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Udl-Informed Teacher Preparation to Strengthen Language Access in Mixed-Ability Efl Classrooms: A Conceptual Model and a School-Based Evaluation Framework

Abstract

Mixed-ability EFL classrooms display predictable variability in learners' proficiency, vocabulary depth, processing speed, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate. Yet, instruction and assessment are frequently built on a uniform design: one task format, one expected output mode, and participation patterns shaped by volunteers. This commonly produces unequal language access—higher-proficiency learners generate most classroom talk and most visible learning evidence, while lower-proficiency learners reduce risk-taking, remain peripheral in interaction, and receive fewer opportunities to practice and refine output. This article proposes a UDL-informed teacher preparation model aimed at improving language access in mixed-ability EFL classrooms by translating UDL principles into measurable classroom processes and trainable teacher competencies. Language access is operationalized through three observable dimensions: (1) participation equity, (2) opportunity-to-respond (OTR) density and distribution, and (3) multiple means of representation and expression that allow learners to demonstrate understanding through alternative pathways aligned to the same learning goal. The model integrates structured classroom talk routines, reusable scaffolds, and formative assessment micro-cycles. To support evaluation under school constraints, the paper outlines a feasible framework with fidelity indicators, observation protocols, and outcome measures for participation, engagement, and language performance, and discusses implications for teacher education and school monitoring systems seeking measurable inclusion.

Keywords: *Universal Design for Learning, EFL, mixed-ability classrooms, language access, participation equity, opportunity-to-respond, formative assessment, teacher preparation*

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Qarışıq qabiliyyətli EFL siniflərində dil çıxışını gücləndirmək üçün UDL-də məlumatlı müəllim hazırlığı: konseptual model və məktəbə əsaslı qiymətləndirmə çərçivəsi

Xülasə

Qarışıq qabiliyyətli EFL sinif otaqları tələbələrin səriştəsində, lüğət ehtiyatının dərinliyində, emal sürətində, özünəinamında və ünsiyyət qurma istəyində proqnozlaşdırıla bilən dəyişkənlik nümayiş etdirir. Bununla belə, təlimat və qiymətləndirmə tez-tez vahid bir dizayn üzərində qurulur: bir tapşırıq formatı, bir gözlənilən nəticə rejimi və könüllülər tərəfindən formalaşdırılan iştirak nümunələri. Bu, adətən qeyri-bərabər dil çıxışına səbəb olur — daha yüksək səriştəli tələbələr sinifdə ən çox danışır və ən görünən öyrənmə sübutlarını yaradır, aşağı səriştəli tələbələr isə risk götürməyi azaldır, qarşılıqlı əlaqədə periferik qalır və nəticəni tətbiq etmək və təkmilləşdirmək üçün daha az imkan əldə edirlər.

Bu məqalədə UDL prinsiplərini ölçülə bilən sinif proseslərinə və təlim edilə bilən müəllim səriştələrinə çevirməklə qarışıq qabiliyyətli EFL sinif otaqlarında dil çıxışını yaxşılaşdırmağa yönəlmiş UDL məlumatlı müəllim hazırlığı modeli təklif olunur. Dil çıxışı üç müşahidə edilə bilən ölçü vasitəsilə həyata keçirilir: (1) iştirak bərabərliyi, (2) cavab vermək imkanı (OTR) sıxlığı və paylanması və (3) tələbələrin eyni təlim məqsədinə uyğun alternativ yollar vasitəsilə anlayış nümayiş etdirməsinə imkan verən çoxsaylı təmsilçilik və ifadə vasitələri. Model strukturlaşdırılmış sinif danışıq rutinlərini, təkrar istifadə edilə bilən iskeleləri və formativ qiymətləndirmə mikro-dövrələrini birləşdirir. Məktəb məhdudiyyətləri altında qiymətləndirməni dəstəkləmək üçün məqalədə sədaqət göstəriciləri, müşahidə protokolları və iştirak, cəlb olunma və dil performansı üçün nəticə ölçüləri ilə mümkün bir çərçivə təsvir edilir və ölçülə bilən inklüzivlik axtaran müəllim təhsili və məktəb monitorinq sistemləri üçün təsirlər müzakirə olunur.

***Açar sözlər:** öyrənmə üçün universal dizayn, EFL, qarışıq qabiliyyətli sinif otaqları, dilə çıxış, iştirak bərabərliyi, cavab vermək imkanı, formativ qiymətləndirmə, müəllim hazırlığı*

Introduction

In global discussions on educational development, inclusion is increasingly treated as an essential condition for quality rather than a separate social goal. However, inclusion is not achieved simply by placing learners in the same classroom. In everyday practice, inclusion becomes meaningful when learners can access instruction: they understand what is expected, they can enter tasks without avoidable barriers, they participate frequently enough to benefit from practice and feedback, and they can demonstrate learning in ways that inform teaching decisions.

These issues are particularly sharp in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Language learning is an accumulative skill that depends on sustained opportunities to comprehend input, attempt output, receive feedback, and refine performance over time. When participation opportunities are uneven, practice is uneven. When practice is uneven, language growth becomes uneven as well.

Mixed-ability EFL classrooms are a widespread reality. Learners in the same class can differ substantially in vocabulary knowledge, grammatical control, fluency, listening stamina, reading speed, prior exposure to English, and learning strategies. They also differ in affective factors such as confidence, fear of errors, and willingness to communicate. Under these conditions, uniform instruction combined with volunteer-based participation often produces predictable interaction patterns: a small subset of confident or higher-proficiency learners generates most public talk and provides most of the evidence teachers use to judge progress, while other learners remain silent or contribute minimally (Bandura, 1997).

This dynamic creates two interconnected problems. First, learners who most need guided practice and timely feedback often receive fewer structured opportunities to use language in supported ways. Second, teachers' formative judgments are shaped by partial evidence, because the "visible classroom data" comes disproportionately from the same learners. Improving participation equity therefore supports both learning and the validity of instructional decisions.

This article addresses the challenge through the concept of language access and proposes a Universal Design for Learning (UDL)-informed teacher preparation model tailored to mixed-ability EFL contexts. UDL treats learner variability as predictable and calls for proactive design that reduces barriers and provides multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and expression. Yet in many implementations, UDL remains a broad principle rather than a set of trainable teacher competencies and measurable classroom processes. The aim here is to operationalize language access through observable indicators and to translate UDL into practical routines, reusable tools, and an evaluation framework feasible for schools (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The article has two objectives. First, it proposes a teacher preparation model that strengthens language access by targeting three dimensions: participation equity, opportunity-to-respond (OTR) density and distribution, and multiple pathways for representation and expression aligned to common learning goals. Second, it outlines a school-based evaluation framework with fidelity indicators,

observation protocols, and outcome measures that can be used to examine implementation quality and effects under real classroom constraints.

Research

The “Research” section presents the conceptual and methodological foundation of the proposed approach: it defines language access as an observable construct, explains why UDL is a strong fit for mixed-ability EFL, details the teacher preparation model and its implementation toolkit, and proposes a feasible evaluation framework (Brookhart, 2008).

1. Language access as observable classroom processes

In many educational discussions, access is interpreted as access to schooling, curriculum materials, or assessment opportunities. In EFL, access must also be understood as access to participation. Language development requires repeated opportunities to understand meaning, attempt output, receive feedback, and attempt again. If classroom systems distribute these opportunities unevenly, learning opportunities become structurally unequal (Heritage, 2010).

To move from aspiration to implementation, language access must be described using classroom processes that can be observed and monitored. This article operationalizes language access through three measurable dimensions: participation equity; opportunity-to-respond (OTR) density and distribution; and multiple means of representation and expression (multiple pathways). These dimensions allow teachers to plan for access and allow schools to monitor whether inclusion is visible in daily routines (CAST, 2018).

1.1 Participation equity

Participation equity refers to how interaction opportunities and learning evidence are distributed across learners. In mixed-ability EFL settings, it can be observed through participation mapping—tracking who speaks during key segments—and through the distribution of products or responses collected from learners.

Practical indicators include the proportion of learners who contribute at least once in a segment, the concentration of speaking turns among the most active speakers, and the proportion of learners producing a short product (written or structured oral evidence). Participation equity does not mean identical talk time; it means classroom routines do not systematically exclude the same learners from meaningful practice and feedback. When participation equity improves, teachers receive more representative evidence to guide instruction, and more learners obtain the practice necessary for language growth (Ellis, 2003).

1.2 Opportunity-to-respond (OTR) density and distribution

Opportunity-to-respond (OTR) describes the frequency and distribution of response opportunities provided by instruction and task design. In mixed-ability classrooms, OTR is shaped less by learner motivation alone and more by routines that engineer participation.

Volunteer-based question-and-answer patterns typically deliver high OTR to a small subset of learners and low OTR to the rest. Distributed OTR can be created through timed pair rehearsal, short written prompts, structured choral responses in controlled practice, and selection strategies that ensure non-volunteers also respond after preparation.

Effective OTR includes preparation time. Public responses without preparation can increase anxiety and reduce participation, especially for lower-proficiency learners. Preparation steps such as think–write–pair rehearsal help learners enter tasks, retrieve vocabulary, and improve the quality of output (Gass & Mackey, 2015).

1.3 Multiple pathways for representation and expression

Multiple means of representation refers to presenting input and task information in ways that reduce avoidable barriers. In EFL, barriers often involve lexical overload, unclear task entry, and high working-memory demands. Useful supports include visuals, short models, worked examples, word banks, and graphic organizers.

Multiple means of expression refers to allowing learners to demonstrate learning through alternative pathways aligned to the same goal. A single high-demand output mode (for example, extended speaking) can prevent many learners from showing what they know. Aligned pathways can

include a short paragraph, a structured oral response using sentence frames, a paired dialogue containing the same target language, or a concept map plus a summarizing sentence. These pathways are not a reduction of standards; they are legitimate routes to reach the same target through different supports and formats (Hattie, 2009).

2. Why UDL fits mixed-ability EFL classrooms

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a proactive design logic for addressing predictable learner variability. In mixed-ability EFL classrooms, variability is not only linguistic; it includes attention, self-regulation, processing speed, and affective factors such as confidence and fear of errors. UDL's principles—multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression—map onto these sources of variability and provide a structure for planning instruction that reduces barriers before they become failure points.

Engagement-focused UDL strategies reduce unnecessary threat and increase predictability, for example by using structured rehearsal before public speaking, predictable pair routines, and legitimate output choices. Representation-focused strategies reduce avoidable cognitive load through clear models, task deconstruction, and targeted vocabulary support. Action and expression strategies legitimize multiple pathways to demonstrate understanding, improving fairness and increasing the amount of usable learning evidence teachers receive.

UDL is especially valuable when linked to formative assessment. Formative assessment requires evidence from many learners to guide instruction. By distributing OTR and enabling multiple aligned output pathways, UDL helps democratize learning evidence and improve the accuracy of classroom judgment (Long, 1996).

3. UDL-informed teacher preparation model

The proposed model is designed as a four-module professional development sequence with an implementation toolkit. It prioritizes routines and reusable tools rather than a large set of disconnected strategies. The intent is to make inclusive practice repeatable, observable, and manageable within typical school constraints.

3.1 Training delivery plan and teacher learning cycle

A feasible delivery format is an eight-week cycle combining short workshops with classroom-based application. For example, each module can be introduced in a 90-minute session, followed by two weeks of classroom implementation supported by peer observation or mentoring. Teachers apply one routine, collect simple evidence (participation maps and exit tickets), and bring artifacts to the next session for reflection.

The teacher learning cycle follows a plan–do–study–adjust sequence. Teachers plan an access feature (for example, a word bank and a talk routine), implement it, collect evidence from most learners, and adjust the next lesson based on patterns observed. This structure supports both skill development and sustainability because teachers learn to use evidence as part of routine planning.

3.2 Module 1: Planning for access

Module 1 builds a shared language for identifying barriers and planning supports. Teachers practice analyzing lessons through a Barrier-Support-Evidence cycle: (a) What barriers are predictable in the task (lexical, procedural, cognitive, affective)? (b) What supports reduce those barriers without lowering the goal (word banks, models, partially completed organizers, rehearsal steps)? (c) What evidence will be collected from most learners to guide next steps (exit tickets, brief products, structured responses)?

Teachers also learn to map participation. A simple map tracking who speaks and who produces evidence can reveal whether routines distribute opportunities or concentrate them. The mapping task is intentionally low-cost: it can be done with a class list and tick marks during a short observation window (Meyer et al., 2014).

3.3 Module 2: Talk routines that distribute participation

Module 2 trains teachers in structured talk routines that increase OTR and reduce fear of errors. Think-Write-Pair-Share is a core routine because it provides a preparation phase and a rehearsal phase

before public participation. The preparation phase supports vocabulary retrieval and idea organization; rehearsal supports fluency and confidence.

Timed partner rotations increase total learner talk time and normalize repetition as learning. Role-based group talk distributes responsibility and clarifies what to say, supporting learners who struggle with open-ended interaction. Teachers also practice selection strategies that reduce volunteer bias while maintaining safety, such as random selection after preparation or selecting pairs to share one joint answer (Nation, 2013).

3.4 Module 3: Formative assessment micro-cycles and micro-feedback

Module 3 integrates UDL with formative assessment. Teachers learn to define success criteria in observable terms that learners can act on. They practice eliciting evidence broadly using quick products and structured response formats that generate information from most learners, not only from volunteers.

Micro-feedback is presented as short prompts that guide immediate improvement without interrupting communicative flow. Typical prompts include: add one reason; use because/so to connect; clarify with an example; replace a general word with a target word; or reformulate for clarity. Micro-feedback makes correction actionable and supports iterative improvement across repeated practice opportunities.

3.5 Module 4: Multiple pathways and reusable scaffolds

Module 4 equips teachers with reusable scaffolds that create multiple aligned pathways. Sentence frames can be tiered (high support to low support) to support task entry for emerging learners while allowing stronger learners to extend language. Word banks and collocation lists reduce lexical barriers and support precision. Graphic organizers support planning and reduce working-memory demands (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Teachers design aligned output options that serve the same goal, such as: a short paragraph; a structured oral response using frames; a paired dialogue that includes the same target language; or a concept map plus one summarizing sentence. The module emphasizes gradual release: supports are reduced over time as learners internalize patterns, while the learning goal remains constant.

4. Implementation toolkit: Repeatable lesson architecture

To reduce planning burden and strengthen fidelity, the model recommends a repeatable lesson architecture that embeds UDL supports and formative evidence cycles within standard lesson time. A practical structure includes: (1) learning goal and success criteria; (2) access supports (word bank, model, organizer); (3) an OTR routine with rehearsal; (4) a short evidence product from most learners; (5) micro-feedback; and (6) an exit ticket plus reflection.

This architecture can be implemented at different levels of intensity. Schools may begin with one talk routine and one evidence tool, then add aligned pathways and more systematic participation mapping as teacher confidence increases. The key principle is to build stable routines that distribute practice and evidence (Sweller, 1988).

5. School-based evaluation framework

For the model to be scalable, it must be evaluable under school constraints. The evaluation framework supports monitoring of both implementation and outcomes without requiring extensive external resources. Where possible, evaluation can use cluster-based comparison designs, with classes or schools as clusters. Alternatively, a phased implementation approach can compare early adopters with later adopters while controlling for baseline performance.

Implementation fidelity can be documented with a brief checklist capturing whether the key mechanisms are present: a structured talk routine; preparation time before public responses; distribution of responses beyond volunteers; at least two aligned expression pathways; stated success criteria; micro-feedback during practice; and evidence collection from most learners. Fidelity information can be collected by teachers (self-report), mentors, or observers, and used for supportive coaching rather than punitive appraisal (Tomlinson, 2014).

Outcome measures should combine process indicators and learning indicators. Process indicators include participation equity (for example, the percentage of learners contributing at least once and

the concentration of turns among the most active speakers) and OTR distribution (response opportunities per minute by format, and the percentage distributed beyond volunteers). Learning indicators can include short speaking or writing tasks scored with a simple rubric aligned to the learning goal, brief comprehension checks, and short engagement or self-efficacy surveys. A central analytic question is whether the model reduces participation gaps and supports relatively larger gains among lower-proficiency learners, indicating improved language access rather than gains concentrated among already-strong learners (Wiliam, 2011).

6. Ethical and practical considerations

Any evaluation involving classroom observation and learner performance data should address ethical requirements. Learners and parents should be informed about data collection procedures, and data should be stored securely. Observation protocols should focus on classroom processes rather than labeling individual learners.

Practically, the model assumes typical constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and curriculum coverage pressures. For this reason, the model emphasizes routines and reusable scaffolds that reorganize lesson time rather than add separate activities. Peer support and mentoring are recommended to prevent partial implementation and to sustain routine use beyond the initial training period.

Conclusion

Mixed-ability EFL classrooms often produce unequal language access when instruction relies on uniform task formats and volunteer-driven participation. The result is unequal practice and unequal learning evidence: some learners receive repeated opportunities to produce language and obtain feedback, while others remain peripheral, and teachers make decisions based on partial data.

This article proposed a UDL-informed teacher preparation model that strengthens language access through three observable dimensions: participation equity; opportunity-to-respond density and distribution; and multiple aligned pathways for representation and expression. The model translates UDL into practical teacher competencies through four modules and provides a repeatable implementation toolkit to support routine change in classrooms.

A feasible school-based evaluation framework was outlined to support monitoring of implementation quality and outcomes within real constraints. The central claim is that measurable inclusion in EFL should be visible in classroom processes—who participates, how frequently learners respond, and how many pathways exist to demonstrate learning—alongside longer-term language outcomes.

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