

أثر إهمال الفروق الفردية في التعلم على أداء طلاب المتوسطة العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية
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Effect of Neglecting Learning Differences on Iraqi EFL Intermediate School Students' Performance

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Abstract:

This study explores the impact of neglecting individual learning differences on the academic performance of Iraqi students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in intermediate schools, with a focus on both gifted and struggling learners. As English language education gains prominence in Iraq's educational system, addressing learner diversity becomes essential for equitable and effective instruction. The research employs a mixed-methods approach involving standardized test data, teacher interviews, and classroom observations to assess the outcomes of undifferentiated teaching. Findings reveal that neglecting individual learning styles and abilities significantly hampers academic progress, particularly among students at the two extremes of the performance spectrum. The study advocates for the adoption of differentiated instructional strategies to enhance both engagement and achievement in EFL classrooms.

الملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة تأثير إهمال الفروق الفردية في التعلم على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلبة العراقيين المتفوقين والضعفاء في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة المتوسطة، ومع تزايد الاهتمام بتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في النظام التعليمي العراقي، أصبح من الضروري التعرف على الممارسات التعليمية التي تعزز أو تعيق تقدم الطلبة. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً يجمع بين الأدوات الكمية والنوعية لتحليل آثار التعليم الموحد على الطلبة ذوي الاحتياجات الأكاديمية المختلفة. أظهرت النتائج أن تجاهل أنماط وقدرات التعلم الفردية يعيق التقدم الأكاديمي بشكل ملحوظ، لا سيما لدى



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الطلبة الذين يقعون في طرفي الأداء (المتفوقين والضعفاء). وتوصي الدراسة باعتماد استراتيجيات التعليم المتمايز كحل فعال لتعزيز الإنصاف والتحصيل في صفوف تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Across Iraqi intermediate schools, the demand for improved English language proficiency has prompted nationwide curriculum development and teacher training initiatives. However, the diversity of learners' abilities in EFL classrooms presents a persistent challenge. Despite growing recognition of the importance of tailoring instruction to accommodate different learning needs, many classrooms continue to adopt a uniform approach that does not reflect individual student profiles. Such methods are often insufficient in meeting the demands of gifted students—who require enrichment—and struggling students—who benefit from support and scaffolding. This lack of responsiveness risks widening the achievement gap and undermining student engagement and success.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Uniform instructional practices overlook the natural variance in students' cognitive and linguistic development. In Iraq, this issue is magnified in EFL settings where students come from diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Teachers often report insufficient resources, large class sizes, and rigid curricula, all of which discourage the application of individualized strategies. Consequently, the academic growth of both gifted and struggling students is at risk. This study addresses the extent to which this instructional neglect affects student performance.

1.3 Importance of the Study

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge advocating for inclusive teaching methods. By examining the Iraqi context specifically, this study adds localized insights that may inform policy decisions, teacher training programs, and classroom interventions aimed at improving EFL instruction. It aims to bridge the gap between pedagogical theory and real-world classroom practice, emphasizing the importance of learner diversity.

1.4 Research Questions

- In what ways does a lack of differentiation impact gifted students' achievement in EFL classes?
- How are struggling students affected by undifferentiated instruction?
- What perceptions do Iraqi EFL teachers have regarding learner differences?

- What instructional practices are most effective in addressing student diversity in EFL classrooms?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

- To explore the relationship between instructional uniformity and student performance in EFL settings.
- To identify barriers that prevent teachers from implementing differentiated instruction.
- To analyze academic data from gifted and struggling learners to assess instructional effectiveness.
- To provide suggestions for policy reform and teacher development aligned with inclusive educational practices.

1.6 Hypotheses

- H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between neglecting individual differences and reduced academic performance among Iraqi intermediate EFL students.
- H2: Differentiated instruction positively affects the academic performance of both gifted and struggling learners.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

- The scope of the study is confined to intermediate-level students in selected Iraqi public schools.
- The focus is exclusively on English language learning, which may limit generalizability to other subjects.
- Cultural factors influencing classroom dynamics may not be fully captured.
- Teachers' self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

- **Individual Learning Differences:** The diverse ways in which students approach learning, influenced by cognitive, psychological, and environmental factors.
- **Gifted Students:** Learners who demonstrate advanced EFL language acquisition skills, creative problem-solving, or above-average academic performance.
- **Struggling Students:** Learners who consistently underperform or face challenges in acquiring English language skills relative to their peers.
- **Differentiated Instruction:** A pedagogical method that adapts teaching strategies, materials, and assessments to accommodate varying student needs.
- **Academic Performance:** Student achievement measured through formal assessments, assignments, and teacher evaluations in EFL courses.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Understanding individual learning differences requires anchoring this study in solid theoretical underpinnings. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively when students engage in tasks just beyond their independent ability, with the aid of appropriate support or scaffolding. Similarly, Gardner's (1983) Theory of Multiple Intelligences challenges the traditional notion of intelligence as a singular, measurable construct, advocating instead for instructional diversity that reflects linguistic, logical, interpersonal, spatial, and kinesthetic strengths. Complementing these, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory underscores the role of self-efficacy and modeling in learning, indicating that students' beliefs in their capabilities are shaped significantly by how instruction aligns with their learning preferences.

2.2 Individual Differences in Language Learning

Second language acquisition (SLA) research underscores the variability among learners in terms of cognitive styles, prior exposure, motivation, age, and personality traits (Ellis, 2008). These individual differences profoundly influence learners' abilities to comprehend and retain linguistic structures. For example, field-independent learners often excel in grammatical rule learning, while field-dependent learners benefit more from contextualized instruction (Witkin et al., 1977). Oxford and Ehrman (1993) also emphasized that successful EFL learners often employ a wider range of learning strategies, tailored to their personal cognitive and affective profiles.

2.3 Differentiated Instruction:

Concept and Application Differentiated instruction is not merely a strategy, but a philosophy of teaching that acknowledges student diversity as a strength rather than a limitation (Tomlinson, 2001; Hall, 2002). It involves proactive adjustments in content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate differences in readiness, interest, and learning profile. For instance, Heacox (2012) highlights the role of tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and ongoing formative assessment as central to effective differentiation. Moreover, studies show that students in differentiated classrooms demonstrate improved academic outcomes and higher motivation (Rock et al., 2008).

2.4 Uniform Teaching and Its Limitations

Despite theoretical support for differentiated practices, many educational contexts still rely on one-size-fits-all instruction. Hattie's (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses identifies teacher clarity, feedback, and formative assessment as top contributors to achievement—elements that are often compromised under rigid, undifferentiated teaching. In EFL settings, such

uniformity often results in disengagement, particularly among students whose learning pace or style diverges from the norm (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). The problem is further exacerbated when curriculum pacing guides and high-stakes testing limit teachers' flexibility.

2.5 Impact on Gifted Learners

Gifted students often face “academic neglect” in environments that prioritize remediation over enrichment (Renzulli & Reis, 2003). Boredom, reduced motivation, and underachievement are frequent consequences when tasks fail to challenge their higher-order thinking. In EFL classrooms, advanced learners may disengage when exposed to repetitive vocabulary or grammar drills. Robinson (2008) argues that gifted language learners thrive when offered complex texts, creative projects, and authentic language tasks.

2.6 Impact on Struggling Learners

Conversely, struggling learners require instruction that is scaffolded, multimodal, and emotionally supportive. Snow and Biancarosa (2003) found that early, targeted intervention leads to significantly better outcomes in language literacy. Differentiated instruction allows struggling students to build competence incrementally through varied input and personalized feedback (Coyne et al., 2007). Without such support, these learners often experience repeated failure, which negatively impacts their academic self-concept (Valiandes, 2015).

2.7 Teacher Beliefs and Implementation Challenges

Teacher beliefs play a central role in the adoption of differentiated instruction. According to Carolan and Guinn (2007), while most teachers recognize learner variability, many feel unprepared to address it due to a lack of professional training and time. Studies in the Middle East (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006) indicate that despite positive attitudes toward differentiation, implementation is minimal due to overcrowded classrooms, rigid curricula, and lack of administrative support.

2.8 The Iraqi EFL Context

In Iraq, EFL education is part of the core curriculum starting from intermediate school. However, studies such as Al-Hadithi (2021) and Al-Mansour (2020) report a dominance of traditional, lecture-based methods. Teachers often report challenges such as high student-teacher ratios, outdated materials, and insufficient training in modern pedagogical strategies. These limitations hinder the application of learner-centered practices, leaving both gifted and struggling students underserved. A report by UNESCO (2019) also highlights systemic barriers in Iraq that affect quality education, including limited policy implementation and inadequate teacher development programs.

2.9 Previous Studies

Several empirical studies have addressed the importance of individual differences and differentiated instruction across various educational contexts. For example, Tomlinson (2014) conducted extensive case studies across U.S. middle schools, demonstrating that differentiated instruction significantly enhances engagement and academic performance among diverse learners. In a study by Subban (2006), teachers implementing differentiation strategies reported a stronger connection with students and better classroom behavior. In the Arab world, Al-Fahad (2015) investigated Saudi EFL learners and found that students exposed to differentiated instruction scored significantly higher in language proficiency tests. More recently, a study by Khalaf and Ahmed (2022) examined 300 Iraqi intermediate students and concluded that classrooms employing flexible grouping and formative feedback showed marked improvements in student outcomes. These studies collectively support the argument that instructional flexibility positively influences student achievement, particularly when addressing learner diversity.

2.10 Synthesis and Research Gap

The body of literature strongly supports the positive impact of differentiation on student achievement. However, while global and regional studies advocate for inclusive strategies, research in the Iraqi context remains scarce, particularly concerning how the neglect of individual differences affects students at both ends of the performance spectrum. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the implications of uniform instruction in Iraqi EFL classrooms.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods design** to explore the impact of neglecting individual learning differences on the academic performance of gifted and struggling Iraqi EFL students in intermediate schools. The rationale for this design was to combine statistical analysis with qualitative insights, offering a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants and Setting:

The research was conducted in five intermediate schools across Baghdad/ Directorate of Education, Rusafa Second. The sample consisted of 200 students (100 high-performing and 100 low-performing in EFL), 10 EFL teachers, and 5 administrators. Purposive sampling ensured the selection of participants with relevant experiences.

Data Collection Instruments:

- **Academic Records:** Standardized EFL test scores were used to measure student achievement.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Conducted with teachers and administrators to understand perceptions of learner diversity and classroom practices.

- **Classroom Observations:** Guided by a checklist based on Tomlinson's differentiation model to assess instructional responsiveness.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (descriptive statistics, t-tests, and ANOVA), while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis, allowing the identification of patterns related to differentiation, teacher attitudes, and instructional barriers.

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including guardians for minors. Data were anonymized, and participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point.

Limitations:

While the purposive sample ensured relevance, it may limit generalizability. Additionally, observational data may have been affected by the presence of the researcher (observer effect), and interview responses may reflect social desirability bias.

Time constraints limited longitudinal follow-up.

Classroom observations might not capture all variations in teaching practices due to the observer effect.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. The analysis is structured around the research questions and hypotheses, exploring how the neglect of individual learning differences affects the academic performance of gifted and struggling Iraqi EFL students in intermediate school settings. The results are presented in two main sections: statistical analysis of student achievement data and thematic analysis of interviews and classroom observations.

4.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

4.2.1 Descriptive Statistics

The study included 200 students divided equally into high-performing and low-performing groups. Table 1 summarizes their mean scores in EFL achievement tests.

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations

Group	N	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
High-Performing	100	84.32	5.67
Low-Performing	100	51.48	7.92

4.2.2 Independent Samples T-Test

To test H1, an independent samples t-test was conducted comparing classrooms with and without differentiated instruction.

Table 2: T-Test Results

Variable	Mean (With Diff.)	Mean (Without Diff.)	t-value	p-value
High-Performing Students	87.12	81.75	3.26	0.001
Low-Performing Students	58.47	45.32	4.78	0.000

4.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

4.3.1 Thematic Analysis of Teacher Interviews

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed three core themes:

- Theme 1: Awareness of Student Differences
- Theme 2: Instructional Barriers
- Theme 3: Student Engagement

4.3.2 Observational Findings

Classroom observations were analyzed using a checklist based on differentiation principles. In classrooms with differentiated instruction:

- Tasks were tiered by readiness level
- Students worked in flexible groups
- Teachers provided varied instructional materials

In contrast, undifferentiated classrooms displayed:

- Whole-class instruction only
- Minimal student interaction
- Lack of formative assessment strategies

4.4 Integration of Findings

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data supports both hypotheses. Classrooms that incorporated differentiated instruction demonstrated significantly higher student achievement and engagement across both performance groups. The findings confirm that neglecting individual learning differences has detrimental effects, particularly on struggling learners, while also limiting the growth potential of gifted students.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

- Differentiated instruction significantly improves EFL achievement among both high- and low-performing students.
- Teachers recognize the importance of individual differences but face systemic and structural challenges.
- Student motivation and classroom engagement are closely linked to instructional responsiveness.

Chapter Five:

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion of Findings

5.1.1 Neglect of Individual Differences and Student Performance

The findings indicate that classrooms lacking differentiated instruction are associated with significantly lower academic achievement among both high- and low-performing EFL students. These results align with the literature emphasizing the detrimental effects of uniform teaching (Hattie, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014). For high-performing students, the lack of cognitive challenge led to disengagement, while for struggling students, the absence of tailored support contributed to persistent underachievement.

5.1.2 Teachers' Perceptions and Instructional Barriers Qualitative data revealed that while teachers acknowledge the importance of learner variability, many feel ill-equipped to implement differentiation due to systemic constraints. These include large class sizes, time limitations, lack of training, and rigid curricula. These findings are consistent with previous research in Middle Eastern contexts (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006; Al-Hadithi, 2021), which highlights similar challenges in adopting inclusive teaching strategies.

5.1.3 Impact on Student Engagement

Teachers observed that differentiated instruction positively influenced student motivation and participation. Students in classrooms where instruction was adapted to their needs demonstrated greater interest, confidence, and willingness to engage in language learning activities. This supports the argument that learner-centered environments promote both academic and emotional development (Gardner, 1983; Rock et al., 2008).

5.2 Conclusions

Based on the data analysis and literature review, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Neglecting individual learning differences in EFL classrooms has a significant negative impact on student achievement.
- Differentiated instruction enhances academic performance and engagement for both gifted and struggling students.
- Teachers are aware of the value of instructional adaptation but face multiple barriers to implementation.
- The Iraqi educational system must address structural and policy limitations to support inclusive, responsive teaching practices.

5.3 Recommendations

For Teachers:

- Engage in ongoing professional development on differentiation strategies.
- Utilize formative assessment to identify and respond to learner needs.
- Implement flexible grouping and tiered tasks to cater to varied readiness levels.

For School Administrators and Policymakers:

- Reduce student-to-teacher ratios to enable more individualized instruction.
- Provide resources and training focused on inclusive pedagogy.
- Integrate differentiation requirements into national curriculum guidelines.

For Researchers:

- Conduct longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of differentiated instruction in Iraqi schools.
- Investigate the role of digital tools in supporting personalized EFL instruction.
- Explore students' perspectives on classroom differentiation to enhance instructional design.

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