiency students benefit from helping peers and that heterogeneous groups promote collaboration and peer learning.

Despite the strong support for heterogeneous settings, respondents acknowledged advantages of homogeneous classes. Lesson planning and management were seen as easier when students share similar proficiency levels (M = 3.95). Weaker students were also viewed as more confident when grouped with peers of similar ability (M = 4.02). These findings show that while heterogeneous classes offer social and cognitive benefits, homogeneous groupings reduce complexity for teachers and provide emotional comfort for weaker learners. Lower mean scores showed mixed views about whether DI is more effective in homogeneous classrooms (M = 3.44) or whether teachers feel more confident in such settings (M = 3.93). This suggests that although homogeneous classes are easier to manage, pre-service teachers do not necessarily see them as superior for learning outcomes.

Respondents indicated that when learners' proficiency levels vary too widely, designing appropriate multi-tiered materials becomes burdensome and ultimately unsustainable, which reflects findings by Chea and Kuon (2024) that differentiation beyond three tiers becomes increasingly difficult for teachers to manage. This challenge is reinforced by Adhikary (2023), who noted that mixed-ability classrooms require teachers to accommodate diverse learning styles and language capacities, making careful planning essential to prevent weaker or more advanced students from being overlooked. From the theoretical standpoint, these results align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively when tasks are slightly beyond the learner's independent ability and supported through scaffolding (Milinga et al., 2022). When proficiency gaps widen excessively, maintaining all students within their ZPD becomes unrealistic, as weaker pupils require intensive support while high-proficiency learners demand enrichment, creating a simultaneous scaffolding challenge that many pre-service teachers in this study found difficult to manage.

Despite these constraints, pre-service teachers maintained positive views about the potential of differentiated instruction to foster motivation, inclusivity and peer collaboration. Their responses align with Tomlinson (2022), who argued that DI enhances student confidence by allowing learners to experience success at an appropriate challenge level. The benefits of heterogeneous grouping identified in this study also mirror Hung and Chao's (2021) findings that such groupings promote cooperative learning through peer support. At the same time, concerns about preparation time and insufficient training echoed issues raised by Hajis and Othman (2024), who found that limited professional development reduces teachers' ability to design differentiated lessons effectively.

Although participants acknowledged the advantages of heterogeneous groupings, many also recognised the practical ease of managing homogeneous groups, reflecting Bellil's (2020) observation that weaker pupils may become reluctant to participate in mixed-ability contexts. This debate parallels ongoing discussions within the Malaysian education system, where the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) discourages streaming but does not fully address the practical constraints faced by teachers in classrooms with extreme proficiency variation.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, the respondent recorded several primary implications in using differentiated instruction (DI). While pre-service teachers value DI for its role in motivation and inclusivity, significant challenges persist as DI requires considerable amount of time and preparation for its implementation. This indicates a theory-practice gap in teacher education that requires bridging through more structured, hands-on experiential learning. Theoretically, the findings affirm core principles of DI and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) but highlight a need to adapt these models to account for the specific limitations and realities faced by novice teachers with limited classroom experience. In terms of policy, the study reveals a tension between the equity goals of national policy, like the Malaysian Education Blueprint, and the practical difficulty of implementing DI in classroom with extreme student proficiency gaps. This suggest that policy aspirations may be misaligned with the real-world pedagogical capacity, risking the teaching and learning effectiveness in the classroom.

For future research, researchers can expand the theoretical lens by incorporating Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis or Bandura's Social Learning Theory to illuminate how social and emotional dynamics interact with DI. Furthermore, researchers can use mixed method designs by integrating classroom observations, interviews, or reflective journals to capture the realities of DI implementation effects on students' learning progress. More importantly, the sample should be expanded to include in-service teachers and students across diverse regions to gain holistic view of DI effectiveness under various classroom settings. Finally, employing alternative research designs such as action research projects would provide more robust evidence on how DI function in authentic classroom settings with varying proficiency level ranges.

CONCLUSION

This study examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of implementing differentiated instruction (DI) in mixed-ability ESL classrooms, focusing on its effectiveness in settings with wide proficiency gaps. The findings revealed that pre-service teachers generally held positive views of DI, recognising its

potential to enhance inclusivity, motivation, and peer collaboration. They valued the ability to tailor instruction to diverse learner needs and acknowledged DI as an important pedagogical approach for equitable teaching and learning. Overall, the study concluded that while wide proficiency gaps could hinder DI implementation in the classroom, students still could benefit a lot from learning in a mixed ability classroom. The study contributes to the field by emphasizing the need to manage proficiency level differences rather than eliminate them entirely, as overly homogeneous classrooms may also restrict students' opportunities for collaboration, peer learning, and holistic development. This calls for the policy makers to consider bringing back classroom streaming as it can help both the teachers and students to enhance their teaching and learning progress.

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