Scaffolding ESL Learners In Mixed-Ability Tertiary Classrooms Through DIA

[1]Kuravi Sasidhar, Research Scholar, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupathi

[2]Dr. Ganji Aruna, Professor & Head of the Department, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupathi.

Abstract

The objective of teaching English language for L2 learners is to impart necessary language skills, correct the errors and motivate the learner to develop required competencies. Learning process can be conducive if teaching is relevant to learner needs and goals. Though, teaching and learning process is defined as dissemination of knowledge from teachers to students, it is coupled with several inevitable factors like delivering, stimulating, and assessing. The researchers of ESL do approve that there is no single method or approach that is suitable to develop the necessary language skills of a student as each learner differs from other in his/her learning approach and style.

The objective of the paper is to emphasize the importance of Differentiated Teaching and Assessment (DIA) approach to impart critical thinking skills and communicative competencies among the students at engineering colleges. The paper not only highlights the importance of DIA in mixed ability ESL classrooms but also discusses the teacher's role in scaffolding English Language Learners (ELLs) by selecting tailored assignments for students in terms of their abilities.

Key words: Differentiated Instruction, Differentiated Assessment, Mixed Ability Classroom, Peer Interactions, Critical Thinking Skills, Communicative Competencies.

Introduction

The students at engineering colleges learn English language for various purposes. Firstly, they need English language to procure employment. During the job selection process, the recruiters select the candidates by evaluating their critical thinking skills, communicative competencies and other soft skills like team management, problem solving, decision making and adaptability. As a first step in the recruitment, the candidate has to appear for the written examination where the aspirant critical thinking skills are assessed through English language. If the student acquires the required marks, he/she will be proceeded to appear for the second level. In the second level, the aspirant communication skills and soft skills will be evaluated by

conducting group discussions, debate, or by asking the students to present a topic impeccably. Secondly, proficiency in the English language is essential for students to pursue higher education after graduation. Entrance exams such as CAT, GMAT, MAT, GRE, GATE, and IELTS are commonly required for admission to postgraduate programs in fields like management, engineering, and other related disciplines, both domestically and internationally. These examinations demand higher level of English language competencies. Another group of students require English language skills either for academic purposes during their undergraduate studies or for effective communication in various contexts.

Although ESL teachers are well-prepared to impart essential language skills, they face significant challenges, such as large class sizes and the diverse proficiency levels of English language learners within each class. Despite various endeavours have been taken by the researchers, teachers, and academicians for improving the methods and approaches of English language teaching for the past few decades, an unsatisfactory situation still persists in the achievements of English learning among the students. (Zahra Akbari, 2015. P.394 - 401) So, it is really necessary to explore real reasons behind the poor achievements of the ELLs. As the problems are irking perpetually even today, there is a need to devise a feasible solution. Differentiated instruction with tailored materials, tasks are found appropriate to address such challenges. Besides instruction, differentiated assessment would be a holistic approach to obtain better outcomes.

Literature Review

To address the problem of large classrooms, some researchers' advice Flipped Classroom method of Teaching in ESL classrooms. They mention, "The teacher substitutes in-class instruction with at home video instruction and utilizes class time for homework assignments and other project-based learning activities. This is one of the features FCM possesses that make it distinct from other methods of teaching like videoconferencing, computer-based teaching (CBT), mobile-learning and so on that do not require direct class interactive session.". (Makinde, S. O., & Yusuf, M. O., 2017, P.119). However, lack of computer devices and internet to participate in discussion is seen as a major drawback in flipped classroom method of teaching. McCarthy mentioned, "Flipped classroom sessions could significantly increase staff workloads, due to the need to prepare additional resources." (Mc Carthy, J., 2016, P. 332-350). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method is also advised to address the problems of mixed ability classrooms and is widely practiced by many teachers. CLT is quite suitable to improve communicative competencies and emphasizes less on the development of critical thinking skills among the learners. "It emphasizes learners' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. Further, it improves oral proficiency". (Jiang, L., & Paulino, F. B. ,2024, P.614). However, other factors like students' enthusiasm and speaking anxiety, teacher's curriculum are closely associated for the conduct of CLT method in the ESL classroom. Further, to address the problems of mixed ability classes, researchers proposed lesson plans that accommodate the varying learning levels of students, ensuring that each individual's pace and needs are considered. Further suggestions include, language games, activity-based teaching, group works to mitigate the disruption in large classrooms. Nidhi Sharma stated, "to deal with such type of classes, the teachers should reinvent strategies that can be helpful for all types of learners of the classroom." (Nidhi Sharma, 2018, P. 508-511). Teaching these diverse learners is definitely challenging due to

the difficulties involved, but mixed-ability classes are known for their varied strengths. The instructors should subsequently focus more on these strengths to promote the teaching learning process. (Muneerah S. Al-Subaiei, 2017, P.182-189). Grouping the learners possessing similar attainment level within in the classroom would foster the learning the process. (Taylor et al., 2020, P. 199-220). But researchers suggested that homogenous group results in peer competition, peer pressure and might provide negative environment. (Bradbury et al., 2021, P. 147–163). In this context, Differentiated Instruction and Assessment approach has consistently aimed at affording every student the fullest prospect for academic and intellectual development in all circumstances. The core principle of differentiated instruction and assessment is the continuous effort to recognize, understand, and respond to this complex mix of factors, ensuring that each student's unique needs are addressed effectively.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of the DIA method in improving Critical Thinking and Communicative Competencies ESL students' language proficiency.

2. To evaluate the impact of differentiated materials among ELLs at tertiary level.

3. To evaluate the effectiveness of the DIA method in managing mixed-ability students in an ESL classroom, focusing on its impact on both high and low-performing learners.

Research Questions:

1. How effective is the DIA method in improving lower and higher order thinking levels of ELLs?

2. What differences can be observed in students' skills before and after the implementation of the DIA method?

3. How does the DIA method improve critical thinking and communication skills in a mixed-ability ESL classroom?

Methodology

The study employs an experimental approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the DIA method in enhancing critical thinking skills and communicative competencies in tertiary-level ESL classrooms. This design enables the researcher to assess improvements without the need for random assignment of participants, using naturally occurring classroom groups. The study involves administering pre-test and post-test assessments to measure the development of students' critical thinking abilities and communication skills after the implementation of the DIA method. Data from these tests will provide a comparative analysis of students' performance before and after the intervention. By analysing the results, the study aims to determine the extent to which DIA fosters these key competencies in a mixed-ability classroom.
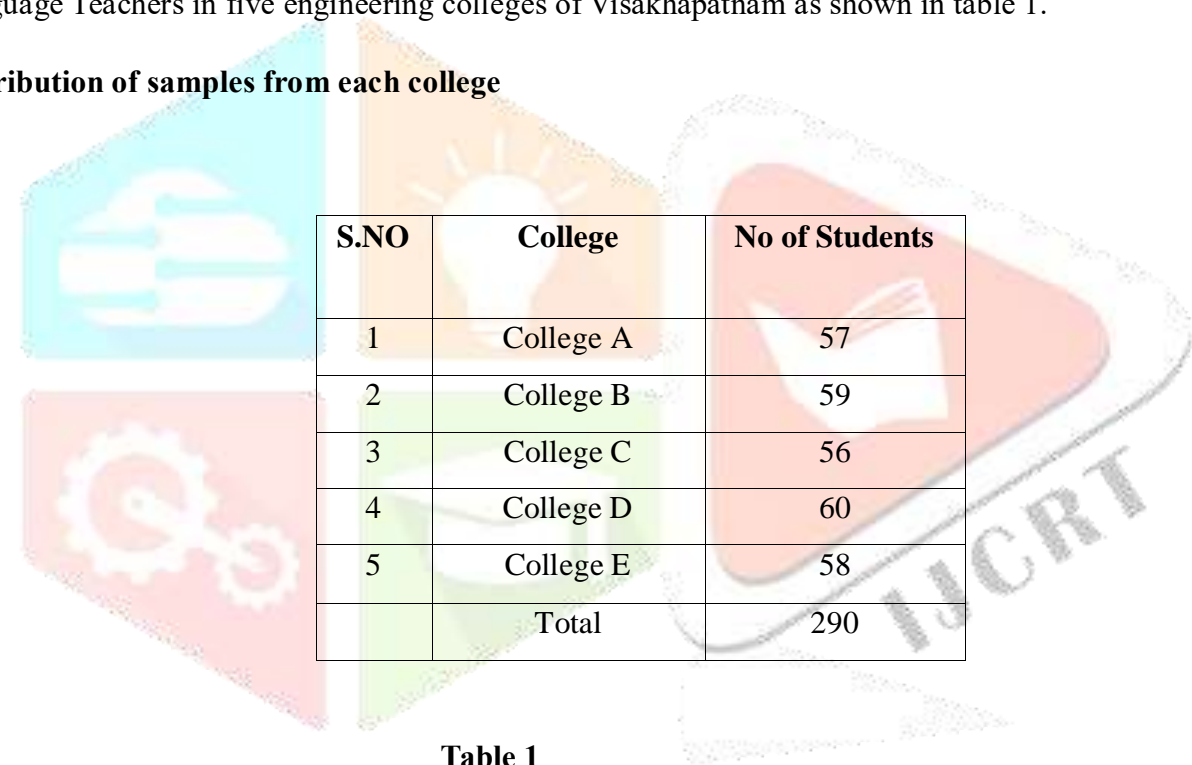
Research Design

A pre-test and post-test design with teacher intervention is used to assess the effectiveness of the DIA method in enhancing students' critical thinking and communication skills. The study involves five engineering colleges, where students from each institution follow the same instructional process based on the DIA approach. All participating students are exposed to the intervention allowing for a direct comparison of performance before and after the DIA implementation. Teachers play a key role in delivering the method, ensuring consistency across the colleges. Pre-tests are administered prior to the intervention to establish a baseline, and post-tests are conducted afterward to measure any improvements.

Research Participants and Teacher Intervention

The study was conducted on undergraduate students studying engineering in Computer Science from 3rd June 2023 to 30th September, 2023. The study was conducted on 290 students with the assistance of English Language Teachers in five engineering colleges of Visakhapatnam as shown in table 1.

Distribution of samples from each college

S.NO	College	No of Students
1	College A	57
2	College B	59
3	College C	56
4	College D	60
5	College E	58
	Total	290

Table 1

Before implementing the method, data was collected from teachers and students about the existing practices they were following. The students include both girls and boys and they are from different socio-economic backgrounds. The students are from rural and urban areas and some of them completed their schooling in regional language and others from English medium schools. Teachers were selected based on their interest and involvement.

Teachers received comprehensive training on the Differentiated Instruction and Assessment (DIA) approach and were provided with tailored materials for practice and evaluation. Concurrently, AI tools were introduced to ESL teachers to assist in material preparation. Following the training program, the ESL teachers acknowledged that the task of preparing materials for practice and assessment, which was previously challenging, became significantly easier with the use of AI tools.

Research Instruments

The research employed both student and teacher questionnaires to gather quantitative data on perceptions and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore deeper insights and obtain qualitative data. This mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive understanding. The combination of these tools allowed for cross-validation and a more subtle analysis of the findings.

Data Analysis

Upon reviewing the student responses, it became clear that many faced difficulties during the written examinations in the recruitment process, particularly with reading comprehension and sentence completion tasks. Additionally, students expressed their challenges with written exercises that required them to analyze issues or arguments. A few also highlighted struggles with participating in group discussions and debates. The teacher questionnaires revealed that they are employing communicative language teaching, task-based teaching, and flipped classroom methods. Moreover, they are grouping students based on their academic grades rather than their English language proficiency. Additionally, teachers are providing uniform practice and assessment materials, regardless of students' varying language abilities.

Research Procedure

Initially, a pre-test was administered to assess students' abilities, and their scores were recorded. Based on their performance, students were categorized as either slow or fast learners. To encourage peer interactions, mixed-ability groups were formed, combining both slow and fast learners. Learners were then provided with practice materials tailored to their individual abilities. Slow learners were provided with structured support through scaffolding, facilitated by both the teacher and their peers. The teacher offered guidance by breaking down tasks into manageable steps, while peers assisted through collaborative learning. This dual support system helped bridge gaps in understanding and fostered a more conducive learning environment. Formative assessments were regularly conducted to monitor the learner progress, and timely feedback was given to address specific learning challenges. Depending on their performance in these assessments, students could be reassigned to different groups. Both practice materials and assessments were continuously adapted to match students' abilities, with performance serving as a guide for adjustments. The practice materials were designed to be both challenging and engaging to enhance students' learning potential.

Activities and Tasks

Reading comprehension and sentence completion exercises were structured to give students targeted practice. In reading comprehension, students evaluated, synthesized, and comprehended ideas stated both implicitly and explicitly. Meanwhile, sentence completion exercises encouraged students to think critically, fostering logical reasoning and enhancing their decision-making skills. By analysing issues or arguments, students not only practiced forming coherent ideas but also sharpened their writing abilities, enabling them to present structured arguments. Additionally, debate sessions and group discussions served as interactive platforms where students could improve their speaking skills, build confidence, and learn to articulate their thoughts more effectively in a collaborative environment. The activities were designed with a dual purpose: to develop both lower and

higher-order thinking skills and to enhance communicative competencies. Reading comprehension and sentence completion exercises helped students improve their critical thinking while building vocabulary, mastering complex sentence structures, and using cohesive devices for greater accuracy. Similarly, writing tasks like argumentative essays and oral activities like debates and group discussions required students to think critically, thus strengthening both their writing and speaking skills. These activities complemented one another, promoting critical thinking and communicative competence simultaneously. These exercises and activities were designed according to the learners' abilities, with the difficulty level of each task increasing as learners successfully completed them. This process continued over time until the slower learners reached a level comparable to that of their faster peers.

Activities to develop Critical Thinking Skills and Communicative Competencies in the ESL Classroom

Criteria of Sixty percentage

English Language Learners (ELLs) scoring 60% or below on either the pre-test or post-test were classified as slow learners, while those scoring 61% or above were classified as fast learners. The total numbers of slow and fast learners from each college were compared in both the pre-test and post-test to assess the effectiveness of the teaching method. The percentage of slow learners (S.L) and fast learners (F.L) in the pre-test and post-test is as shown in figure1.
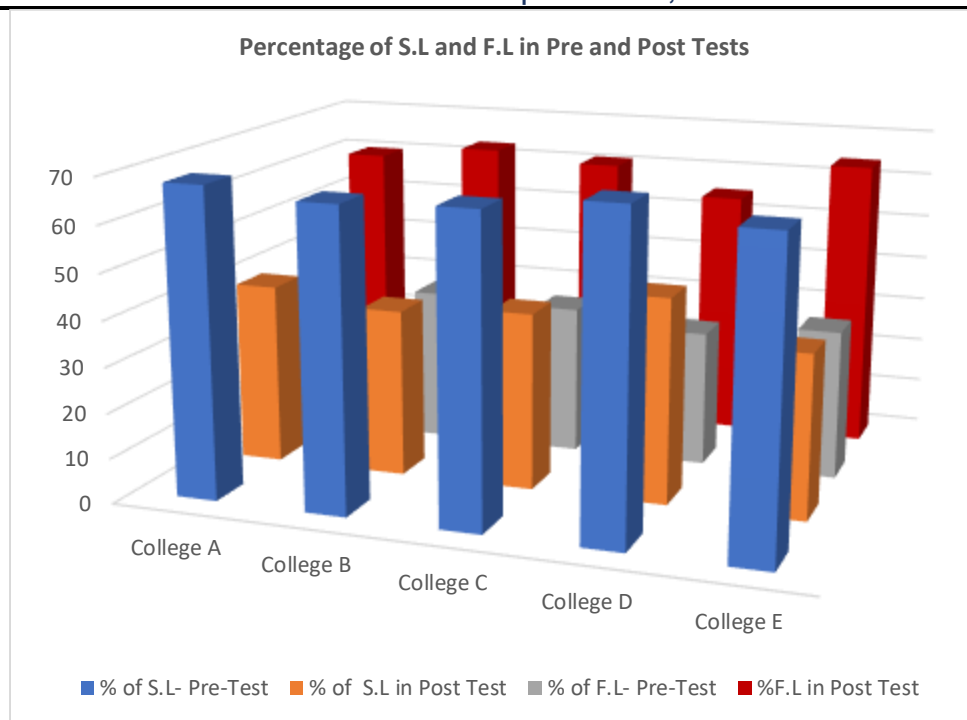
Figure 1: Percentage of S.L and F.L in pre and post tests

Findings and Conclusion

The data from the graph indicates a significant improvement in student performance across all colleges. In College A, the percentage of slow learners dropped from 68% to 40%, while fast learners increased from 32% to 60%. Similarly, in College B, the proportion of slow learners decreased from 66% to 37%, with fast learners rising from 34% to 63%. College C also saw a decline in slow learners from 67% to 39%, and an increase in fast learners from 33% to 61%. In College D, slow learners decreased from 70% to 45%, while fast learners grew from 30% to 55%. Lastly, in College E, the percentage of slow learners reduced from 67% to 36%, and fast learners rose from 33% to 64%.

The reduction in the number of slow learners and the improvement among fast learners highlight the effectiveness of the Differentiated Instruction and Assessment approach. By tailoring materials to match the abilities of both slow and fast learners, the content became more engaging and accessible for all students. The challenging practice materials, designed according to the performance levels of English Language Learners (ELLs), fostered critical thinking skills and enhanced communicative competencies. Additionally, the mixed-ability grouping, where slow and fast learners collaborated, encouraged peer support and collective growth, further driving student development. From the results obtained, it is understood that DIA approach is an alternative method to improve employability skills of the ELLs. Thus, DIA approach is recommended to implement in mixed ability classrooms to foster critical thinking skills and communicative competencies among students the Ells at the tertiary level.

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