



Volume 2 Issue 2 Year 2026 Pages 23-43
e-ISSN 3090-9406 | DOI: 10.70152
<https://journal.akademimerdeka.com/ojs/index.php/duites>

Supporting Low-Proficiency Learners in EFL Classrooms: Strategies for Inclusive Teaching

Eddiong Emmanuel Akpan¹, Wildan Nurul Aini^{2*}

¹ University of Ibadan, Nigeria

² Universitas Siliwangi, Tasikmalaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding author's email: wildannurulaini@unsil.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70152/duties.v2i2.361>

Abstract: This study investigated the instructional strategies employed by EFL teachers to support low-proficiency learners in inclusive classroom settings and examined the extent to which these strategies influenced learners' participation and language achievement. Employing a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory sequential design, the study combined qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of inclusive teaching practices. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six EFL teachers and focus group discussions with students, while quantitative data were obtained from structured questionnaires and classroom-based assessments. The qualitative findings revealed that teachers implemented various inclusive instructional strategies, including scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified and contextualized instruction, and differentiated tasks to accommodate learners' diverse needs. The quantitative findings demonstrated that these strategies positively influenced students' classroom participation and language achievement, particularly in vocabulary mastery, grammar accuracy, reading comprehension, and writing performance. The study further highlighted that supportive and flexible instructional practices contributed to increased learner confidence and engagement in classroom activities. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of inclusive pedagogy in creating equitable and participatory EFL learning environments. The study also offers pedagogical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and educational institutions in supporting low-proficiency learners more effectively.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, EFL classrooms, inclusive pedagogy, language achievement, low-proficiency learners

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, emphasizing the need to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of their abilities and backgrounds. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, this principle is particularly important due to the diverse range of learners' language proficiencies (Namaziandost et al., 2024). Among them, low-proficiency learners often encounter significant barriers to successful learning, including

limited vocabulary, weak grammatical knowledge, low confidence, and high levels of language anxiety (Quvanch et al., 2024). These challenges frequently result in reduced classroom participation and slower language development, which may further widen the gap between learners of differing proficiency levels.

The presence of mixed-ability classrooms requires teachers to adopt instructional strategies that can accommodate diverse learner needs while maintaining meaningful learning experiences. In this regard, inclusive teaching emphasizes the importance of responsiveness, flexibility, and learner-centered approaches (Effendi et al., 2024). Teachers are expected to employ various strategies such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, peer collaboration, and the use of accessible learning materials to ensure that low-proficiency learners are not marginalized (Hassen et al., 2024). These strategies are intended not only to support comprehension but also to encourage active participation and engagement in classroom activities.

However, despite the recognized importance of inclusive practices, many EFL teachers face challenges in implementing them effectively. Factors such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, curriculum demands, and insufficient professional training often constrain teachers' ability to fully support low-proficiency learners (Imran et al., 2024). In addition, previous research has largely focused on identifying general teaching strategies without deeply examining how these strategies are enacted in real classroom contexts (Zhao & Qi, 2023). There is also limited empirical evidence that clearly demonstrates the extent to which such strategies influence learners' participation and language achievement (Forsman, 2025).

Another important gap lies in the methodological approaches used in existing studies. Qualitative research has provided valuable insights into teachers' beliefs and practices, yet it often lacks measurable evidence of impact on student outcomes (Witter & Hattie, 2024). On the other hand, quantitative studies tend to emphasize learning outcomes without adequately capturing the complexity of classroom processes and instructional decision-making (Rauteda, 2025). This separation creates a need for more comprehensive research that integrates both perspectives in order to better understand inclusive teaching practices and their effects on low-proficiency learners. Based on these concerns, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What instructional strategies do EFL teachers employ to support low-proficiency learners in inclusive classroom settings?
2. To what extent do these instructional strategies influence low-proficiency learners' participation and language achievement?

By addressing these questions, the present study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusive teaching strategies are implemented and how they contribute to student outcomes in EFL classrooms. Through the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, this research is expected to offer both descriptive and empirical insights into effective pedagogical practices. The findings are anticipated to contribute to the development of more inclusive instructional approaches and to inform teachers,

curriculum developers, and policymakers in supporting low-proficiency learners more effectively.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the principles of inclusive pedagogy, which emphasize the need to create learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs while maintaining equitable access to meaningful educational experiences (Langan et al., 2025). In EFL classrooms, low-proficiency learners often face challenges that limit their ability to participate actively and achieve expected learning outcomes. Inclusive pedagogy shifts the focus from learners' limitations to teachers' responsibility in designing instruction that is accessible, flexible, and responsive (Cai et al., 2024; Filippou et al., 2025). This perspective encourages the use of varied instructional strategies that can support learners with different levels of language proficiency within the same classroom.

To operationalize inclusive pedagogy, this study draws on the framework of differentiated instruction. Differentiation involves adapting teaching practices in terms of content, process, and learning tasks to match students' readiness levels and learning needs (Jufrianto et al., 2025). In the context of low-proficiency learners, teachers may employ strategies such as simplifying input, providing step-by-step guidance, using visual aids, and organizing collaborative activities. These approaches aim to reduce learning barriers and promote active engagement (D'Intino & Wang, 2021). By aligning instructional strategies with learners' abilities, differentiated instruction is expected to enhance both participation and learning outcomes.

This study is also informed by sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Wu & Bakar, 2025). Learning is viewed as a socially mediated process in which interaction with teachers and peers plays a crucial role (Song, 2024). Scaffolding, as a key instructional strategy, enables learners to accomplish tasks with guidance before gradually achieving independence. In EFL classrooms, scaffolding may take the form of modeling, guided practice, and structured peer interaction (Kayi-Aydar, 2013). Such support is especially important for low-proficiency learners, as it helps them build confidence and develop language skills through meaningful participation.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, the conceptual framework of this study positions instructional strategies as the central factor influencing two main outcomes, namely learners' participation and language achievement. Participation refers to students' active involvement in classroom activities, while language achievement reflects their progress in developing language skills (Yousif, 2025). The framework assumes that effective and inclusive instructional strategies can create supportive learning environments that encourage participation, which in turn contributes to improved language achievement (Namaziandost & Çelik, 2025). Thus, instructional strategies are conceptualized as the key mechanism through which inclusive teaching can support low-proficiency learners in EFL classrooms.

Previous Studies and Gap Identification

A growing body of research has explored instructional strategies for supporting diverse learners in EFL classrooms. Previous studies have identified various approaches such as scaffolding (Liu et al., 2022), cooperative learning (Feng, 2023), differentiated instruction (Tajik et al., 2024), and the use of contextualized materials (Afrilyasanti et al., 2025) as effective in enhancing students' understanding and engagement. These studies highlight the importance of adapting teaching practices to learners' needs and creating interactive classroom environments that promote active participation (Gordon & Montenegro, 2025). In particular, scaffolding and peer collaboration have been widely recognized for their role in facilitating language development among low-proficiency learners.

In addition, several studies have examined the relationship between instructional strategies and learner outcomes, including participation and language achievement. Findings generally suggest that supportive and learner-centered strategies can increase students' willingness to participate and improve their performance in language tasks (Koyuncu et al., 2024; Yousif, 2025). However, much of this research tends to focus either on describing teaching practices or on measuring learning outcomes, often treating them as separate areas of investigation (Cao et al., 2023; Domke & Cerrato, 2026). As a result, there is limited understanding of how specific instructional strategies are connected to both participation and achievement within the same study.

Another limitation in the existing literature lies in the methodological approaches employed. Many studies adopt either qualitative or quantitative designs, which provide valuable but partial insights. Qualitative studies offer in-depth descriptions of teachers' practices and classroom dynamics, yet they often lack measurable evidence of their impact on student outcomes. On the other hand, quantitative studies provide statistical evidence of effectiveness but may overlook the complexity of instructional processes and contextual factors influencing teaching practices. This methodological separation creates a gap in capturing a holistic view of inclusive teaching in EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, relatively few studies have specifically focused on low-proficiency learners within inclusive classroom settings (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022; Prediger & Buró, 2024). While mixed-ability classrooms are widely acknowledged, research often does not sufficiently address the unique challenges faced by learners at the lower end of the proficiency spectrum (Gaitas et al., 2024; Kamaşak et al., 2021). There is a need for studies that not only identify effective strategies but also examine how these strategies function in real classroom contexts and how they influence both learner participation and language achievement.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive instructional strategies in EFL classrooms. By integrating qualitative exploration of teachers' strategies with quantitative examination of their impact on learners' participation and achievement, this study aims to bridge the divide between pedagogical processes and learning outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to the existing literature by offering both contextualized insights and

empirical evidence on how low-proficiency learners can be effectively supported in inclusive educational settings.

METHODS

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using an exploratory sequential design to provide a comprehensive understanding of instructional strategies used to support low-proficiency learners in EFL classrooms. The qualitative phase was conducted first to explore and identify the instructional strategies employed by teachers in inclusive classroom settings (Peng, 2025). Consistent with the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2026), the qualitative findings served as the foundation for developing the quantitative phase. Specifically, the themes generated from the qualitative analysis—including scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified and contextualized instruction, and differentiated tasks—were transformed into questionnaire constructs that measured students' perceptions of these instructional strategies and their influence on classroom participation and language achievement. This sequential process ensured methodological continuity between the qualitative exploration and quantitative validation phases.

The study was conducted in three public secondary schools implementing inclusive EFL programs. Participants in the qualitative phase consisted of six EFL teachers (T1–T6) who were purposefully selected based on at least five years of teaching experience, experience teaching mixed-ability classrooms, and active implementation of inclusive instructional practices. In addition, eight low-proficiency learners participated in two focus group discussions to provide complementary perspectives regarding their classroom learning experiences.

The quantitative phase involved 128 low-proficiency learners (67 females and 61 males) enrolled in Grade 10, aged between 15 and 16 years (Coded as S). Students were drawn from the same schools as the qualitative participants using purposive sampling. Learners were classified as low-proficiency based on three criteria: (1) English achievement scores below the school's minimum mastery criterion (KKM = 75), (2) teachers' recommendations based on continuous classroom observations, and (3) consistent difficulties in classroom participation and language performance. These criteria ensured that the participants represented the target population investigated in this study.

Data Collection and Instrument Development

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases corresponding to the mixed-methods design.

During the qualitative phase, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with students. The interviews explored teachers' instructional strategies, pedagogical decision-making, and challenges encountered when teaching low-proficiency learners (Tarrayo et al., 2021). Focus group discussions explored learners' perceptions of classroom practices, learning experiences, and factors

influencing classroom participation (Geampana & Perrotta, 2025). All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified before analysis.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step procedure. Initial codes were generated inductively before being grouped into broader themes representing inclusive instructional practices.

The themes identified during the qualitative analysis directly informed the development of the quantitative questionnaire. Each major theme was operationalized into multiple questionnaire items. For example, the scaffolding theme generated items concerning teacher guidance, modelling, and step-by-step explanations; the peer collaboration theme informed items related to group work and peer interaction; simplified and contextualized instruction generated items measuring instructional clarity and contextual relevance; and differentiated instruction informed items assessing task adaptation and instructional flexibility. This process ensured that the questionnaire reflected teachers' authentic instructional practices identified during the qualitative investigation.

The initial questionnaire consisted of 30 items measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before administration, the questionnaire underwent expert review by three specialists in English language education and educational measurement to establish content validity. Revisions were made based on their recommendations regarding item clarity, wording, and construct representation. Subsequently, the revised questionnaire was pilot-tested with 35 students from a comparable school that did not participate in the main study. Internal consistency analysis demonstrated satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$), indicating that the questionnaire was appropriate for data collection.

During the quantitative phase, participants completed the questionnaire after experiencing the instructional intervention. The same group of students also completed classroom-based pre-tests and post-tests designed to measure vocabulary mastery, grammar accuracy, reading comprehension, and writing performance. The achievement tests were developed according to the curriculum objectives and were reviewed by two experienced EFL teachers to ensure alignment with the instructional content.

Intervention Procedures

The instructional intervention was implemented over an eight-week period comprising sixteen 90-minute classroom meetings. Throughout the intervention, participating teachers consistently implemented the inclusive instructional strategies identified during the qualitative phase, including scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified and contextualized instruction, and differentiated learning tasks. The same group of students completed the pre-test one week before the intervention and the post-test during the final week of implementation, enabling comparisons of learners' language achievement following exposure to the instructional strategies.

Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, to examine students' perceptions of instructional

strategies. Pre-test and post-test scores were analysed using paired-samples t-tests to determine changes in language achievement following the intervention.

Integration occurred at two stages of the research process. The first stage involved instrument development, where qualitative themes directly informed questionnaire construction. The second stage occurred during interpretation, where qualitative findings explaining teachers' instructional decision-making were compared with quantitative findings describing students' perceptions and learning outcomes. A joint display matrix was developed to align qualitative themes, questionnaire constructs, quantitative results, and integrated meta-inferences. This integration enabled the study to move beyond reporting separate qualitative and quantitative findings by generating comprehensive explanations regarding the effectiveness of inclusive instructional strategies for low-proficiency learners.

Methodological triangulation was further employed by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and classroom-based assessments. The convergence of findings across these data sources strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the overall conclusions regarding inclusive teaching practices in EFL classrooms.

FINDINGS

RQ1: Instructional Strategies Employed by EFL Teachers to Support Low-Proficiency Learners

Scaffolding Strategies

The findings reveal that scaffolding emerged as one of the most frequently employed instructional strategies by EFL teachers to support low-proficiency learners. Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps, providing clear models, and guiding students gradually toward independent performance. Scaffolding was implemented through various techniques, including teacher modeling, guided writing, the use of sentence starters, and step-by-step explanations. These practices were particularly useful in reducing students' cognitive load and helping them understand task requirements more clearly.

Table 1. Scaffolding Strategies

Scaffolding Strategy	Description	Purpose
Teacher modeling	Demonstrating how to complete tasks	Providing clear examples for learners
Guided practice	Supporting students during task completion	Reducing difficulty and building confidence
Sentence starters	Providing partial structures for writing	Assisting idea development
Step-by-step instruction	Breaking tasks into smaller steps	Enhancing comprehension

The data indicate that scaffolding not only supported comprehension but also increased students' confidence and willingness to participate. Teachers observed that when learners were given structured support, they were more likely to attempt tasks and engage in classroom activities. This suggests that scaffolding plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between learners' current abilities and expected learning outcomes. Excerpts from the interviews and focus group discussions further illustrate how scaffolding was enacted in classroom practice:

T1: "I usually give them an example first, then we do it together before they try individually. It helps them feel more confident."

T3: "Low-level students need more guidance, so I break the task into smaller parts to make it easier."

S2: "When the teacher explains step by step, I understand better and I am not afraid to try."

These responses suggest that teachers selected scaffolding because they perceived structured guidance as necessary to bridge learners' limited language proficiency and lesson demands. Rather than applying scaffolding uniformly, teachers adjusted the amount of support according to students' responses during classroom activities. However, they also acknowledged that providing individualized guidance within mixed-ability classrooms required balancing the needs of both low- and higher-proficiency learners.

Peer Collaboration

Another prominent strategy identified in the findings is peer collaboration. Teachers frequently organized pair or group work activities to encourage interaction among students with different proficiency levels. This approach allowed low-proficiency learners to receive support from their peers while also participating in meaningful communication. Collaborative activities included group discussions, peer review sessions, and cooperative writing tasks.

Table 2. Collaboration Strategy

Collaboration Strategy	Description	Purpose
Pair work	Students work in pairs	Encouraging interaction
Group discussion	Small group conversations	Sharing ideas and building understanding
Peer feedback	Students review each other's work	Improving writing through feedback
Mixed-ability grouping	Combining high and low proficiency learners	Providing peer support

The findings suggest that peer collaboration fosters a more interactive and inclusive classroom environment. Low-proficiency learners benefit from exposure to their peers' language use, which helps them develop vocabulary and improve their understanding. Additionally, collaborative tasks reduce anxiety, as students feel more comfortable

expressing their ideas in smaller groups rather than in whole-class settings. The following excerpts demonstrate students' and teachers' perspectives on peer collaboration:

T2: *"I mix strong and weak students so they can help each other. It works well because they learn from their friends."*

T5: *"Group work makes low-level students more active because they feel less pressure."*

S4: *"When I work with my friends, I can ask questions and learn new words."*

These findings suggest that teachers deliberately organized peer collaboration to reduce learners' anxiety while increasing opportunities for meaningful interaction. Rather than grouping students randomly, teachers adapted collaborative activities according to classroom objectives and students' participation levels. Nevertheless, they reported that effective collaboration required continuous monitoring because stronger learners occasionally dominated discussions, limiting the participation of lower-proficiency peers.

Simplified and Contextualized Instruction

The findings also show that teachers adapted their instructional input by simplifying language and using contextualized materials. This strategy was aimed at making content more accessible to low-proficiency learners. Teachers reported using simpler vocabulary, shorter sentences, visual aids, and real-life examples to facilitate understanding. Contextualized instruction often involved connecting lesson content to students' daily experiences, cultural backgrounds, or familiar situations.

Table 3. Instructional Adaptation

Instructional Adaptation	Description	Purpose
Simplified language	Using basic vocabulary and structures	Enhancing comprehension
Visual aids	Pictures, charts, or videos	Supporting understanding
Real-life examples	Linking content to daily experiences	Increasing relevance
Contextualized materials	Using culturally familiar topics	Improving engagement

This strategy was found to be effective in helping low-proficiency learners grasp lesson content more easily. By reducing linguistic complexity and increasing relevance, teachers were able to create a more inclusive learning environment. Students reported that they found lessons easier to understand when examples were related to their own lives. The following excerpts illustrate this practice:

T4: *"I try to use simple language and give examples from their daily life so they can relate to the lesson."*

T6: “Using pictures and videos helps them understand faster, especially for difficult topics.”

S1: “If the teacher uses simple words, I can follow the lesson better.”

These findings indicate that teachers simplified instructional input not to reduce academic expectations but to improve learners’ access to lesson content. Teachers adjusted explanations according to students’ understanding while maintaining appropriate linguistic challenge. They also recognized the need to balance comprehensible instruction with continued language development to avoid excessive simplification.

Differentiated Tasks

Finally, differentiated tasks were identified as an important strategy for addressing varying levels of student ability. Teachers reported modifying tasks based on students’ proficiency levels by adjusting the complexity, length, or expected outcomes of assignments. This allowed low-proficiency learners to participate in the same lesson as their peers while working at an appropriate level of difficulty.

Table 4. Differentiation Strategy

Differentiation Strategy	Description	Purpose
Task modification	Adjusting difficulty levels	Matching learners’ abilities
Flexible output	Allowing different forms of responses	Encouraging participation
Tiered assignments	Providing tasks at varying levels	Supporting diverse learners
Additional support	Extra guidance for low-level students	Ensuring task completion

The findings indicate that differentiated tasks help create a more equitable learning environment by allowing all students to engage with the lesson content. Low-proficiency learners were more willing to participate when tasks were within their capabilities, which contributed to increased confidence and motivation. Supporting excerpts from the data include:

T1: “I give simpler tasks to low-level students so they can still participate without feeling left behind.”

T3: “Not all students can do the same task, so I adjust it based on their level.”

S5: “When the task is easier, I feel more confident to do it.”

These findings suggest that differentiation reflected teachers’ ongoing instructional decision-making rather than simply modifying task difficulty. Teachers continuously adjusted learning activities according to learners’ proficiency, confidence, and classroom participation, although they acknowledged that preparing differentiated tasks increased planning demands and instructional complexity.

Taken together, these findings indicate that teachers did not employ scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified instruction, and differentiation as isolated strategies. Rather, they combined and adapted these approaches in response to learners' proficiency levels, classroom participation, and instructional objectives. Across all themes, teachers' pedagogical decisions reflected continuous responsiveness to classroom conditions while balancing inclusive participation with curriculum expectations. This suggests that inclusive instruction was enacted as a dynamic process of instructional adaptation rather than the implementation of predetermined teaching techniques.

RQ2: The Influence of Instructional Strategies on Low-Proficiency Learners' Participation and Language Achievement

Influence on Learners' Participant

The quantitative findings indicate that the instructional strategies employed by EFL teachers positively influenced low-proficiency learners' classroom participation. Based on the structured questionnaire data, students generally perceived scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified instruction, and differentiated tasks as supportive in encouraging their engagement during classroom activities. The findings suggest that inclusive teaching strategies helped learners feel more confident and comfortable participating in the learning process.

Table 5. Students' Perceptions of Instructional Strategies Supporting Classroom Participation

Statement	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Teacher guidance helps me participate actively in class	4.31	0.62	High
Group activities make me more confident to speak English	4.18	0.71	High
Simplified explanations help me understand classroom tasks	4.42	0.54	Very High
Differentiated tasks encourage me to complete activities	4.09	0.68	High
I feel more comfortable participating when working with peers	4.25	0.66	High

The questionnaire results demonstrate consistently positive student perceptions across all instructional strategies, with mean scores ranging from 4.09 to 4.42. Simplified explanations received the highest rating ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.54$), followed by teacher guidance and peer collaboration, suggesting that accessible instruction and structured support were perceived as particularly important in promoting classroom participation. Although differentiated tasks received the lowest mean score, the rating remained high, indicating that all four instructional strategies contributed positively to learners' classroom engagement.

Table 6. Classroom Participation Before and After the Implementation of Inclusive Instructional Strategies

Participation Indicator	Before Implementation	After Implementation	Improvement
Responding to teacher questions	38%	72%	+34%
Participating in group discussions	44%	81%	+37%
Completing classroom activities	53%	87%	+34%
Asking questions during lessons	29%	61%	+32%

The classroom-based assessment further supports these findings by demonstrating improvements across all participation indicators following the implementation of inclusive instructional strategies. Participation in group discussions showed the greatest increase (from 44% to 81%), while responding to teacher questions, completing classroom activities, and asking questions during lessons also improved substantially. These results indicate that the instructional strategies were associated with broader increases in learners' active participation across different classroom activities rather than improvements in a single aspect of engagement.

Influence on Language Achievement

The findings also indicate that the instructional strategies employed by teachers positively influenced learners' language achievement. Questionnaire responses showed that students perceived the strategies as helpful in improving their understanding of lesson content, vocabulary development, and overall language performance. Supportive teaching practices appeared to facilitate both comprehension and language production among low-proficiency learners.

Table 7. Students' Perceptions of Instructional Strategies Supporting Language Achievement

Statement	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Teacher guidance helps me improve my English skills	4.27	0.63	High
Group work helps me learn new vocabulary	4.15	0.74	High
Simplified instruction helps me understand grammar better	4.38	0.58	Very High
Differentiated tasks help me complete language activities successfully	4.12	0.69	High
Classroom activities help improve my writing performance	4.21	0.65	High

The questionnaire results indicate consistently positive perceptions of all instructional strategies in supporting language achievement. Simplified instruction again received the highest mean score ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.58$), followed by teacher guidance and classroom activities. The relatively high ratings across all questionnaire items suggest that students perceived multiple instructional strategies as contributing to their language development rather than attributing their progress to a single instructional approach.

Table 8. Students' Language Achievement Before and After the Implementation of Inclusive Instructional Strategies

Achievement Indicator	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Improvement
Vocabulary mastery	57.8	73.6	+15.8
Grammar accuracy	55.4	71.2	+15.8
Reading comprehension	59.1	75.3	+16.2
Writing performance	60.3	79.1	+18.8

The classroom-based assessment revealed improvements across all language achievement indicators following the implementation of inclusive instructional strategies. Writing performance demonstrated the largest gain (from 60.3 to 79.1), while vocabulary mastery, grammar accuracy, and reading comprehension also showed notable improvements. The consistent increases across all four language domains suggest that the instructional strategies supported learners' overall language development rather than improving only a specific language skill.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that EFL teachers employed various inclusive instructional strategies to support low-proficiency learners, particularly scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified instruction, contextualized materials, and differentiated tasks. These strategies were found to contribute positively to learners' classroom participation and language achievement. The findings highlight the importance of responsive and flexible teaching practices in addressing learner diversity within inclusive EFL classrooms.

One of the major findings of this study is the significant role of scaffolding in supporting low-proficiency learners. Teachers frequently provided step-by-step guidance, teacher modelling, and structured support to help students complete learning tasks. These qualitative findings are reinforced by the quantitative results, in which teacher guidance received a high mean score ($M = 4.31$) for supporting classroom participation, indicating that students also perceived structured assistance as beneficial to their engagement. This finding aligns with previous studies that identified scaffolding as an effective strategy for facilitating language learning among struggling learners (Homayouni, 2022; Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023). Previous research has suggested that scaffolding reduces learners' cognitive burden and enables them to perform tasks beyond their current level of competence through guided assistance (Faber et al., 2024; Zhang & Singh, 2025). The convergence of the qualitative and quantitative findings suggests that scaffolding supported not only learners' academic performance but also their confidence and

willingness to participate actively in classroom activities. However, unlike some previous studies that focused primarily on academic achievement, this study additionally demonstrates that scaffolding contributes to learners' emotional readiness and classroom engagement, particularly in inclusive learning environments.

The findings also reveal that peer collaboration played an important role in enhancing learners' participation and confidence. Teachers organized mixed-ability group activities that allowed low-proficiency learners to receive support from more proficient peers. This qualitative evidence is supported by the quantitative findings, in which students reported high agreement that group activities increased their confidence in speaking English ($M = 4.18$) and that working with peers made classroom participation more comfortable ($M = 4.25$). This finding is consistent with earlier research emphasizing the value of collaborative learning in promoting interaction and reducing language anxiety in EFL classrooms (Homayouni, 2022; Sukkaew et al., 2025). Through peer interaction, learners were able to practice language skills in less intimidating settings, which increased their willingness to communicate. The consistency between both datasets indicates that peer collaboration functioned simultaneously as an instructional strategy supporting language development and as a mechanism for promoting learners' social inclusion within inclusive classrooms. Nevertheless, this study extends previous findings by illustrating how peer collaboration functions not only as an academic support mechanism but also as a social inclusion strategy that helps low-proficiency learners feel accepted and involved in classroom activities.

Another important finding concerns the use of simplified and contextualized instruction. The qualitative findings showed that teachers intentionally simplified instructional input and contextualized learning materials to improve learners' understanding while maintaining lesson objectives. These findings are strongly reinforced by the quantitative evidence, in which simplified explanations received the highest mean score for classroom participation ($M = 4.42$) and simplified instruction likewise obtained the highest mean score for language achievement ($M = 4.38$). This suggests that accessible language input is particularly beneficial for low-proficiency learners. These findings support previous studies arguing that comprehensible input is essential for effective language acquisition (Almohawes, 2024; Nguyen, 2024). The use of familiar examples and contextualized materials also appeared to increase students' understanding and engagement. The convergence of both datasets indicates that simplified instruction supported learners not only cognitively by facilitating comprehension but also affectively by increasing their confidence and willingness to participate in classroom activities. However, while earlier studies often discussed simplified instruction in relation to comprehension alone, the present study demonstrates that it also positively influences learners' confidence and classroom participation. This indicates that accessible instruction can simultaneously support cognitive and affective dimensions of learning.

In terms of differentiated instruction, the findings show that adapting tasks according to learners' proficiency levels encouraged greater participation and improved language performance. The qualitative findings revealed that teachers continuously adjusted learning tasks according to students' abilities, while the quantitative results showed that differentiated tasks were positively perceived in supporting both classroom participation

($M = 4.09$) and language achievement ($M = 4.12$). This finding corresponds with studies on differentiated pedagogy that emphasize the importance of adjusting instructional practices to meet diverse learner needs (Letzel-Alt & Pozas, 2025; Vogel et al., 2022). Low-proficiency learners in this study reported feeling more capable and motivated when tasks were aligned with their abilities. Together, these findings suggest that although differentiation requires continuous pedagogical judgement, learners recognize its value in creating equitable opportunities for successful participation and learning. Nevertheless, this study also reveals practical challenges in implementing differentiation, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms where teachers must balance diverse learning needs within limited instructional time. This finding contrasts with some previous studies that portray differentiation as relatively straightforward to implement, suggesting that contextual classroom realities significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive teaching practices (Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Love & Horn, 2021).

Taken together, the integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings provides a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusive instructional strategies function in EFL classrooms. While the qualitative data explain why teachers selected particular strategies and how they adapted them to learners' diverse needs, the quantitative findings demonstrate that students consistently perceived these strategies as beneficial for both classroom participation and language achievement. The convergence of both datasets strengthens the conclusion that inclusive instructional practices support learners not only academically but also affectively by fostering confidence, engagement, and meaningful participation.

Beyond demonstrating the effectiveness of individual instructional strategies, this study contributes to the discourse on inclusive pedagogy by illustrating how teachers' ongoing instructional decision-making shapes inclusive classroom practices for low-proficiency learners. Previous research has often examined instructional strategies in general language teaching contexts without specifically focusing on low-proficiency learners in inclusive classrooms. By centering on this group of learners, the present study highlights the importance of equitable instructional practices that ensure meaningful participation for all students. The findings suggest that inclusive teaching is not limited to accommodating learners' weaknesses but involves creating supportive classroom environments where diverse learners can actively engage and succeed.

Based on the findings, several pedagogical implications can be proposed. First, EFL teachers should incorporate scaffolding techniques consistently in classroom instruction to support learners' gradual language development and participation. Second, collaborative learning activities should be integrated into classroom practice to promote both academic learning and social inclusion among students. Third, teachers need to provide simplified and contextualized instructional input to make learning more accessible and meaningful for low-proficiency learners. Fourth, differentiated instruction should be implemented flexibly to accommodate varying learner abilities without marginalizing students with lower proficiency levels. Finally, teacher education and professional development programs should place greater emphasis on inclusive pedagogy and practical strategies for managing mixed-ability classrooms. By adopting these

approaches, EFL classrooms can become more equitable, participatory, and supportive learning environments for low-proficiency learners.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the instructional strategies employed by EFL teachers to support low-proficiency learners in inclusive classroom settings and examined the extent to which these strategies influenced learners' participation and language achievement. Rather than identifying effective instructional strategies alone, the findings demonstrate that inclusive pedagogy is enacted through teachers' continuous adaptation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, simplified and contextualized instruction, and differentiated tasks in response to learners' diverse needs. The integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence indicates that these instructional strategies collectively support not only language achievement but also learners' confidence, engagement, and active classroom participation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on inclusive EFL pedagogy by highlighting teachers' adaptive instructional decision-making as a key mechanism through which inclusive teaching practices become effective in mixed-ability classrooms. Methodologically, the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design provides a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive instruction by combining teachers' perspectives on instructional practices with quantitative evidence of learners' participation and language achievement. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of preparing EFL teachers to implement responsive and learner-centered instructional strategies through teacher education and professional development programs that emphasize inclusive pedagogy and effective classroom management for mixed-ability learners.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a limited educational context and involved a relatively small number of teacher participants, which may affect the broader generalizability of the findings. In addition, the quantitative data focused primarily on classroom participation and language achievement within a specific period of implementation. Accordingly, future research should examine inclusive instructional practices across more diverse educational contexts and educational levels to determine the transferability of these findings. Longitudinal studies are also needed to investigate how sustained implementation of inclusive instructional strategies influences learners' language development over time. Furthermore, future research could explore the roles of learner motivation, foreign language anxiety, and digital or AI-supported learning environments in shaping the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogy for low-proficiency EFL learners.

REFERENCES

- Afrilyasanti, R., Basthomi, Y., & Suhartoyo, E. (2025). Involving students as collaborators in developing learning materials through action research. *Educational Action Research*, 33(2), 251–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2024.2307566>

- Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim, K., Cuba Carbajal, N., Zuta, M. E. C., & Bayat, S. (2023). Collaborative learning, scaffolding-based instruction, and self-assessment: Impacts on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension, motivation, and anxiety. *Language Testing in Asia*, 13(1), 16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-023-00229-1>
- Almohawes, M. (2024). Second language acquisition theories and how they contribute to language learning. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(3), 181. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n3p181>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. In *Sage Publications* (p. 320). <https://books.google.se/books?id=Hr11DwAAQBAJ&hl=sv>
- Cai, J., Wen, Q., Bi, M., & Lombaerts, K. (2024). How Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is related to Differentiated Instruction (DI): The mediation role of growth mindset and teachers' practices factors. *Social Psychology of Education*, 27(6), 3513–3532. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-024-09945-9>
- Cao, Y., Grace Kim, Y.-S., & Cho, M. (2023). Are observed classroom practices related to student language/literacy achievement? *Review of Educational Research*, 93(5), 679–717. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221130687>
- D'Intino, J. S., & Wang, L. (2021). Differentiated instruction: A review of teacher education practices for Canadian pre-service elementary school teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 47(5), 668–681. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2021.1951603>
- Domke, L. M., & Cerrato, M. A. (2026). Integrating content and language instruction for multilingual learners: A systematic review across program types. *Review of Educational Research*, 96(1), 299–338. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543241298667>
- Donkoh, S. (2023). Application of triangulation in qualitative research. *Journal of Applied Biotechnology & Bioengineering*, 10(1), 6–9. <https://doi.org/10.15406/jabb.2023.10.00319>
- Effendi, T., Thurston, A., & MacKenzie, A. (2024). A systematic evidence synthesis of disability and inclusive pedagogy in initial teacher training in English as a Foreign Language. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 7, 100350. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100350>
- Elsayed, A. M., Kholikov, A., Abdullayeva, I., Al-Farouni, M., & Wodajo, M. R. (2024). Teacher support in AI-assisted exams: An experimental study to inspect the effects on demotivation, anxiety management in exams, L2 learning experience, and academic success. *Language Testing in Asia*, 14(1), 53. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-024-00328-7>
- Faber, T. J. E., Dankbaar, M. E. W., van den Broek, W. W., Bruinink, L. J., Hogeveen, M., & van Merriënboer, J. J. G. (2024). Effects of adaptive scaffolding on performance, cognitive load and engagement in game-based learning: A randomized controlled trial. *BMC Medical Education*, 24(1), 943.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-024-05698-3>

- Feng, H. (2023). Scaffolding teaching approach to foster cooperation in English teaching strategy. *International Journal of Social Science and Research*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.58531/ijssr/1/1/4>
- Filippou, K., Acquah, E. O., & Bengs, A. (2025). Inclusive policies and practices in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Review of Education*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70034>
- Forsman, L. (2025). Co-teaching literacy strategies for the inclusion of second-language learners: Possibilities for professional development. *Language and Education*, 39(3), 638–655. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2348596>
- Gaitas, S., Carêto, C., Peixoto, F., & Castro Silva, J. (2024). Differentiated instruction: ‘to be, or not to be, that is the question.’ *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(11), 2607–2623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2119290>
- Geampana, A., & Perrotta, M. (2025). Using interview excerpts to facilitate focus group discussion. *Qualitative Research*, 25(1), 130–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941241234283>
- Gordon, G. V., & Montenegro, D. E. M. (2025). Differentiated instruction in Ecuadorian higher education: Adapting English language teaching to learning styles and academic majors. *Revista Científica Multidisciplinar G-Nerando*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.60100/rcmg.v6i1.672>
- Haddadian, G., Radmanesh, S., & Haddadian, N. (2024). Construction and validation of a Computerized Formative Assessment Literacy (CFAL) questionnaire for language teachers: an exploratory sequential mixed-methods investigation. *Language Testing in Asia*, 14(1), 33. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-024-00303-2>
- Hassen, S. K., Adugna, E. T., & Bogale, Y. N. (2024). EFL students’ writing achievement via the execution of scaffolding strategies instruction. *System*, 125, 103439. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103439>
- Homayouni, M. (2022). Peer assessment in group-oriented classroom contexts: On the effectiveness of peer assessment coupled with scaffolding and group work on speaking skills and vocabulary learning. *Language Testing in Asia*, 12(1), 61. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-022-00211-3>
- Imran, M., Almusharraf, N., Sayed Abdellatif, M., & Ghaffar, A. (2024). Teachers’ perspectives on effective English language teaching practices at the elementary level: A phenomenological study. *Heliyon*, 10(8), e29175. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e29175>
- Jufrianto, M., Basri, M., & Iskandar. (2025). A mixed-methods framework for assessing differentiated instruction implementation barriers in EFL secondary education contexts. *MethodsX*, 15, 103457. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mex.2025.103457>
- Kamaşak, R., Sahan, K., & Rose, H. (2021). Academic language-related challenges at an

- English-medium university. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 49, 100945. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100945>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2013). Scaffolding language learning in an academic ESL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 67(3), 324–335. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct016>
- Koyuncu, S., Kumpulainen, K., & Kuusisto, A. (2024). Scaffolding children's participation during teacher–child interaction in second language classrooms. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 68(4), 750–764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2183430>
- Langan, L., Frazer, K., Darley, A., Goodman, L., Browne, F., Fulfilled, P., Halligan, P., & Redmond, C. (2025). Inclusive pedagogy in online simulation-based learning in undergraduate nursing education: A scoping review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 81(2), 591–606. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.16284>
- Letzel-Alt, V., & Pozas, M. (2025). Fostering inclusive teaching competences: Concrete practice-oriented suggestions for teachers to deal with diverse learning groups in inclusive settings. *British Journal of Special Education*, 52(2), 221–227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70014>
- Lindner, K.-T., & Schwab, S. (2025). Differentiation and individualisation in inclusive education: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 29(12), 2199–2219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1813450>
- Liu, Z., Hua, J., & Zhang, Z. (2022). Scaffolding instruction in virtual language learning. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(2), 386–391. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1302.20>
- Love, H. R., & Horn, E. (2021). Definition, context, quality: Current issues in research examining high-quality inclusive education. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 40(4), 204–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121419846342>
- Namaziandost, E., & Çelik, F. (2025). Demystifying the nexus between social support, teacher support and psychological needs fulfilment with peace of mind, achievement emotions and situational motivation in artificial intelligence-integrated language learning. *British Educational Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4191>
- Namaziandost, E., Kargar Behbahani, H., & Heydarnejad, T. (2024). Tapping the alphabets of learning-oriented assessment: Self-assessment, classroom climate, mindsets, trait emotional intelligence, and academic engagement are in focus. *Language Testing in Asia*, 14(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-024-00293-1>
- Nguyen, C. D. (2024). Incidental grammar acquisition through meaning-focused reading: Structure frequency and reading comprehension. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 36(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/67461>
- Peng, W. (2025). Teacher-researcher autonomy of Chinese EFL academics: An exploratory sequential mixed methods design. *Higher Education Policy*, 38(2), 314–

337. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-024-00347-2>
- Petersson-Bloom, L., & Holmqvist, M. (2022). Strategies in supporting inclusive education for autistic students—A systematic review of qualitative research results. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969415221123429>
- Prediger, S., & Buró, R. (2024). Fifty ways to work with students' diverse abilities? A video study on inclusive teaching practices in secondary mathematics classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(2), 124–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1925361>
- Quvanch, Z., Qasemi, A. S., & Na, K. S. (2024). Analyzing levels, factors and coping strategies of speaking anxiety among EFL undergraduates in Afghanistan. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2413225>
- Rauteda, K. R. (2025). Quantitative research in education: Philosophy, uses and limitations. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, 2(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.56916/jmrd.v2i1.993>
- Song, Y. (2024). Sustainable Growth of learner engagement and well-being through social (teacher and peer) support: The mediator role of self-efficacy. *European Journal of Education*, 59(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12791>
- Sukkaew, N., Apridayani, A., & Whanchit, W. (2025). Debates in the EFL classroom: A sociocultural approach to language acquisition, emotional resilience, and peer collaboration. *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 16(2), 483–504. <https://doi.org/10.15503/jecs2025.3.483.504>
- Tajik, O., Noor, S., & Golzar, J. (2024). Investigating differentiated instruction and the contributing factors to cater EFL students' needs at the collegial level. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 9(1), 74. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-024-00299-5>
- Tao, Y., Meng, Y., Gao, Z., & Yang, X. (2022). Perceived teacher support, student engagement, and academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology*, 42(4), 401–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2022.2033168>
- Tarrayo, V. N., Hernandez, P. J. S., & Claustro, J. M. A. S. (2021). Research engagement by English language teachers in a Philippine University: Insights from a qualitative study. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 21(3). <https://doi.org/10.59588/2350-8329.1387>
- Vogel, F., Kollar, I., Fischer, F., Reiss, K., & Ufer, S. (2022). Adaptable scaffolding of mathematical argumentation skills: The role of self-regulation when scaffolded with CSCL scripts and heuristic worked examples. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*, 17(1), 39–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11412-022-09363-z>
- Witter, M., & Hattie, J. (2024). Can teacher quality be profiled? A cluster analysis of

- teachers' beliefs, practices and students' perceptions of effectiveness. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(2), 653–675. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3938>
- Wu, L., & Bakar, K. A. (2025). Language scaffolding strategies based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development in early reading education: A cross-cultural comparison. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, 7(6). <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i6.9624>
- Yousif, A. S. A. (2025). The influence of cooperative learning on oral efficiency and inducement among upper-intermediate Saudi EFL learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 15(8), 2611–2618. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1508.18>
- Zhang, H., & Singh, C. K. S. (2025). Scaffolding and reading comprehension: A literature review. *International Journal of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics*, 9(2), 89–109. <https://doi.org/10.24191/ijmal.v9i2.4671>
- Zhao, C. G., & Qi, Q. (2023). Implementing Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) among limited-proficiency EFL students: Challenges, strategies, and students' reactions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(2), 566–594. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3167>