

# What Happens When We Get Rid of Levels? Instructors' Perceptions of Mixed-Ability EFL Courses

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## 수준별 학습을 없앤다면? 다수준 영어 수업에 대한 교수자의 인식

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**Abstract** The present study aims to investigate how general education EFL instructors who teach in a higher education institution in Korea perceive mixed-ability classes and the teaching strategies that they utilized to teach learners who have varying English proficiency levels and may have different instructional needs. Twenty instructors at a higher education institution in Korea who teach general education EFL courses participated in a questionnaire and three of the twenty instructors participated in follow-up interviews. The findings from the questionnaire and interviews showed that instructors' experiences teaching mixed-ability classes were positive. They offered clear guidelines for participation to help motivate learners and found that higher level students helped lower level students through group work. The instructors also felt that ESP could be a possibility in mixed-ability classes to meet the learners educational needs.

**Key Words** : EFL teaching, College education, Teaching strategies, Mixed-ability classes, General Education

**요약** 본 연구는 한국 대학에서 외국어로서의 영어교육 환경에서 다수준 수업을 진행하는 강사들의 다수준 수업에 대한 인식과 각기 다른 영어 능력과 교육적 요구가 있는 학생들을 가르칠 때 강사들이 활용한 교수전략에 대해서 알아보려고 한다. 이를 위해 한국의 한 대학에서 교양영어수업을 담당하는 스무 명의 교수자가 설문지에 참여하였고, 그 중 세 명은 후속 면담에 참여하였다. 설문지와 후속 면담의 결과에 따르면 교수자들이 인식한 다수준 수업의 경험은 긍정적이었다. 교수자들은 학생들을 동기부여하기 위해서 수업 참여에 대한 명확한 지침을 제시하였고, 그룹 활동을 통해 높은 수준의 학생들이 낮은 수준의 학생들을 도울 수 있다는 점을 알게 되었다. 또한 학생들의 다수준 수업에서 학생들의 교육적 요구를 만족시키기 위해서 특수목적영어교육이 필요할 것 같다고 하였다.

**주제어** : 외국어로서의 영어교육, 대학교육, 교수전략, 다수준 수업, 교양교육

## 1. Introduction

College-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs in Korea have the objective of enhancing communicative competence of

learners. In order to achieve such objective, programs evolve and revise their curriculum, program management, and assessment measures to meet the ever-changing English demands of the global world. Based on the

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shifts in English language teaching paradigm, EFL instruction has moved from a grammar-based approach to a communicative approach. Due to this major shift, many college-level general education EFL programs have moved away from focusing on instruction of reading to speaking and oral communication[1]. Nam[1] claims that because of this focus on speaking, general education EFL programs have hired native-speaking English teachers (NET) who may have advantages compared to non-native-speaking English teachers (NNET) in terms of teaching oral communication abilities. Furthermore, researchers have conducted studies investigating learner satisfaction[2-6] and exploring cases of curriculum development[7-9] to improve the quality of general education EFL courses that can impact the English needs of students in all areas of study. Studies have also examined the need for and the learning outcomes of level-differentiated EFL instruction [10,11]. These studies have concluded that level-differentiated instruction may be effective in teaching students in college-level general education EFL programs because by having courses that meet the levels of students based on the results of placement tests, students can have opportunities to receive more individualized instruction.

Level-differentiated instruction has been found to be necessary as the focus of EFL instruction shifted from reading to communication and previous studies have been conducted to investigate learning outcomes and perception of small-scale, level-differentiated instruction in Korean EFL general education programs[6,8,12-14]. These studies have supported the need for level-differentiated instruction in higher education EFL instruction.

As shown above, many studies have

investigated the need for and the level of satisfaction of level-differentiated general education EFL instruction in Korean colleges. However, there is a paucity in research that investigated mixed-ability general education EFL instruction in Korean colleges despite the fact that there are still EFL programs in Korean higher education that do not offer level-differentiated instruction. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature by investigating how college EFL instructors perceive mixed-ability classes and the teaching strategies that they implemented to teach learners who are in varying proficiency levels and may have differing instructional needs.

## 2. Mixed-ability English Instruction

In Korea, most EFL instruction in primary and secondary schools consist of mixed-ability classes. In a mixed-ability class, learners may have different levels of English proficiency and educational backgrounds. Learners can also have different learning behaviors, expectations, and strategies[15]. According to Na[15], there are advantages and disadvantages of having a mix of abilities in an EFL class. Students can support and help each other by using their varying abilities and they can have more opportunities to take responsibility of their own learning. Teaching a class with mixed abilities can also encourage teachers to offer a variety of teaching tasks to students, which can enhance their professional abilities. However, Na[15] warrants that teaching mixed-ability classes can be challenging for teachers as students in higher levels may perceive instruction to be boring, whereas struggling students may feel threatened and frustrated. Teachers may also find class management and preparation more time consuming and difficult.

Previous studies on mixed-ability classes

have focused more on primary or secondary education compared to adult education. For example, Hallam & Ireson[16] compared teachers' teaching instructional practices in mixed-ability classes in secondary schools in the United Kingdom through a teacher questionnaire. They found that teachers gave struggling learners more opportunities for repetition and rehearsal, more structured work compared to discussions, and gave them more time. Lou, Abrami, Spence, Poulsen, Chambers & d'Apollonia[17] identified that, in mixed-ability classes, grouping practices have been found to be important in increasing learner performance. However, these studies have been conducted with teachers in several subject areas[16,18] and research on mixed-ability classes have been focused in the subject area of mathematics[17,19].

Literature on mixed-ability classes have shown conflicting results in terms of how this approach can influence students affective factors. For example, some studies have found that these classes can have negative effects on learner participation and motivation[20,21]. However, Hess[22] wrote that having a diverse group of students can create a more meaningful and student-centered learning environment. In terms of teaching, Bell[23] claims that mixed-ability classes can provide teachers with more flexibility in their teaching by using practices that best meet the needs and skills of their students.

In sum, mixed-ability classes have been researched in varying subject areas, with a particular focus on mathematics. Furthermore much of the research took place in primary or secondary schools. Therefore, there is a lack of research on how instructors perceive mixed-ability classes in college-level EFL instructional contexts in Korea and the types of

strategies that instructors implement in their teaching to accommodate the different needs and abilities of learners in their classes.

### 3. General Education EFL Programs in Korea

In order to offer learners optimal and more personalized speaking-based English instruction, many college-level programs have provided level-differentiated instruction [10,11]. Joh[10] found that approximately 80% of students in her study responded that level-differentiated EFL instruction is necessary because learners believed that instruction that was adjusted to meet their level would have more positive learning outcome, offer fairer assessment, and provide a more relaxing learning environment.

Studies that investigated the level of satisfaction of level-differentiated EFL instruction in post-instructional settings have shown mixed results. Kim[24] studied how college EFL learners perceived level-differentiated EFL instruction and found that learners generally showed satisfaction about the instruction that they received and the level of satisfaction was the highest among learners in the lowest level because they felt that the level of instruction was suitable for their level. However, Park[9] found that even though learners and instructors perceived the need for level-differentiated instruction, learners' level of satisfaction about the course and achievement was relatively low. Similarly, learners also had questions about the fairness and standard of placement into levels. Similar to what Park[9] found, Kim[24] showed that students did not show high levels of satisfaction regarding level-differentiated EFL instruction.

Even though previous studies that have been conducted in the context of general education EFL programs in Korean colleges have generally supported level-differentiated instruction, the

reality is, there are still general education EFL programs that do not offer level-differentiated instruction. Instead, some programs offer only one level of EFL instruction or have even recently shifted from level-differentiated instruction to mixed-ability classes. In a study conducted in 2002, Joh[10] examined 67 universities in Korea on whether their EFL programs offered level-differentiated instruction. Of the 67 programs in her study, approximately 20 (30%) programs had level-differentiated instruction. Out of the 20 programs, 35% of them used standardized English tests (e.g., TOEIC, TOEFL, or TEPS) as placement measures to place students into appropriate levels. Three (15%) of the programs used students scores from Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test and two programs had institutional placement tests. Joh[10] concluded that about one third of the programs in her study that offered level-differentiated EFL instruction did not have in place objective, systematic evidence for placing students into appropriate levels. This lack of objective placement measures may have caused confusion in evaluating the effectiveness of instruction.

Based on the information provided on the schools' websites of thirteen large universities in the Seoul Metropolitan area, as of the 2021 academic year, seven universities offered level-differentiated EFL instruction. Six of the seven schools used scores from standardized English tests (e.g., TEPS, TOEIC) to place students into appropriate levels with two universities including a writing or speaking exam as an additional assessment tool. Only one university had an online institutional placement test. It seems that even though level-differentiated learning has been emphasized in the literature, many schools still use mixed-ability classes in general education EFL instruction.

Despite the prevalence of mixed-ability

classes in college-level general education EFL instruction in Korea, there is a lack of research on mixed-ability classes. Furthermore, there is a lack of teaching resources for instructors in such programs that can be used as guidance for how to teach students who come from different educational backgrounds and interests in English. Therefore, to fill the gap in the previous literature, the present study is intended to provide insights into how instructors teaching in mixed-ability EFL classes perceive the effectiveness of such instructional approach and the teaching strategies they used to teach learners in such programs. The following research questions were investigated:

Question 1. How did the general education EFL instructors perceive mixed-ability classes?

Question 2. What kind of strategies did the instructors use to effectively accommodate the needs of different learners in their classrooms?

## 4. Research Method

### 4.1 Research Context and Participants

This case study was conducted at X University which is 4-year higher education institution located in the Seoul Metropolitan area. Since the 2020 school year, X University offered its undergraduate students a 2-course general education EFL sequence as a requirement. Students are recommended to enroll in the sequence based on their departments. The sequence is taught by native-speaking English teachers (NET) and the primary focus of the courses is to provide freshmen students with opportunities to enhance their oral English proficiency. Each semester, the general education EFL program at X University offers about 216 sections of required EFL courses and each section has about 20-25 students.

Prior to 2020, the general education EFL

courses at X University were level-differentiated, meaning that newly admitted freshmen took a Mock TOEIC prior to the start of instruction and based on their scores, students were placed into one of the following four levels: A, B, C, or D, with A being the lowest and D being the highest level. Even though students were highly encouraged to take the Mock TOEIC for placement purposes, they were not required to take the test and those students who did not take the test were directly placed into level B. Because it was difficult to require all newly admitted freshmen to take the Mock TOEIC due to logistical reasons and institutional constraints, the program decided to remove the placement test in its entirety and place students into different sections based on students' department information. Hence, since 2020, regardless of department, all sections used an identical textbook and shared the same curriculum.

The participants of the study were instructors of general education EFL program at X University. All of the instructors in the program had experience teaching in both level-differentiated and mixed-ability instruction. The participants were recruited via Google Forms and were asked to participate in a questionnaire. The participation in the study was voluntary. The total number of instructors in the program was thirty-five and twenty instructors participated in the questionnaire (see Table 1 for information on the participants). The mean age of the participants was 48.4 ( $SD=9.1$ ). The participants had a mean of 10.1 years ( $SD=3.8$ ) of teaching experience in Korean higher education. They had a mean of 7.9 years ( $SD=3.5$ ) of experience teaching at X University. All participants in the questionnaire had taught for at least two years in level-differentiated instruction prior to 2020.

**Table 1. Questionnaire participant information (N=20)**

Age	Teaching Experience in Higher Education	Teaching Experience at X University
<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
48.4 (9.1)	10.1 (3.8)	7.9 (3.5)

In order to conduct a follow-up interview with the participants to find out more about their experiences in teaching mixed-ability classes, at the end of the questionnaire, participants had the option to include their phone number or email if they volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher. Of the twenty instructors that participated in the questionnaire, three instructors volunteered to participate in the follow-up interview. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the instructors that participated in the follow-up interviews.

**Table 2. Interview participant information (N=3)**

Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching Experience in Higher Education	Teaching Experience at X University
Ben	Male	14 years	14 years
Jason	Male	7 years	7 years
Liam	Male	12 years	8 years

## 4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect data from instructors regarding their experiences with mixed-ability classes, an online questionnaire was first conducted. The online questionnaire was developed to investigate participants' level of satisfaction with mixed-ability classes and their perception of the effectiveness of the previous placement procedure (i.e., Mock TOEIC). The participants were asked to choose how much they agree or disagree with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale; 1 indicating strongly disagree to 5 indicating strongly agree (see Table 3 for details on the questionnaire). The internal reliability of the questionnaire was 0.7 (Cronbach's alpha), which suggests acceptable level of internal consistency[25].

**Table 3. Summary of questionnaire**

Item Number	Item
1.	I was satisfied with level-differentiated instruction.
2.	I found the Mock TOEIC to be an effective test to place students into levels.
3.	I am satisfied with my teaching of mixed-ability classes.
4.	It was more difficult to teach in mixed-ability classes.
5.	It was more difficult for me to motivate my students in mixed-ability classes.
6.	The preparation time for the mixed-ability classes was longer compared to the previous curriculum.
7.	The participation level of my students in mixed-ability classes was lower than in the previous curriculum.
8.	Assessing my students in mixed-ability classes was more difficult compared to the previous curriculum.
9.	It was more difficult to teach the higher proficient speakers compared to the lower proficient speakers in mixed-ability classes

The questionnaire was delivered via Google Forms and was sent via email to all the instructors in the general education EFL program at X University. The participants were informed that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and they could opt out of the questionnaire at anytime. They were also assured of their anonymity.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe participant information, level of satisfaction of level-differentiated instruction, and participants' experiences regarding mixed-ability classes. A paired *t*-test was used to compared the level of satisfaction between level-differentiated instruction and mixed-ability classes. All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 25.

The data from the follow-up interviews were conducted via Webex (a video conferencing tool) and each interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted in English. With the permission of the interviewees, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis and thematically coded[26]. The themes and findings from the interviews were triangulated

with quantitative findings.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Instructors' Experiences of Level-differentiated Instruction and Mixed-ability Classes

The results show that, overall, instructors were satisfied with their experiences regarding teaching mixed-ability classes. A paired *t*-test was conducted to compare instructors' level of satisfaction between level-differentiated instruction and mixed-ability classes (see Table 4). Instructors' perceived level of satisfaction with mixed-ability classes was statistically significantly higher ( $M=4.0$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ) than level-differentiated instruction ( $M=3.2$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ),  $t(19)=-2.2$ ,  $p=.04$ .

**Table 4. Comparison in level of satisfaction between level-differentiated and mixed-ability classes (N=20)**

Item	M	SD	t	p
I was satisfied with level-differentiated instruction.	3.2	1.2	-2.2	0.04
I am satisfied with my teaching of mixed-ability classes.	4.0	1.1		

The findings from the questionnaire can be found in Table 5

**Table 5. Instructors' experiences (N=20)**

Item	M	SD
I found the Mock TOEIC to be an effective test to place students into levels.	2.4	1.0
It was more difficult to teach in mixed-ability classes.	2.4	1.3
It was more difficult for me to motivate my students in mixed-ability classes.	2.1	1.2
The preparation time for the mixed-ability classes was longer compared to the previous curriculum.	2.2	1.1
The participation level of my students in mixed-ability classes was lower than in the previous curriculum.	2.4	1.1
Assessing my students in mixed-ability classes was more difficult compared to the previous curriculum.	2.1	1.0
It was more difficult to teach the higher proficient speakers compared to the lower proficient speakers in mixed-ability classes	2.1	1.2

After experiencing both level-differentiated instruction and mixed-ability classes, they found the previously used placement test to be somewhat ineffective ( $M=2.4$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ). The instructors' perceptions regarding difficulty of teaching mixed-ability classes also showed that the instructors did not find teaching the mixed-ability classes to be more difficult compared to level-differentiated instruction ( $M=2.4$ ,  $SD=1.3$ ). The instructors also did not perceive encouraging motivation ( $M=2.1$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ) and participation ( $M=2.4$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ) in mixed-ability instruction to be difficult or lower compared to the previous curriculum. In terms of course preparation time, the instructors did not feel that preparation time was longer compared to level-differentiated instruction ( $M=2.2$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ). With regard to assessment and teaching higher proficient speakers compared to lower proficient ones, the instructors did not find assessment to be more difficult ( $M=2.1$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ) nor did they find it more difficult to teach higher proficient speakers ( $M=2.1$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ) in mixed-ability classes. In sum, instructors' experiences with mixed-ability classes was rather positive when compared with their experiences teaching level-differentiated instruction.

## 5.2 EFL Instructors' Previous Experiences with Level-differentiated Instruction

Based on the analysis of the follow-up interviews, it was apparent that the participating instructors had concerns about teaching mixed-ability classes before starting the 2020 school year. However, they all acknowledged that in the past, even with the level-differentiated instruction, there were students with different levels in a classroom. Ben, an instructor with 14 years of experience, said that he "did not find there was an equilibrium or there was equality within the

whole classroom based on the levels itself." Another instructor, Jason, with 7 years of experience at X University, similarly stated that he had also felt that in the previous level-differentiated instruction, "the A level classes were all over the place."

In relation to their previous experiences with the leveling system, they questioned the effectiveness of the Mock TOEIC that had previously been used to place students into different levels.

"In the beginning level, students were really good at TOEIC, whereas the higher level students who are communicating very well, or more proficient in English, struggled when it came to the TOEIC exam." (Liam, with 12 years of higher education teaching experience)

Jason also agreed with the point that the Mock TOEIC may not have tested what was actually stressed in the classroom because the Mock TOEIC primarily assessed students' reading and listening and that "a lot of students are good at TOEIC and not good at speaking and vice versa."

Similarly, Ben shared that due to the fact that the Mock TOEIC was not mandatory for all newly admitted freshmen at X University, that removing the placement test and moving toward the mixed-ability classes was rather rational and even added that some students can manipulate the test: "And they know that if they get a lower score, they'll get put into a lower level and they'll have a chance to get the A+."

The instructors' previous experiences with level-differentiated instruction showed that even with a placement test and a leveling system, placing students through the Mock TOEIC may not have been effective.

## 5.3 EFL Instructors' Teaching Strategies Used in Mixed-ability Classes

During the interview, all participants stated

that in the mixed-ability classroom, they were able to encourage the higher level students to help out the lower level students.

“I had some strong students in class, but they tended to help out the weaker students. Usually with the stronger students, I had more conversations with them, because they were the ones who are willing to answer. But I did something where it was based on volunteering information and participation. And I had a lot of comments of, you know, I was really afraid to talk but you forced me to talk.” (Ben, an individual interview)

“I think it's, I think it gives students an opportunity to think that they can achieve a higher, like they could level up based on the experience of other people who have done the same thing. And they can learn from each other. And I think that's one thing that they're realizing is learning from each other might be more important than what level they're at.” (Jason, an individual interviews)

In addition, Liam stated that doing group work with a wide range levels seemed to motivate students to use different communicative strategies: “I gave groups missions to complete without assigning roles and that helped students navigate how they wanted to solve the problem. The more proficient students found ways to divide up the work that helped the group find a solution.”

The interviewees explained that having a mixed-ability class allowed students to find ways to cooperate and overcome their fear of speaking in English in the classroom. They also claimed that implementing clear guidelines as to how students can participate in the classroom encouraged students to be more open and willing participants in class discussions and interact with one another.

#### 5.4 Possibility of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in General Education EFL Program

Due to the fact that sections at X University were divided based on students' departmental information, interviewees also found that this could be an opportunity to implement ESP or English for Specific Purposes. Instructors found that even though students in the same department had different English levels, the topics they were interested in were similar depending on the department courses that they were taking. Hence, the instructors felt that redesigning some topics in their existing curriculum could make the topics more relatable to the students' needs, which could make learning tasks more individualized. Liam, for example, felt that having students in a classroom from the same department could be an opportunity to offer specialized courses:

“I think if we gear toward specialized courses based on departmental needs, courses may be more, more appealing to students. Of course, these courses are required for all students, but still, some topics in the textbook may be too general or may not, not meet the interests of students who may be looking for something geared to their needs as college students.”

All participating instructors reported that because students in the same department share commonalities and goals, having specifically designed curriculum based on departmental information may be a way to further develop the EFL curriculum at X University to prepare students for their future career paths.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of the questionnaire, instructors' experiences with mixed-level classes were rather positive. The findings show that their experiences in terms of motivating



students, encouraging participation, assessment, and course preparation were somewhat positive. The results from the analysis of the follow-up interviews correspond with Na[15] on how in a mixed-ability classroom, students can help each other by bringing in different skills and abilities. The instructors in the interview expressed how they were able to encourage students to cooperate through group work and observe each other as examples of learners that they can learn from. This finding also aligns with previous studies that have found grouping to be important in a mixed-ability classroom[17,18].

However, contrary to the findings from previous work on participation and motivation in mixed-ability classes[20,21], the results of the study found that by having a group of students that have different English proficiencies, the instructors seemed to find that students were more motivated to use different strategies to communicate with peers with varying English abilities, which, in turn, may create more meaningful and student-centered learning opportunities[22].

The instructors also provided their ideas about the possibility of further developing and revising the curriculum to make the courses more specialized to meet the needs of departments. Because X University divided up the sections based on students' departments and majors, the implementation of ESP in the EFL program could help students build English skills based on the purposes, needs and functions for which English is required for students' career paths. By considering ESP as an option, students may be able to receive specialized education that meet the expectations from their professional communities. Likewise, the ESP approach can increase the relevance of the content that the students are learning and allow them to be more active in their EFL courses

because their interest in their field of study may motivate them to participate and interact with speakers and course materials.

Despite the positive results that previous studies have found on level-differentiated instruction, in reality, there are still higher education institutions that have mixed-ability classes in their general education EFL programs. These general education EFL courses are normally courses that students in all different departments take to fulfill their graduation requirements, and thus, can influence students' learning experiences as they navigate through their college education. Students in general education EFL courses can meet students from different educational backgrounds, majors, regions, and experiences and each student will bring different abilities and skillsets to the classroom. Therefore, the benefits of implementing mixed-ability classes in general education EFL courses may be able to help students overcome their fears and learn to communicate with a diverse population. It may also be an opportunity for students to learn from one another and build and practice different communicative strategies. Based on the findings of the study, it will be important to set clear expectations in the classroom in terms of classroom participation to help students understand what participation actually means and encourage students to become willing participants in the classroom.

Because the current study examined the case of general education EFL instructors at one university with a relatively small number of participants, the findings may not be able to reflect the experiences of instructors in other contexts or different subject areas. Furthermore, more information on instructors teaching strategies in mixed-ability classes may be found through class observations and investigation

into instructors' teaching logs or journals. These future studies may be able to help teaching practitioners deliver more creative and innovative teaching practices and strategies to help students participate and engage in the learning process. Research on how mixed-ability classes are implemented in institutions other than X University may be necessary to find practical solutions and strategies of instructors who teach in other programs that may have different learning objectives. This study only includes opinions from EFL instructors. Future studies that can supplement the findings of the current study by adding students' voices regarding mixed-ability EFL courses would be able to provide more practical and useful information for those implementing mixed-ability EFL courses. Despite these limitations, the current study provides some practical suggestions and may encourage administrators of higher education EFL programs to consider mixed-ability classes as a possibility when revising their curriculum. It is important for school administrators to understand and consider options for curriculum design and stay flexible and open to other possibilities that can be considered to redesign their curricula and pedagogical practices. This flexibility may help to construct the most optimal EFL curriculum to meet their learners needs and institutional expectations.

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