

Differentiating Instructions for A Single Task: A Strategy For Achieving Full Engagement In The EFL Classroom

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Abstract: This classroom-based study explores how varying instructions for a single writing task enhanced student engagement among intermediate EFL learners. Instead of altering the core activity—writing an opinion essay on fast fashion—the teacher modified instructions by assigning distinct framing angles, such as writing from the viewpoint of a designer, consumer, or environmentalist. Despite working on the same task, learners demonstrated significantly higher interest, motivation, and output quality when given varied perspectives. Data collected from classroom observation, task completion, and student reflections showed near-total participation. The findings highlight that instructional variation is a simple yet effective tool for activating diverse learners and fostering ownership in writing.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, EFL engagement, writing tasks, instructional framing, student motivation, fast fashion, task-based learning.

Introduction: Engaging students fully in classroom tasks, particularly in writing-focused lessons, continues to be a pressing challenge in EFL education. Many learners find writing to be abstract, disconnected from their experiences, and difficult to approach without a clear context. Uniform instructions for writing tasks often fail to activate students' personal interests or cognitive strengths, which can result in low motivation and incomplete work. As language learning is not only cognitive but also emotional and social, the way a task is framed plays a crucial role in learner participation.

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of differentiated instructions for a single writing task on student engagement. Grounded in principles of task-based learning (Ellis, 2003) and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001), this study suggests that shifting the instructional frame—while keeping the task itself unchanged—can lead to increased ownership, deeper thinking, and stronger emotional connection to the task. By assigning distinct perspectives such as a fashion designer, teenage consumer, environmental activist, and policymaker, the teacher enabled learners to approach the same writing task from different angles. This technique proved especially effective in

achieving full engagement among 13-year-old intermediate EFL learners in a 45-minute classroom setting.

2. METHODS

2.1 Context and Participants The lesson was conducted at a private language center in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The class consisted of 15 intermediate-level learners, all aged 13, with diverse interests and varying degrees of comfort with English writing. Most of them had prior exposure to paragraph writing and the structure of opinion essays, including topic sentences and body paragraphs, but often struggled to write fluently and confidently in extended compositions.

2.2 Task Description and Instructional Design The target task was an opinion essay on the topic: "Do the benefits of fast fashion outweigh the drawbacks?" This topic was chosen due to its relevance to young learners, who are often exposed to fashion trends and fast consumer culture. Instead of giving the same instruction to all students, the class was divided into four small groups. Each group was assigned a different perspective from which to approach the same task:

- Group A: Fashion Designers – Write from the perspective of someone who creates clothing and cares

about trends.

- Group B: Environmental Activists – Write about the environmental consequences of fast fashion.
- Group C: Teenage Consumers – Write as young people who buy and wear fast fashion regularly.
- Group D: Government Policymakers – Write from the standpoint of a person who wants to encourage sustainability in fashion.

All groups were instructed to use the standard opinion essay format with an introduction, two body paragraphs (one for opposing views and one for their own opinion), and a conclusion. Vocabulary support and linking phrases were provided, and a model essay was analyzed during the presentation phase. Students were also encouraged to incorporate new vocabulary such as "sustainable," "eco-friendly," "consumer habits," "pollution," and "overproduction."

2.3 Procedure and Tools for Data Collection The lesson followed a task-based format:

- Warm-up Discussion: Students reviewed different essay types and discussed fashion trends they were familiar with.
- Presentation: The teacher explained opinion essay structure and analyzed a sample essay with students.
- Task Assignment: Each group received their unique instruction and began brainstorming and writing.
- Reflection and Feedback: Students shared excerpts from their writing and reflected on their experience.

Data were collected using the following tools:

- Observation checklist tracking verbal participation, time-on-task, and peer collaboration.
- Completed writing samples evaluated for vocabulary range, cohesion, and relevance.
- Student reflection handouts, including Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.
- Teacher journal documenting student behavior, engagement, and notable quotes or outcomes.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Engagement Indicators Prior to this lesson, only around 60% of students typically completed opinion writing tasks. However, in this case, all 15 students completed their essays. The task also produced more sustained and focused writing periods, with minimal off-task behavior. Group discussions were lively, and students were more willing to ask questions, clarify ideas, and

help peers.

Observation checklists revealed:

- 100% task completion
- 100% verbal participation during group discussion
- 80% use of new vocabulary in writing samples
- High collaboration within groups, especially among weaker writers who received peer support

3.2 Student Reflections Open-ended feedback from students included comments such as:

- "Being a designer made me think differently. It was fun."
- "I didn't know fast fashion was so bad until I became an activist."
- "Writing from a teenager's view was easy. It felt real."
- "I like when the task is like a role play."

The student self-rating of engagement averaged 4.7 out of 5 on a Likert scale. Students reported that the role-based framing gave them a sense of identity and purpose.

3.3 Writing Quality Instructors observed improved organization and expression. Students used linking devices such as "however," "in contrast," and "from my perspective" more accurately. Emotional vocabulary appeared more frequently, and students personalized their examples:

- "From a teenager's view, we want to look good, but we also care about the Earth."
- "Designers need to think not only about trends but also about future generations."

4. Discussion This study provides empirical support for the pedagogical potential of instructional framing. By giving different instructions for the same task, the teacher provided learners with varied entry points into the topic. This method aligns with multiple theoretical frameworks in language learning:

- Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): The task was communicative, purposeful, and linked to real-world issues (Ellis, 2003).
- Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Students were scaffolded through role-based perspectives that matched their developmental zones (Vygotsky, 1978).
- Self-Determination Theory: Giving choice and meaningful roles enhanced autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).
- Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis: The novelty and emotional involvement increased attention to form and meaning (Schmidt, 1990).

One particularly valuable insight is the importance of emotional resonance in learning. Students reported feeling more invested in the writing when they could imagine a specific identity or situation. This suggests that identity-based tasks may bridge the gap between mechanical practice and meaningful expression. When students wrote "as someone," they accessed personal narratives, values, and creativity—making the vocabulary and grammar more than just academic requirements.

The success of this strategy also challenges the notion that differentiated instruction requires extensive planning. The core task remained the same; only the instructional framing changed. Yet this subtle shift transformed a passive writing exercise into a dynamic and participatory experience.

5. CONCLUSION

Incorporating differentiated instructions for the same writing task significantly enhanced student engagement in this intermediate-level EFL classroom. All students completed their tasks, actively participated in discussions, and produced writing that was more expressive, structured, and lexically rich. The key to this success lay not in changing the task itself, but in changing how the task was framed.

Instructional variation offered students meaningful roles and emotional entry points, leading to greater investment and autonomy. This method proved particularly effective with younger learners who benefit from imagination, empathy, and real-world relevance. Teachers seeking to improve classroom participation and writing quality may find that the most powerful tool is not more material, but more meaningful framing of what they already do.

Future studies could investigate how instructional framing affects long-term retention, grammatical accuracy, or the development of critical thinking in writing. Furthermore, this approach may be applied across genres (e.g., narratives, reports, emails) and skills (e.g., speaking or reading) to support a more holistic language learning experience.

In conclusion, differentiated instruction for the same task is not just a strategy for inclusion; it is a catalyst for transformation. When learners are invited to view content from varied perspectives, they become not just better writers, but more thoughtful, empathetic communicators.

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