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**TEACHING ENGLISH**  
**TO MIXED-LEVEL CLASSES IN RURAL SCHOOLS**

# TEACHING ENGLISH

## TO MIXED-LEVEL CLASSES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

### ENSEÑANZA DE INGLÉS EN CLASES DE NIVELES MIXTOS EN ESCUELAS RURALES

Dalia Mariela Tillaguango-Pintado<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [dalia.tillaguango.65@est.ucacue.edu.ec](mailto:dalia.tillaguango.65@est.ucacue.edu.ec)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7158-3579>

Juanita Argudo-Serrano<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [juanita.argudo@ucuenca.edu.ec](mailto:juanita.argudo@ucuenca.edu.ec)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3337-7803>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad Católica de Cuenca. Ecuador.

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#### ABSTRACT

English education in mixed-level classes in rural schools is a complex and challenging task because it requires educators to address the students' multiple academic abilities, backgrounds, interests, and particular needs in a single class. This research synthesis, on the one hand, presents a systematic review and aims to explore the background of this educational setting, focusing on the diverse challenges that teachers come across when teaching English. On the other hand, it analyzes effective teaching strategies that help the instructor address these problems. By synthesizing existing research, this review tries to shed light on the implications for educators and curriculum developers in enhancing English language instruction in similar contexts. The methods involve a comprehensive analysis of scholarly articles, case studies, and empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals to provide insights into best practices for promoting inclusive learning environments and improving language outcomes of students in mixed-level classes in rural areas. The review pretends to contribute to the literature by compiling the most reported ongoing strategies in English classes in rural areas. In this way, it attempts to offer insights that can inform practice and contribute to the improvement of English language instruction in similar educational contexts, thus benefiting the field of foreign language research.

#### Keywords:

Mixed-level classes; teaching English, challenges, strategies, rural schools, EFL.

#### RESUMEN

La educación del inglés en clases de niveles mixtos en escuelas rurales es una tarea compleja y desafiante porque requiere que los educadores aborden las múltiples habilidades académicas, antecedentes, intereses y necesidades particulares de los estudiantes en una sola clase. Esta síntesis de investigación, por un lado, presenta una revisión sistemática y tiene como objetivo explorar los antecedentes de este entorno educativo, enfocándose en los diversos desafíos que enfrentan los docentes al enseñar inglés. Por otro lado, se analizan estrategias de enseñanza efectivas que ayuden al docente a abordar estos problemas. Al sintetizar la investigación existente, esta revisión intenta arrojar luz sobre las implicaciones para los educadores y los desarrolladores de currículos al mejorar la enseñanza del idioma inglés en contextos similares. Los métodos implican un análisis exhaustivo de artículos académicos, estudios de casos e investigación empírica publicadas en revistas revisadas por pares para proporcionar información sobre las mejores prácticas para promover entornos de aprendizaje inclusivos y mejorar los resultados lingüísticos de los estudiantes en clases de niveles mixtos en áreas rurales. La revisión pretende contribuir con la literatura, recopilando las estrategias más reportadas en las clases de inglés en áreas rurales. De esta manera, intenta ofrecer ideas que puedan informar la práctica y contribuir a la mejora de la enseñanza del idioma inglés en contextos educativos similares, beneficiando así el campo de la investigación en lenguas extranjeras.

#### Palabras clave:

Clases de niveles mixtos, enseñanza de inglés, desafíos, estrategias, escuelas rurales, inglés como lengua extranjera.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in rural schools has specific challenges, one of the most significant being the existence of mixed-level classes. These classrooms have students with varying English proficiency levels, making it arduous for teachers to cater to the needs of all students effectively. This literature review explores the current research on this topic, highlighting the challenges faced by teachers in these environments.

Numerous studies have explored the arduous task teachers face when teaching English in mixed-level classes (Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Diasamidze et al., 2021; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Haufiku et al., 2022; Heng et al., 2023; Kariminasab et al., 2023) acknowledge the difficulty in teaching English to mixed-level classes. On the other hand, Diasamidze et al. (2021); and Habelko (2022), stated that the use of a one-size-fits-all approach proves ineffective, and could make some students feel bored or frustrated. This can lead to issues like a lack of student motivation (Haufiku et al., 2022) and difficulty managing the classroom (Bhandari, 2020). Additionally, Gedamu & Gezahegn (2022); and Haufiku et al. (2022), highlight issues like limited resources, large class sizes, and student motivation. Furthermore, a lack of proper training is another concern in this kind of classroom (Kariminasab et al., 2023).

Despite the challenges, research also explores strategies for successful teaching in mixed-level classrooms. Differentiation, where instruction is tailored to individual student needs (Umarova, 2021; Habelko, 2022; Heng et al., 2023). This can involve using a variety of teaching materials (Umarova, 2021; Hasa, 2023), employing group work (Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Heng et al., 2023), and fostering a positive learning environment that encourages student participation (Ismoilova, 2021; Hasa, 2023). Utilizing technology and online resources are additional strategies that help teachers manage mixed-level classrooms (Mannebratt, 2022; Hasa, 2023).

While existing research offers valuable insights, there is a need for further exploration. Researchers Mannebratt (2022); and Heng et al. (2023), suggest research with larger sample sizes where student perspectives can be incorporated, focusing specifically on the context of rural schools would be beneficial. Teaching English to students, with varying skill levels in schools comes with its set of obstacles. However, by understanding these challenges and employing effective strategies educators can establish a supportive learning atmosphere that benefits all students.

It is essential to conduct a systematic review to examine the existing research and learn teaching methods that work well for other teachers. In this context, the purpose of

the review is not only to summarize the findings, but also to show their strengths and weaknesses. This study may be used as a valuable resource for teachers, policymakers, and researchers due to the need to develop teaching techniques that are evidence-based and are adapted to the needs of students living in rural areas. (Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Mannebratt, 2022; Eshonqulova et al., 2023). On the other hand, it is crucial to explore additional educational resources for mixed-level teaching that help teachers meet individual student needs effectively (Mannebratt, 2022). Finally, by knowing specific teaching methods and strategies for working with this group of students, educators can help promote inclusive education and empower students to succeed in a globalized world where English proficiency is increasingly essential for communication and participation.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for conducting the present synthesis on teaching English to mixed-level classes in rural schools involved a systematic approach tailored to achieve the research aim and specific objectives. Systematic reviews involve clearly defined processes for searching, selecting, and analyzing relevant literature, minimizing bias, and enhancing the reliability of the findings (Shaheen et al., 2023). Moreover, according to Norris & Ortega (2006), when planning a research synthesis, concentrating on the identification, selection, and characterization of studies and explaining how the relevant literature was searched are imperative. Regarding data collection, the academic search engines were ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen due to their extensive coverage of educational literature (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020) and that they are free. Their inclusion ensured access to a broad range of scholarly articles and empirical studies, which were crucial for conducting a thorough review.

Preliminary keywords used for the search included terms such as “teaching English,” “mixed-level classes,” “challenges,” “rural schools,” “EFL,” and variations thereof, which guide the search strategy facilitating the identification of relevant studies. Furthermore, the selection of articles considered peer-reviewed works published within the last five years. This timeframe ensured that the review captured recent developments and trends in the field of teaching English to mixed-level classes in rural schools. Theses, conference papers, and non-English language articles were excluded to maintain the focus and quality of the review. Additionally, regarding the type of articles, both quantitative and qualitative studies were included, as well as mixed-methods research works to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus of the article	Mixed-level classes in rural schools	Articles that did not cover Mixed level classes in rural schools
Publication date	2019- 2023	Articles published before 2019 and after 2023
Publication Type	Scholarly, peer-reviewed articles	Conference papers, theses, book chapters, technical reports or discussion papers that did not include a discussion of the procedures of the study or data analysis.
Language	English	Other languages

Initially, 30 primary sources were selected for the review. Then, the different studies found were checked according to the aforementioned criteria. This process resulted in reducing the initial works to 14 preliminary studies. It is important to mention that two articles were eliminated because they did not focus on mixed-level classes, eight articles were excluded because they did not correspond to the years 2019-2023, and six contained data that was not reliable considering that they were not peer-reviewed (Figure 1).

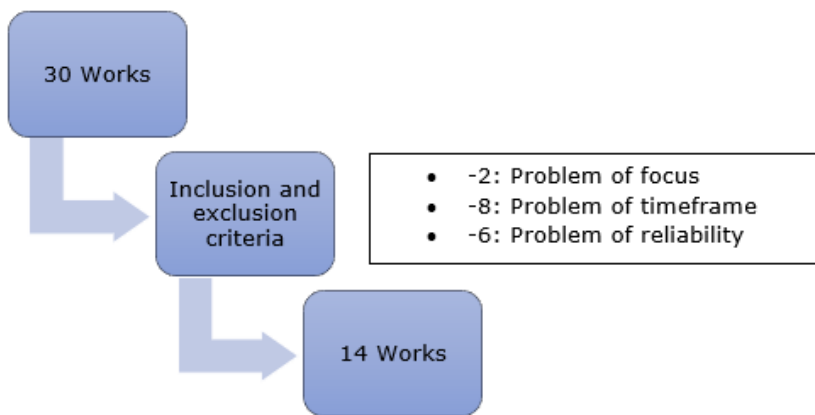


Figure 1. Process of Exclusion of Sources.

## DEVELOPMENT

The development of this literature review is divided into three sections: Mixed-Level EFL Classes in Rural Schools, Challenges of Teaching Mixed-Level Classes, and Teaching Strategies for Mixed-Level Classes. The last two parts answer the research questions: What reported challenges do EFL teachers face in teaching English to mixed-level classes in rural schools? What reported challenges do EFL teachers face in teaching English to mixed-level classes in rural schools?

### 1 Mixed-Level EFL Classes in Rural Schools

This first section seeks to provide a definition of mixed-level EFL classes and some of their characteristics according to different authors.

Thus, a mixed-level class, also known as a mixed-ability class or heterogeneous class refers to a group of students who have different types of knowledge, backgrounds, needs and interests. According to Heng et al (2023), mixed-ability classes have drawn more and more attention from teachers, researchers, and academia in the education sector, especially in teaching EFL. In general, mixed-ability classes consist of students who have different characteristics. Heng et al (2023), stated that these features may vary from student to student, including their attitude, motivation, and discipline since mixed-level groups have not only students with different interests but also various capacities making it hard for teachers to plan effective lessons to meet every student's needs. Besides, they emphasize that in EFL classes, mixed-ability students may have various learning styles, different language backgrounds and learning paces, grammatical skills, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, and receptive and productive skills. Similarly, Wroblewski & Majerová (2019) highlight the importance of student diversity regarding language competence, background, motivation, and

aptitude. Likewise, Mannebratt (2022), underscored the relevance of the varying proficiency levels that learners may have. All of this explains why mixed-level classes cause challenges to EFL teachers.

## 2 Challenges of Teaching Mixed-Level Classes

In order to have a better understanding of this section, Table 2 presents the main difficulties that educators face in mixed-level classes according to the analyzed sources of information (see Annex 1).

Table 2. Main Challenges Faced by Teachers in Mixed-Level Classes.

N°	Category	Authors	N° Articles	%
1	Differentiation	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Majerová, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Diasamidze et al., 2021; Umarova, 2021; Ismoilova, 2021; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Mannebratt, 2022; Habelko, 2022; Eshonqulova et al., 2023; Heng et al., 2023.	11	78.57%
2	Lack of engagement and motivation	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Ismoilova, 2021; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Habelko, 2022; Haufiku et al., 2022; Mannebratt, 2022; Hasa, 2023.	9	64.28%
3	Large classes	Bhandari, 2020; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Habelko, 2022; Haufiku et al., 2022; Kariminasab et al., 2023; Eshonqulova et al., 2023; Hasa, 2023.	7	50%
4	Teacher workload	Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Diasamidze et al., 2021; Mannebratt, 2022; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Kariminasab et al., 2023.	6	42.86%

Out of the 14 works that were analyzed, it is possible to notice that the challenge of differentiation was the most commonly mentioned. It was found in 11 sources (78.57%). Thus, Benmassoud & El Madani (2019), highlighted the difficulty of catering to individual students' needs in mixed-level classes. Likewise, Bhandari (2020), pointed out that English teachers, along with instructors of other curriculum subjects, regularly face mixed ability sets in which different individuals are at various levels and have different abilities which could mean a serious challenge for instructors. Eshonqulova et al. (2023), also corroborated that adapting to different ability levels is a difficulty that could worry any instructor. Besides, Habelko (2022), claimed that learners could have various English levels, from beginners to advanced students. This variety could make it challenging to satisfy everyone's needs.

Another common challenge identified in the analyzed sources was a lack of students' engagement and motivation. It was detected in nine works (64.28%). In this regard, Haufiku et al. (2022); and Hasa (2023), mentioned that because of a lack of interest in learning English, engagement and motivation in mixed-level classes could be arduous. This difficulty was also corroborated by Mannebratt (2022), who claimed that keeping learners of all levels interested and constantly challenged can be difficult. As a way of minimizing this limitation, Ismoilova (2021), suggested that instructors could consider not comparing lower proficiency students with more advanced peers because that can make them feel discouraged.

Additionally, large classes were an important challenge for classes with mixed levels. It was found in six sources (50%). Gedamu & Gezahegn (2022), explained that large class sizes can make it hard to manage and properly give attention to all learners. This could even lead to problems in maintaining discipline and learners' engagement. Similarly, Habelko (2022); and Kariminasab et al. (2023), pointed out that classes with many students make it challenging to provide individual attention and effectively manage the learning environment. Likewise, the work of Hasa (2023), identified that both, instructors and learners, see large classes as challenging. They believe that having many people in one room could lead to issues when maintaining engagement and managing student behavior. Ultimately, it could be hard to ensure that all students learn effectively. Likewise, Haufiku et al. (2022), stated that large classes make it arduous for instructors to give individual attention and also manage the classroom appropriately.

Finally, teacher workload is another relevant challenge that teachers may have to address in mixed-level classes. It was identified in five works (42.86%). Diasamidze et al. (2021), said that differentiated work for each student could be beneficial. However, it can require much more planning and preparation, which could be very time-consuming. Eshonqulova et al (2023), agreed with Diasamidze et al. (2021), and acknowledged that these types of classes require more effort from the instructor. This may include the creation of differentiated materials and also the management of mini-classes within the bigger group. Likewise, Gedamu & Gezahegn (2022), corroborated that teacher workload is a serious challenge by highlighting the difficulty of finding and creating sound materials for all proficiency levels.

### 3 Teaching Strategies for Mixed-Level Classes

To better understand this section, Table 3 shows the main strategies that teachers could use to address challenges that can arise in mixed-level classes according to the analyzed works.

Table 3. Main Strategies Utilized by Teachers to Address Challenges in Mixed-Level Classes.

N°	Category	Authors	N° Articles	%
1	Differentiation	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Diasamidze et al., 2021; Umarova, 2021; Ismoilova, 2021; Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2022; Habelko, 2022; Hasa, 2023; Heng et al., 2023; Mannebratt, 2022; Eshonqulova et al., 2023.	12	85.71%
2	Grouping	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Bhandari, 2020; Umarova, 2021; Habelko, 2022; Haufiku et al., 2022; Mannebratt, 2022; Eshonqulova et al., 2023; Hasa, 2023; Heng et al., 2023.	11	78.57%
3	Engagement Techniques	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Diasamidze et al., 2021; Ismoilova, 2021; Habelko, 2022; Mannebratt, 2022; Haufiku et al., 2022; Kariminasab et al., 2023; Eshonqulova et al., 2023; Hasa, 2023.	10	71.43%
4	Student Assessment	Benmassoud & El Madani, 2019; Wroblewski & Majerová, 2019; Ismoilova, 2021; Habelko, 2022; Mannebratt, 2022; Hasa, 2023; Heng et al., 2023.	7	50%

This last part deals with teaching strategies to overcome the different challenges of mixed-level classes, according to the selected sources (see Annex 2). In this way, it answers the research question: What reported strategies help teachers in rural schools to overcome the challenges they face in teaching English in mixed-level classes?

From the 14 works that were analyzed, it is possible to see that the strategy called differentiation was the most frequently identified. It was found in 12 sources (85.71%). Thus,

Benmassoud & El Madani (2019), and Kariminasab et al. (2023), mentioned that a way of addressing the challenges of mixed-level classes is differentiating or using distinct materials with each student. Regarding content, Eshonqulova et al. (2023), advised tailoring it to students' interests thus boosting engagement. Similarly, Bhandari (2020), also supported differentiation by stating that instruction should be different for each learner. Moreover, Gedamu & Gezahegn (2022), corroborated the importance of this strategy. They mentioned that it is necessary to cater to students' learning styles. This may involve having differentiated instructions that allow learners to select their own difficulty levels.

Grouping is the second common strategy found in the 14 works. It was identified in 11 sources (78.57%). Concerning it, Habelko (2022), recommended grouping students with different abilities. In this way, advanced learners might help struggling students. Similarly, Hasa (2023), suggested encouraging collaboration among learners to promote peer learning. Likewise, Heng et al. (2023), agreed with the use of peer-assisted learning due to the benefits that collaboration brings. Lastly, it is important to highlight that this strategy can take different forms. For example, mixed-ability grouping (Habelko, 2022), strategic grouping, which is done by ability or proficiency level, and random grouping (Umarova, 2021).

Besides, using engagement techniques is another strategy that was commonly mentioned. It was found in nine sources (71,43%). In this regard, Benmassoud & El Madani (2019), underscored the importance of incorporating a variety of activities in class, which could be related to listening, writing, or speaking skills. Another engagement technique is giving alternatives for independent learning. It allows learners to choose activities according to their abilities and interests (Eshonqulova et al., 2023). Similarly, Habelko (2022), highlighted the importance of student choice. The author claimed that it may increase engagement and motivation. Besides, Hasa (2023), mentioned that teachers should use engagement techniques like Think-Pair-Share, Question of the Day, or technology integration to get students' attention and promote their participation.

Finally, the last strategy that was common in the articles was student assessment. It was identified in seven works (50%). This strategy was recommended by authors such as Benmassoud & El Madani (2019); and Heng et al. (2023). Concerning this, Habelko (2022), highlighted the importance of regularly assessing learners to identify areas where they need extra help. In this way, the teaching process could be adjusted accordingly. Likewise, Wroblewski & Majerová (2019), corroborated the relevance of this strategy in mixed-level classes considering that regularly assessing students' progress with various methods serves to identify areas that need more support.



## CONCLUSIONS

Different conclusions of the literature review based on the analysis section are provided in this segment of the article, limitations and suggestions for future research are presented as well.

Intending to answer the research question: What reported challenges do EFL teachers face in teaching English to mixed-level classes in rural schools? 14 sources were analyzed revealing that the principal difficulties of students and teachers were differentiation. These findings mean that instructors of mixed-level classes in rural schools should seriously consider learners' differences. Students have different interests, abilities, needs, levels, and learning styles. This could suggest that teachers should plan activities with various levels of difficulty or give options for activities to address different needs. In this regard, instructors could set up some stations around a classroom with various learning tasks from which learners could choose their favorite ones. Additionally, the relevance of differentiation suggests that teachers should tailor their teaching methods to adapt to the unique characteristics of each learner. Another common challenge was a lack of students' engagement and motivation. This finding may indicate that more variety should be present in classes. Additionally, connecting materials or tasks to learners' experiences and interests could be beneficial. In relation to large classes, it may be advisable to group students or to integrate technology into classes to facilitate the teachers' job. Finally, regarding teacher workload, it could be ideal to collaborate with colleagues sharing lesson plans or important resources.

The second part of this work intended to answer the question: What reported strategies help teachers in rural schools overcome the challenges they face in teaching English in mixed-level classes? In view of the importance of differentiation, instructors should ignore "one-size-fits-all" instruction. Instead, they should make their classes adapt to what students really need. Variety for the different lessons ought to be seriously considered. Additionally, the findings suggest that grouping students should be implemented in EFL classes considering that collaboration can benefit all learners. In regard to engagement techniques, they should not be forgotten considering that students' motivation is necessary for language learning. If students are feeling discouraged or stressed, teachers could offer flexible options for them to complete tasks. In this way, their motivation levels would probably go up. Finally, the importance of student assessment found in the analysis may suggest the need to apply it regularly. Its use could help us identify areas where learners might need additional support. This assessment might be through quizzes, observations, tests, etc.

Additionally, the limitations that this work presented were that it analyzed only 14 sources of information. More works would have been ideal to carry out a deeper review

on mixed-level classes. Another limitation was that this review was based on the subjective analysis of research works which could make room for some bias about the interpretation of the main challenges and strategies found.

Finally, in view of the results, future research could explore how effective differentiation strategies and certain grouping techniques are in rural mixed-level classrooms. Additionally, researching the impact of these strategies on learners' motivation would be beneficial. Besides, even though the results of the previous analysis suggest interesting ideas to improve EFL education in rural schools with mixed-level classrooms, they also indicate that more research should be done on how to effectively implement the aforementioned strategies.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1. Challenges of Teachers in Mixed-Level Classes.

N°	Year	Authors	Challenges
1	2019	Benmassoud & El Madani	Resource constraints, catering to individual needs, time management, engaging all students, motivation
2	2020	Bhandari	Addressing learning needs, poor involvement, managing classroom dynamics, ensuring equitable learning outcomes, ineffective learning, indiscipline, addressing multiple intelligences, ineffective preparation and planning, deficient class management, balancing body language and voice, bad management of teaching materials
3	2021	Diasamidze et al.	“One-book-fits-all” approach, limited differentiation, teacher workload
4	2023	Eshonqulova et al.	Teacher workload, catering to distinct ability levels
5	2022	Gedamu & Gezahegn	Classroom management, variety of language proficiency, difficulty in adapting lessons and materials, lack of teacher training, inadequate training, poor language proficiency, lack of interest and motivation, different abilities
6	2022	Habelko	Student level discrepancies, teacher training, limited resources, large classes, lack of motivation and engagement
7	2023	Hasa	Large classes, managing behavior, maintaining engagement, ensuring everyone learns, teacher training
8	2022	Haufiku et al.	Limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, learners' absenteeism, limited access to language media, lack of motivation, lack of parental involvement, teacher training
9	2023	Heng et al.	Addressing various learning needs, managing time effectively, adapting instruction to proficiency levels
10	2021	Ismoilova	Lack of motivation and engagement, differentiation, communication struggles
11	2023	Kariminasab et al.	Managing discipline, lack of support and training, choosing appropriate activities and materials
12	2022	Mannebratt	Planning, differentiation, lack of motivation and engagement, time constraints, assessment
13	2021	Umarova	Different abilities, backgrounds, and interests
14	2019	Wroblewski & Majerová	Differentiation, assessment, lack of engagement, activity design

### Annex 2. Strategies to Overcome Challenges in Mixed-Level Classes.

N°	Year	Authors	Strategies
1	2019	Benmassoud & El Madani	Grouping, differentiated materials, stages of a lesson plan, using different activities, student assessment, teacher help
2	2020	Bhandari	Differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, flexible grouping, scaffolding
3	2021	Diasamidze et al.	Differentiated work, allowing learners to choose tasks
4	2023	Eshonqulova et al.	Grouping by ability, pairing learners with different abilities, methods of strategic interaction, learning stations, tailoring content based on interests, mini-classes, one-on-one support
5	2022	Gedamu & Gezahegn	Addressing students' needs, teacher training, improved classroom management
6	2022	Habelko	Multi-level tasks, group work, assessment, adapting materials, integrating technology, individualized learning, subject-language integration, student choice
7	2023	Hasa	Variety in activities, collaborative learning, technology integration, engagement techniques, assessment, student feedback, planning and preparation, assessment strategies

8	2022	Haufiku et al.	Motivating learners, interactive activities, teacher training, addressing class size, English as a medium of instruction, English clubs, parental involvement
9	2023	Heng et al.	Differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, cooperative learning, assessment
10	2021	Ismoilova	Individualized learning goals, differentiated learning, motivational environment, open-ended tasks, respectful feedback
11	2023	Kariminasab et al.	Teachers' training programs, appropriate materials and activities, managing behavior and discipline
12	2022	Mannebratt	Differentiation strategies, group work, integration of technology, assessment, focus on mastery, clear learning objectives
13	2021	Umarova	Task differentiation, material adaptation, grouping
14	2019	Wroblewski & Majerová	Variety of activities, differentiation, scaffolding, seating arrangements, clear instructions and explanations, grouping, emphasis on collaboration, assessment