# Exploring the views of Pakistani ESL teachers about differentiated instruction in English language teaching

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**Hafiza Sana Mansoor**[1+]

**Bambang Sumardjoko**[2]

**Anam Sutopo**[3]

**Harun Joko Prayitno**[4]

**Abdul Bari Khan**[5]

[1,2,3,4]Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia.
[1]Email: Q300249009@student.ums.ac.id
[2]Email: bs131@ums.ac.id
[3]Email: as123@ums.ac.id
[4]Email: harun.prayitno@ums.ac.id
[5]University Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia.
[5]Email: 17010087@siswa.unimas.my

(+ Corresponding author)

## ABSTRACT

Differentiated Instruction (DI), a pedagogical strategy that addresses students' diverse learning needs and abilities is a recognized effective teaching method in English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. However, there is limited research on how ESL teachers perceive and use DI in their classrooms in the Pakistani context. In this mixed-method study, undergraduate-level Pakistani ESL teachers were surveyed about their perceptions and practices of DI. This study investigated the teaching strategy known as DI in their ESL classrooms. The researcher used an adapted questionnaire to gather data from 84 ESL teachers. Five ESL teachers participated in a semi-structured interview. The interview focused on how ESL teachers perceived and practiced DI, and the difficulties they faced. The findings demonstrated that teachers' perceptions about teaching are generally consistent with this paradigm although it appears that they do not fully implement DI. These findings are consistent with previous research that revealed teachers did not implement DI to its fullest capacity. Moreover, teachers also experience several obstacles including managing large class numbers, dealing with heavy workloads, facing limited time, achieving high expectations from administration, and addressing concerns related to student assessment. There is a critical need for administrative collaboration and professional development to properly adopt DI.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study exclusively explores Pakistani undergraduate ESL teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of differentiated instruction through a mixed-methods approach by addressing a significant research gap in the Pakistani ESL context where DI remains overlooked, especially through both quantitative and qualitative lenses.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The heterogeneous classrooms pose a significant challenge to teachers. The presence of learners from multiple backgrounds and with different learning styles limits the effectiveness of traditional, consistent teaching approaches (Mansoor, Sumardjoko, Sutopo, Prayitno, & Khan, 2025; Wong, Chue, Ali, & Lee, 2023). According to Darling-Hammond and Snyder's (2000) definition of Differentiated Instruction (DI), teachers have to modify their teaching methods to meet the individual needs of each student. This method requires changes in both the curriculum and the

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instructional methods to meet the various needs of the learners by avoiding a one-size-fits-all strategy (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003; Khan, Ramanair, & Rethinasamay, 2023; Khan, Ramanair, & Rethinasamy, 2023). There is a considerable disparity between ESL teachers' comprehension and practices (Mansoor, Muhibbin, Khan, & Riaz, 2025) regarding the application of DI in the context of undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) education in Pakistan. The existence of knowledge and English language proficiency gaps among undergraduate students due to diverse cultural, academic, and language backgrounds is alarming for the teachers. Focusing on three main research issues, this study sought to understand the perceptions and practices of ESL undergraduate Pakistani teachers regarding DI. This research also delves into how far ESL teachers respond to the academic diversity displayed by ESL learners in classrooms.

The empirical literature highlights the positive impact of DI on student outcomes, benefiting several learners (Pazhayannur, 2022; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Effective implementation of DI depends on teachers' deep understanding of their students and the subjects they teach combined with their adeptness at changing classroom elements such as lessons, teaching resources, and testing methods. The views and practices of English teachers towards DI have been the focus of a significant number of studies in the last few years. These studies used several research approaches and covered a wide range of study contexts. Chien (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the perspectives of Taiwanese English teachers in elementary schools on DI. Similarly, Bourini (2015) investigated the viewpoints of English teachers at secondary schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Greek English teachers from the public and private sectors participated in Tzanni's (2018) extensive questionnaire survey. Teachers from a private school in Turkey who teach in the primary and secondary grades participated in a study based on interviews conducted by Gülşen (2018). Additionally, Sougari and Mavroudi (2019) used a mixed-methods study to analyse the environment of Greek primary schools. In addition, Lombarkia and Guerza (2021) and Rovai and Pfingsthorn (2022) conducted a questionnaire-based study with the former. Furthermore, Lombarkia and Guerza (2021) and Rovai and Pfingsthorn (2022) conducted questionnaire-based research with the latter examining the DI-related views of German pre-service English teachers and the former focusing on English instructors in an Algerian university setting.

Although the study settings and procedures used in these investigations varied, a general conclusion was drawn. They all showed that English teachers typically understand the idea of DI, while they fail to employ this strategy as often as their optimistic attitudes may suggest. There are many reasons why their opinions and actions in the classroom diverge. First, according to Bourini (2015), Chien (2015), Rovai and Pfingsthorn (2022), Sougari and Mavroudi (2019) and Tzanni (2018), many teachers appear to be deficient in the instructional understanding and abilities needed to successfully integrate DI. Furthermore, it was noted that a significant barrier was the sufficient planning time needed for DI (Bourini, 2015; Gülşen, 2018; Lombarkia & Guerza, 2021; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018). According to Gülşen (2018), certain teachers find it difficult to multitask in differentiated settings. In addition, Bourini (2015) and Sougari and Mavroudi (2019) expressed fear that DI can result in behavioural problems. These issues are consistent with the more general difficulties with DI (Blaz, 2016; Willard-Holt, 1994) emphasizing the need for more research into how to properly help English teachers in their attempts to use DI.

Although differentiation is frequently recommended in today's English language classrooms (Pazhayannur, 2022; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Stodolsky & Grossman, 2000), teachers rarely practice it regularly and effectively. Many investigators prefer to use a homogeneous teaching style that overlooks student variability. According to survey research, approximately fifty percent of middle school teachers believed that differentiating their instruction for diverse students was useless. This suggests that some teachers may avoid differentiation because they do not regard it as being necessary (Moon, Tomlinson, & Callahan, 1995). Sometimes, teachers may choose not to differentiate due to a lack of knowledge and abilities as shown by a study that found deficiencies in high school teachers' ability to differentiate effectively (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). Differentiation theory often runs opposed to

conventional educational procedures. In a study, pre-service teachers were given training from seasoned teachers and given an introduction to differentiation techniques. Although the program improved their motivation to use differentiation and their awareness of its significance, they faced real-world difficulties in their teaching situations. Incorporating differentiation was difficult due to problems including strict schedules, fixed routines, and expectations to follow the prescribed curriculum. Teachers found it difficult to properly handle equally struggling and advanced learners despite having an understanding of differentiation (Tomlinson et al., 1997).

Ineffective teaching strategies, like uniformity are highlighted by recent studies (Clift & Brady, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Grossman, 2005; Kótay-Nagy, 2023; Pazhayannur, 2022; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019). Nevertheless, a contradiction occurs when teachers promote better teaching methods, like differentiation in English language classrooms but continue to use conventional methods when teaching ESL learners. Recent studies have emphasised the importance of ESL education in modern society. However, guaranteeing that every student achieves excellent academic standards is filled with difficulties (Bourini, 2015; Chien, 2015; Pazhayannur, 2022; Rovai & Pfingsthorn, 2022; Sougari & Mavroudi, 2019; Tzanni, 2018). This study aims to investigate teacher techniques for instruction and the dynamics of learning in ESL education. The inquiry focuses on the implementation of DI and teachers' perceptions.

DI is expected to be implemented in the teaching strategies of ESL teachers at private universities in Pakistan. Nonetheless, there is a lack of studies that could examine how they implement this strategy, especially with a focus on their views, which are essential for successful DI integration. This study aims to fill this research gap by examining the perceptions and practices of ESL teachers. It involves investigating the extent to which ESL teachers are knowledgeable about the DI approach along with what specific tactics they use to implement DI in their lectures.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on Tomlinson's theory regarding the DI teaching strategy (Tomlinson, 2005). Numerous studies have addressed this well-known theory (Tomlinson et al., 2003; Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008).

According to Tomlinson (2005), DI is a systematic approach to teaching and learning that takes into account the particular needs of each learner. The objective is to maximise each student's capacity for learning. Effective differentiation is based on a few key principles: treating each student as an individual and appreciating their differences, holding everyone accountable for their success, fostering a positive classroom environment, providing a high-quality curriculum and using various types of assessments to inform teaching decisions. Students and teachers alternate responsibilities for teaching and learning to help students learn in several ways. According to Tomlinson's model, teachers should adapt what they teach, how they teach it, and the learning environment based on each student's readiness, interests, and learning style.

### 2.1. Readiness, Interest, and Learning Profile

Teachers should prioritize the following three essential qualities of learners: readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Readiness refers to a student's level of readiness for the teaching that the teacher has planned. It is important to consider students' life experiences and prior knowledge along with their intelligence when teachers plan teaching. Teachers should assure that each student receives an appropriate level of competition based on their learning readiness. Students who have interests tend to be motivated and curious about those things. The learning process becomes more active and inspiring when teachers teach subjects that students are interested in. Additionally, it aids students in making connections between what they are learning and what they already know and enjoy. Teachers occasionally even assist learners in finding new interests.

The learners' learning profiles, which show how they learn are the most significant element to understand. It includes characteristics, such as whether students work better in groups or on their own, whether their thought

processes are organised or disorganized and if they prefer to learn in an active or passive setting. Things like a student's gender and culture affect their learning choices (Farahi & Slaoui, 2025). Thus, when lesson planning, teachers should consider the following three factors: students' readiness level, areas of interest, and preferred learning styles. This improves everyone's ability to learn effectively and enjoyably.

### 2.2. Content, Process, Product, and Learning Environment

Teachers instruct learners on content, such as critical information that they must understand. The curriculum is almost the same for all the students but teachers adapt their teaching methods to meet the individual needs of each student. There are a few exceptions, such as when a student is an expert in a subject or needs additional assistance to grasp it. In such a case, a teacher helps him learn and understand the problem. Teachers will occasionally put learners in groups according to their needs. For instance, some students may perform better in groups with peers who are at their level while at other times,  a combination of various levels or interests serves well. Additionally, learners may have an opinion about how they participate in groups.

Product is when teachers assign homework to students to demonstrate what they have learnt in class. These tasks need to encourage students to reflect, use, and display what they have learnt.  Therefore, teachers should promote innovative and critical thinking that differs from conventional examinations and quizzes. Everything in the classroom, including its layout and teacher-student interactions is considered to be part of the learning environment. A healthy learning environment in a classroom is adaptable and meets the needs of every learner. Teachers must alter their teaching approach and resources to encourage teamwork, learners' interests, and learning levels. Additionally, they need to respect every student and take an interest in their unique needs and backgrounds.

To educate each student effectively, teachers make use of all this information. Teachers modify what they teach, how they teach it, and how they organise the classroom to ensure that everyone learns and succeeds.

## 3. METHOD

In this mixed- method study, the participants were chosen from five prestigious private universities, i.e., Minhaj University, University of Southern Punjab, Superior University, Lahore Leads University, and University of Central Punjab in the province of Punjab, Pakistan to fill the questionnaire for the quantitative phase. These five universities had three separate academic divisions of English teachers which are English linguistics, English literature, and general English. Lecturers from the above-mentioned department at all five universities were invited to participate in quantitative research. This data collection process included full-time, part-time, and adjunct lecturers. 85 ESL teachers, who were teaching undergraduate students, comprised the cohort of participants for this study. The questionnaire based on Tomlinson's (2005) theoretical framework was adapted and used for this study. Given that it was the first empirical investigation of this complex concept, it was crucial to include questions designed to address specific variables in this study on differentiation in education (DeVellis, 2003).

The teachers who expressed interest in participating in qualitative data collection were given details and consent forms. Five English teachers, three lecturers and two assistant professors returned consent forms to the researchers for a week. The lecturers were in their early 30s consisting of two females and one male. Assistant professors were above 35, one male and one female. During the period of the study, the participants were engaged in the teaching of general English, English literature, and English linguistics courses. Lecturers had a combined teaching experience of less than ten years. Both of the assistant professors were senior and they had been teaching for more than 12 years. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data with each participant being asked to reply to a set of open-ended questions. This semi-structured interview format was chosen over a structured one because it was considered to give participants more freedom to express their viewpoints (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To make it easier to gather in-depth data for small-scale investigations as Porter and Lacey (2004) advise using more open-ended interviews. The tool for video calls used for the interviews was Zoom (Archibald,

Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019) which provides affordability, simplicity, and choices for documentation and privacy. Zoom interviews enable the person, conducting the interview to catch critical non-verbal clues that are missed during phone conversations.

The interviews took place for two week period at mutually agreeable times and each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants received an electronic mail one day before each scheduled interview, giving a reminder of the designated interview time. Participants were informed that their participation in the interviews was voluntary and were provided with a set of open-ended questions to review. Furthermore, researchers have compiled an additional set of questions to be posed during the interview in accordance with the recommendations put forward by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Nevertheless, the further questions were not forwarded to the participants by electronic mail. The additional questions were intended to facilitate the interviewer in acquiring supplementary information, particularly in cases where a participant initially provided an insufficiently elaborate response. Regarding pilot testing and member screening, Creswell's (2014) recommendations were carried out. Before the guides were finalized, interview questions were first tested with two ESL current lecturers in the same setting. The interview script was then sent through email to each participant so that they could check its content.

This study identified seven key factors as follows: the significance and influence of readiness, interest, and learning profile; the differentiation of content, process, and product; the differentiation of the learning environment; and the assessment of readiness, interest, and learning profile. The first draft of the questionnaire was field-tested with a group of 10 lecturers from a different university, all of whom had extensive knowledge of Tomlinson's instructional paradigm. These experts carefully evaluated each item's compatibility with the seven theoretical variables under consideration as well as the instrument's overall design and individual components (Dawis, 1992). The initial questionnaire was revised based on the feedback received from researchers during the pilot phase.

The questionnaire's final version has three separate sections. The purpose of part 1 was to collect descriptive data that would be relevant to undergraduate teaching beliefs and behaviours (Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005). Participants in the study submitted information on their gender, race, departmental affiliation, professional status, highest level of education earned, years of experience instructing undergraduate students, and the number of credits of graduate and undergraduate courses they took. They also disclosed information about their course load. Part 2 of the survey which included 21 questions was adapted to extract respondents' opinions on the importance and bearing of students' readiness (12 items), interests (3 items), and learning profile aspects (6 items). Additionally, two questions were included in this area to determine participants' perceptions of their readiness to address student diversity and their desire to take advantage of professional development opportunities. There were five response alternatives for each question in part 2, each with a descriptive anchor: strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and highly agree. The nature of the research led to consideration of the implementation of a forced answer structure for part 2, but it was ultimately rejected (Mueller, 1986). The 36 questions in part 3 were all intended to help participants self-report how frequently they used strategies that helped differentiate content (15 items), process/product (15 items), and learning environment (06 items). Assessments of readiness, interest, and learning profiles were also included in this part. There were five answer options for each question in part 3. The anchors characterized these options as never—no intention to do so in the future, never—may be willing to do so in the future, rarely, often," and always. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the complete survey ($\alpha$ =.91), part II's 23 items ($\alpha$ =.86), and part III's 39 questions ($\alpha$ =.93) to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire. When taken as a whole, these results showed that the questionnaire had a notable degree of internal consistency (DeVellis, 2003). Alignment with Tomlinson's well-established theory of distinction and a thorough pilot approach ensured the questionnaire's content validity.

The statistical package for the social sciences, namely version 21was used to carefully analyse the quantitative data obtained from the administered questionnaire. For each item included in the questionnaire, frequencies were carefully calculated. In addition, the researchers determined means and standard deviations for each item included

in parts 2 and 3 of the questionnaire. For each measure, total scores were calculated to gain a deeper knowledge of the underlying patterns and traits connected to the responses matching to Tomlinson's seven distinct variables. This involved giving each item equal weight while calculating an average score based on the pertinent item responses. The reliability of each composite score was examined, and it was determined to be within acceptable limits through the determination of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (DeVellis, 2003). Coefficients of readiness, interests, learning profile, content, process, product, and learning environment were.76,.72,.75,.88,.82,.87, and.83, respectively.

## 4. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

ESL teachers recognised that readiness varies among students as they have a variety of prior knowledge, language backgrounds, and abilities that place significant importance on the relationship between the course English language skills and outcomes. Nevertheless, there exists a visible disparity in the process of tailoring instruction to accommodate the diverse attitudes and motives of individual learners. Teachers acknowledge that interest is a critical factor in relation to varying levels of student interest and its influence on academic achievement. However, there is still potential for improving the customization of lectures to respond to individual interests. Despite learning profiles, the data conveys that teaching methods should be more flexible to accommodate diverse intelligences, learning styles, and preferences. Efforts are underway to establish a positive learning environment, but there is still room for improvement in confidential follow-ups and equitable participation. The study recommends utilising a variety of teaching methods and resources to differentiate processes, products, and content. However, handling student preferences in customizing assignments and meeting deadlines remains difficult. Language proficiency and interest are the main focus of current assessment methods, but there is room for improvement in the area of evaluating learning profiles, which should include things like preferred learning styles and grouping orientations. ESL teachers' responses show a predominantly favourable perception of readiness (90.07%), interest (80.47%), learning profile (70.47%), learning environment (89.83%), content (79.25%), process/product (75.73%), and assessment (65.27%).

Table 1 presents the findings related to supporting strategies used for implementing DI in ESL classrooms. The data reflect the extent to which teachers employ various DI strategies. These strategies include adapting content, process, product, and learning environment to meet diverse student needs. The table illustrates that while some strategies are moderately applied, others are less frequently practiced indicating a gap between teachers' awareness of DI principles and their practical application in the classroom.

**Table 1.** DI Supporting Strategies

| No. | Strategies and their related questionnaire items readiness | M (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| R1. | My students have different language backgrounds. | 4.62 (0.54) |
| R2. | Students' learning outcome is highly correlated with their prior knowledge of the English language. | 4.48 (0.70) |
| R3. | I adjust my teaching based on the idea that students have different experiences of English language learning. | 4.31 (0.63) |
| R4. | In my class, students vary in English language abilities like listening, speaking, reading and writing. | 4.40 (0.65) |
| R5. | Course outcomes are highly correlated with students' English language abilities. | 4.77 (0.42) |
| R6. | My teaching is shaped by understanding variations in students' basic English language skills. | 3.80 (0.67) |
| R7. | Students in my classes differ in how well they learn, take notes, and manage time. | 4.60 (0.60) |
| R8. | Doing well in class is closely linked to studying effectively. | 4.68 (0.47) |
| R9. | I adjust my lessons based on what study skills students have. | 4.14 (0.55) |
| R10. | Students have different views and goals for success in my classes. | 4.22 (0.64) |
| R11. | Student attitude and motivation play a big role in how they perform. | 4.82 (0.38) |
| R12. | I teach considering the varying attitudes and motivations of individual students. | 3.02 (0.95) |

| No. | Strategies and their related questionnaire items readiness | M (SD) |
|---|---|---|
| Interest | | |
| I1. | Students have different levels of interest in the topics I cover. | 4.74 (0.44) |
| I2. | Student performance in class is strongly tied to their level of interest. | 4.68 (0.47) |
| I3. | I customize my lessons knowing that my students have a wide range of interests. | 2.65 (1.16) |
| Learning profile | | |
| LP1. | In my class, students differ in intelligence, learning style, and active/passive learning preference. | 4.68 (0.52) |
| LP2. | Students' course performance is strongly related to their preferred learning style. | 4.25 (0.74) |
| LP3. | I adapt my teaching considering that students have different ways of learning. | 2.71 (1.12) |
| LP4. | Students have varied preferences for group size and arrangement in my class. | 3.71 (1.10) |
| LP5. | Performance in class is noticeably connected to students' preferred grouping orientation. | 3.28 (1.28) |
| LP6. | My teaching is guided by understanding the diverse grouping preferences of students. | 2.71 (1.2) |
| Learning environment | | |
| LE1. | I create activities to unite students. | 4.57 (0.60) |
| LE2. | I ensure every student feels valued and comfortable. | 4.40 (0.65) |
| LE3. | I aim to be accessible and friendly. | 4.45 (0.65) |
| LE4. | I work to ensure fair and equal participation in class. | 4.71 (0.45) |
| LE5. | I inspire students to think critically about the material covered in class. | 4.65 (0.48) |
| LE6. | I handle confidential follow-ups for issues like low grades or disputes. | 4.17 (0.85) |
| Content | | |
| C1. | I use different text materials like manuals, publications, and books. | 4.20 (0.86) |
| C2. | The topics in the course materials have different levels of difficulty. | 4.65 (0.48) |
| C3. | I give students the choice to read one of the texts out of a four. | 3.11 (1.30) |
| C4. | I use various forms like text, video, audio, and web content. | 4.22 (0.84) |
| C5. | I use different resources to convey information in diverse ways. | 4.11 (0.86) |
| C6. | I use content that matches students' interests and backgrounds. | 4.20 (0.86) |
| C7. | Struggling students can use extra materials I provide. | 3.82 (0.70) |
| C8. | Students who find the material easy get extra tools to test their abilities. | 3.11 (0.83) |
| C9. | I use visual aids like displays and demonstrations. | 3.80 (0.67) |
| C10. | I use examples from students' experiences to explain the course material. | 4.62 (0.49) |
| C11. | I use tactics like guided questions and outlines to help students understand and remember. | 4.20 (0.86) |
| C12. | Strategies like lecture outlines and summaries ensure material is understood and retained. | 4.71 (0.45) |
| C13. | I provide extra help, like office hour conferences for struggling students. | 4.22 (0.84) |
| C14. | Students who find the material easy get more advanced options. | 2.91 (0.74) |
| C15. | I ask students for opinions to choose or modify course material each semester. | 2.05 (1.13) |
| Process/Product | | |
| PP1. | I make projects and activities for students to work together and understand the material. | 3.74 (0.78) |
| PP2. | I use various groupings like full class, small group, and individual in class. | 3.80 (0.67) |
| PP3. | I assign outside-of-class work in small groups, pairs, and individuals. | 4.22 (0.84) |
| PP4. | Students can choose to work alone or in pairs. | 3.00 (0.84) |
| PP5. | I group students based on their readiness using their prior knowledge and skills. | 3.60 (0.69) |
| PP6. | I group students on purpose based on their interests. | 3.88 (0.67) |
| PP7. | I intentionally group students according to their preferred learning styles. | 2.94 (0.76) |
| P8. | I give assignments with optional formats like writing, drawing, designing, or presenting. | 1.88 (0.75) |
| PP9. | I assign and let students choose personal interest themes. | 3.62 (0.68) |
| PP10. | I adjust assignment deadlines based on students' needs. | 4.22 (0.80) |
| PP11. | I help students struggling with activities or assignments. | 4.25 (0.85) |
| PP12. | I provide extra opportunities for students who complete work easily. | 2.88 (0.79) |
| PP13. | I evaluate students based on their progress throughout the semester. | 4.28 (0.85) |
| PP14. | I assess performance using multiple methods like papers, presentations, participation, and final exams. | 4.45 (0.65) |
| PP15. | I seek suggestions from students to create or adjust semester activities. | 3.94 (0.63) |
| Assessment | | |
| A1. | I assess students' background knowledge, English language skills, and attitude. | 3.68 (0.67) |
| A2. | I assess students' interests like future plans, talents, and passions. | 3.94 (0.63) |
| A3. | I assess students' learning profiles, including preferred learning style and grouping orientation. | 2.17 (1.01) |

### 4.1. Perceptions of ESL Teachers about DI

The viewpoints of ESL teachers were explored on three crucial dimensions.

### 4.1.1. Readiness

This factor encompasses the degree of readiness that students demonstrate. Most ESL teachers view the readiness components of differentiated teaching positively. Students have their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses when it comes to language acquisition, learning style, and study habits, and teachers show that they are conscious of these factors. In order to handle unique attitudes and motivations, there is a need for improvement. In general, teachers agreed on their practice of using students' prior knowledge as a cornerstone of their educational techniques. 90% of teachers agreed and strongly agreed with all items related to readiness. Course outcomes are highly correlated with students' English language abilities got the most votes with a mean score of 4.77. Additionally, they proposed a high relationship between students' academic success and their knowledge, study techniques, attitude, and drive. Teachers assigned an average readiness score of 4.50 out of 5. The mean range of all readiness items was from 4.82 to 3.02.

### 4.1.2. Interest

Interest refers to a student's level of involvement and zeal for their academic activities. ESL teachers observe that students display varying degrees of enthusiasm towards the subjects they are teaching, and their academic achievement closely correlates with their level of engagement. Nevertheless, the third item, "I customize my lessons knowing that my students have a wide range of interests," obtained a somewhat lower average score of 2.65, suggesting difficulties in accommodating varied interests. The majority of teachers agreed that learners' interests have a big impact on how well they do in the classroom. 80% of teachers agreed and strongly agreed with all items related to interest. However, when assessing whether learners display noticeably different interests, a wider range of perspectives emerged. Teachers provided an average interest score of 4.02 out of 5. The interest rates ranged from 4.74 to 2.65.

### 4.1.3. Learning Profile

A learning profile includes all of the different ways that learners choose to learn. Teachers acknowledge that learners have several intellectual capacities, methods of learning, and preferences for active or passive learning. The item "I adapt my teaching considering that students have different ways of learning" obtained a somewhat lower average rating of 2.71, indicating possible opportunities for enhancing the approach towards adapting to multiple learning styles. 70.47% of teachers agreed and strongly agreed with all items related to learning profiles. The teacher concluded that students have several preferences for different learning modalities, and they expressed a willingness to change their teaching strategies to accommodate these choices.

However, there was a somewhat lower level of support for the idea that learners have significantly different learning profiles. The learning profile has a 3.56 out of 5 average rating, with means ranging from 4.68 to 2.71. Notably, researchers found statistically significant differences between these three dimensions. Teachers assessed readiness more favorably than interest and learning profile, indicating a greater emphasis on students' readiness as the primary factor in their pedagogical practices (Al-Breiki, Al-Mekhlafi, & Smaoui, 2025). Additionally, they gave the interest profile a higher rating than the learning profile. This hierarchy suggests that teachers give priority to students' readiness in the teaching situation followed by their level of interest, and their learning profile comes in second.

### 4.2. Practices of DI by ESL Teachers

The second research question was designed to determine how frequently teachers use different pedagogical techniques to serve students with different needs during their teaching practices. The results are broken down into four main categories.

### 4.2.1. Learning Environment

Teachers frequently use ways to optimize the learning environment in the ESL classroom to meet the varied requirements of their students. This includes making changes to the classroom's physical design and creating an environment that is conducive to learning. Teachers typically design activities to foster cooperation among students, promoting equality and a sense of belonging, and striving for balanced and consistent engagement in the classroom. The item, "I handle confidential follow-ups for issues like low grades or disputes" obtained a mean score of 4.17, suggesting a slightly decreased level of trust in managing confidential situations. 89.83% of respondents acknowledged that they use such tactics frequently or occasionally. On average, this aspect scored a commendable 4.49 out of 5; the means ranged from 4.71 to 4.17.

### 4.2.2. Content

ESL teachers use numerous materials and strategies to efficiently impart knowledge, accommodating the varying interests and backgrounds of learners. The item with the lowest rating is "I ask students for opinions to choose or modify course material each semester," with an average value of 2.05, indicating a possible opportunity to enhance student participation in curricular decision-making. 79.25% of ESL teachers agreed and strongly agreed with the implementation of several strategies with regard to the written materials and course content. These include various resources, visual aids, and examples chosen to appeal to the interests of the learners. However, they use certain approaches less frequently, such as providing supplemental resources to more advanced students. This dimension received an average rating of 3.96 out of 5, and the means ranged from 4.71 to 2.05.

### 4.2.3. Process and Product

This aspect pertains to the creation of educational activities and assessments. Teachers foster cooperative instruction through several strategies, such as independent tasks and group projects. The statement "I give assignments with optional formats like writing, drawing, designing, or presenting" had a mean score of 1.88, suggesting a need to incorporate more diverse task types. Less common methods like dividing learners according to readiness, interests, or learning styles and giving advanced students more work. The mean range for all process and product items was 4.45 to 1.88. This feature has a 3.79 out of 5 average rating. 75.73% of ESL teachers typically employ strategies that encourage student collaboration in learning as well as variety in evaluation systems.

### 4.2.4. Assessment

ESL teachers evaluate not only the interests of their learners but also their prior knowledge, English language proficiency, and attitudes. The last statement, "I assess students' learning profiles, including preferred learning style and grouping orientation" earned a mean score of 2.17, indicating a need for advancement in evaluating different learning profiles. Teachers rarely conduct assessments of students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. 65.27% of ESL teachers agreed and strongly agreed with all items related to assessment. Only around half of them reported regularly assessing students' interests, and an even smaller percentage reported consistently assessing students' readiness and learning style. This dimension has an average rating of 3.26 out of 5, and the means ranged from 3.94 to 2.17.

These data highlight significant differences in teachers' focus on these variables. In their instructional approaches, the learning environment emerged as the primary priority, followed by content, process/product, and

assessment. The results indicate that ESL teachers commonly utilise differentiated instruction strategies; however, there are particular aspects where they could improve their methods, such as responding to diverse learning styles, engaging students in curriculum decisions, and diversifying the task types. The data offers helpful suggestions for enhancing the efficacy of ESL education at higher education institutions in Pakistan.

### 4.3. ESL Teachers Respond to the Learners' Academic Diversity

The third research question focused on whether teachers are determined to address the various levels of academic background, level, and interest displayed by learners enrolled in their classes. This inquiry was based on examining the answers to two specific questions. "I am sufficiently ready to assist students with diverse academic backgrounds in my classes." 42.86% strongly agreed, 37.14% agreed, 5.71% strongly disagreed, 8.57% disagreed, and 5.71% were neutral. This question received a 3.46 out of 5 rating overall. "I am eager to know the strategies to support students with diverse academic backgrounds." The results show that 42.86% agreed and 42.86% strongly agreed, while 2.86% strongly disagreed, 8.57% disagreed, and 2.86% were neutral. This item has a 3.51 out of 5 average rating. The research indicates a predominantly favourable tendency towards both preparedness and enthusiasm for developing techniques to assist learners from diverse academic backgrounds. It is desirable for teachers and administrators to prioritize resolving minority students' fears or anxieties in order to adopt a more comprehensive and welcoming approach to assisting students with their different needs.

## 5. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) and Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested thematic analysis stages following the conclusion of the interviews. This analysis method was chosen because it could be utilized to organize and code emerging categories into evolving themes and was flexible in identifying themes in the information collected during interviews. A 6-step methodology was employed to conduct data analysis. This analysis facilitated the identification of the primary themes that emerged from the transcripts about the interview inquiries. Initially, the researchers engaged in a process of double-reading each transcript to uncover probable codes. Secondly, the codes were manually coded after an agreement was reached. Thirdly, material was organized into evolving topics following the coding method. The concepts were then polished and examined in step four. Peer reviewers engaged in critical discussion and building agreement about themes and the thematic structure during the review phase of the coding process, which improved the reliability of data interpretation (Cho & Trent, 2006). Fifthly, the concepts that had emerged were given names. Lastly, the quotes that are presented here were carefully chosen from the data according to the standards outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

During the examination of the interview data, three major themes were developed: (1) comprehension of DI, (2) DI strategies, and (3) difficulties in using DI. The value ESL teachers gave to DI as a teaching strategy was well expressed in the opening theme. The second theme was identified as the diverse strategies employed by ESL teachers in utilizing DI during the process of lecture organization, delivery, and student evaluation. The last theme shed light on the difficulties ESL instructors have in implementing DI in their classes.

### 5.1. Comprehension of DI

Upon initial examination of the transcripts, it became clear that the ESL teachers possessed a substantial understanding of DI. This observation was supported by the consistent use of terminology and concepts related to DI, which align with existing literature and academic discussions on DI. Teachers who were questioned for their personal opinions on DI said that it was vital because of the variety of students they had in their classes and that it was therefore an essential part of their routine. Assistant professors had a more comprehensive understanding of DI and placed a stronger focus on the necessity of having DI availability in every university classroom. According to their knowledge of their students' requirements, the majority of teachers evaluated the success of DI. For instance,

teacher A stated that DI was a teaching strategy that "*ensures the fulfilment of every student's need*", similarly teacher B stated about DI "*it's like teaching and testing if students understand it in different ways based on what they need, because all students should have an equal chance.*". Teacher B further added that every student must "*all the students should have an equal opportunity to understand what you're teaching, and its fine if they do so in their own particular style.*" Additionally, teacher B emphasized how crucial it is for each student to "*as far as each student has a chance to learn the content, it's okay if they all understand it in their way as you teach it to them.*"

Teacher C emphasized the significance of "*we should try our best to assist every learner by getting to know them and developing courses that match to their particular needs as DI focuses on this*". Years of teaching experience appeared to be correlated with teachers' reported confidence in their ability to identify important DI implementation concepts. Teacher A, who has nine years of teaching experience claimed about implementing DI, she modified and adapted her teaching methodology to match with the calibre of the students and her opinion about the implementation of DI "*effectively*" in her report. Teacher C, an experienced teacher, emphasized the importance of familiarizing oneself with students across three crucial domains: readiness level, interest, and learning profile. These areas encompass the students' familiarity with the subject matter, their engagement with topics of interest, and the techniques through which they best acquire knowledge. However, with only two years of experience, teacher B was confused about how to explain differentiation since "*I'm still learning about the different teaching methods that teachers use.*"

Teacher D, an assistant professor with some administrative responsibilities, defined DI as "*ensuring that all students have access to education that allows them to participate in the curriculum, gain information, and develop their skills*". According to her description of DI, the teacher is in charge of offering a meaningful curriculum to all students, regardless of whether they are performing above, below, or at average level standards. She also emphasized how important it was for teachers to regularly identify the position and situation of students" and individualize and personalize instruction. Teacher D referred to teachers' responsibilities for students' learning as "*educational adventures.*" She said, "*every student learns differently; therefore, we need to recognize this, comprehend what we're teaching, and prepare lessons accordingly. We should always explore how we might support their learning and skill development while taking into account their particular requirements and learning preferences to assist students in progressing through their education*". Collectively, these remarks highlight components about the efforts of teachers as they skilfully implement DI in the classroom.

Teacher E provided a similar teaching- focused description of DI but emphasized the necessity of incorporating DI into "*all aspects of teaching activity; in organizing, planning, implementation, and assessment*". In addition, he acknowledged the content, process, product, and assessment as Tomlinson's (2014) four primary instructional techniques and made it evident that all university teachers should apply these strategies. The need for using different teaching methods to accommodate all learners was discussed by all participants. However, teachers were inclined to recognize the implementation of DI more with students who were in need of it and were less skilled. All involved respondent teachers made links regarding the implementation of DI and teaching according to the requirements of learners, which is notable given that each teacher was questioned separately.

## 5.2. DI Strategies

According to the concept, DI is a flexible instruction strategy in which teachers modify lesson plans, assessments, and instruction to fulfilment the requirements, interests and skills of specific students. Successful DI pedagogy, according to Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, and Hardin (2014) and colleagues focuses on teachers' abilities to comprehend unique learner traits, apply them in organizing and modification of pedagogy so all the learners can enhance their skills of learning. English language teachers at this university responded in ways that demonstrated both their professional teaching approach and student-centered focus when asked about strategies used to differentiate throughout the course of instruction and education. Key DI planning techniques were not consistently implemented by these teachers. For instance, teacher C's planning DI methods focused entirely on how to react to

his students. He said, " *we are aware of the various learning preferences of students, and then, we make every effort to meet the requirements of each student."*

Teacher C understood the value of assisting learners from diverse backgrounds. Students from different cities may have different learning skills. He said, *"I keep telling myself that planning for and implementing DI is essential".* The main focus of teacher B's planning was creating lectures and learning activities in a specific order. She remarked, *"I try to understand what was discussed in the last class to see if I need to go over it again. I give students who are making success extra work and activities to help them. Assuming they already know the basics, I give them extra work from time to time. When some students miss important information, I try to help them catch up as we go along. That way, they don't fall behind right away".* Teacher A, in contrast, viewed planning in terms of the curriculum, the needs of the students, and the learning objectives. She said, *"Think about the main things you want your students to learn as you plan the course and its outline. Look at what each student needs and then make goals based on what you want them to be able to do by the end of the course."*

Teachers A, C, and D shared evidence of their efficient teaching strategies to ensure the accessibility of all students to knowledge when presenting critical DI strategies for teaching (Dixon et al., 2014). Teacher A spent a lot of time discussing the structure that she employed for conveying material to her students. According to her, she *"a great deal of visual aids with lectures"* and *"provides them guided handouts and asks them to capture the visual image while attending lecture"* for students who are struggling. On the other hand, teacher C described how he used a critical approach to teach literature while developing content. He clarified, *"we try to make things easier at the start of class by breaking them up into smaller segments. This is helpful for students who might have trouble with big tasks. They are more excited and confident when they have three or four smaller tasks instead of one big one."*

Teacher D concluded by describing how she incorporates group work into her lectures. With groups collaborating, she claimed, *"they can better understand their ideas and don't feel as pressured."* Her adaptable grouping strategy was frequently seen as an important DI process element (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). Numerous instructional strategies that are regularly used during learning activities were also noted. Teacher A stated that she preferred to use "*models help us get a better look at things and figure out how they work"* over other teaching methods. Diagrams, a piece of writing model, and "*before the real tests, we do short practice tests and talk about them as a group"* were among Teacher B's preferences. For teacher C, a variety of "*team quizzes*" in the class offered enjoyable exercises to review students' knowledge.

According to Tomlinson (2014), teachers in differentiated educational settings must utilize student information to direct and provide assessment changes and adaptations for particular students to ensure they are able to show what they understand and are capable of with regard to learning outcomes. The ability of teachers A, B, C, and D to modify assessments included changes to particular procedures (such as structures, more time, the use of readers/writers, short pauses), assessment topic (such as revising topics, translate and explain topic) and pattern of assessment (such as composed statements rather than reports or essays). As an illustration, teacher A provided an explanation of the way she changed the assessment task by *"explaining the topic statement and concluding the main concept which is being asked"* and the assignment pattern, *"for lengthy answer writing, student could work on an electronic device or I asked just write points, you aren't required to compose a lengthy answer."* Teacher D similarly described the strategy of *"giving additional minutes and short pauses"* and *"modified the assignment with emphasis on important topics or skipping less important topics."* This individualized method of assessment shows the actual knowledge and comprehension of students due to the particular learning profiles and preferences of each student.

### 5.3. Difficulties Regarding DI

Although DI is a useful educational strategy to deal with the variations among students yet several difficulties are often met by the teachers during its implementation in regular classes. Difficulties rise as a result of the organizational structure of educational institutions (Smale-Jacobse, Meijer, Helms-Lorenz, & Maulana, 2019). Lack

of time for planning and teaching was the main issue highlighted by the teachers regarding the use of DI, which is an often-recognized barrier to its usage. English linguistics, English communication skills, functional English, and report writing were among the subjects that teacher B was instructing. She had a varied teaching schedule. She made note of how little time she had for planning and instruction with first-semester undergraduate students because courses like Functional English were spread out across a single semester. *"There are many students in that class who require significant differentiation, but I only have 120 minutes per week with them in my class of 33 students, it is challenging for me to determine what is effective for them and what is not. Sometimes I even don't remember their names".*

Similar worries about time limitations were shared by teachers A and B. Teacher B said, "You may develop lessons that aim to satisfy every student's requirement, but how difficult it is, to get to understand them in such a brief amount of time". Planning for her meant that "*major planning and events occur at the beginning of the semester for those with greater need students*" because of her scheduled classes of limited duration. Teacher A also claimed that DI *"performing well is getting harder because it's hard to always make clear differences for the whole class"*. Similar feelings were expressed by Teacher B, who said that DI was "*It can be hard to do because there are so many different students, and it does not always come out right".*

Teachers C and A shared that they have eighteen credit hours per week to teach different courses to different classes. It becomes difficult for them to plan well, differentiate students and implement multiple DI strategies in each classroom. Assistant professors did not say much in response to these issues. Assistant professors have 9 credit hours per week to teach. Teacher E responded that "*every teacher has a minimum of two hours of free time every day to plan. That's when we work on planning our lectures*" when asked about the amount of time teachers have to prepare. He continued by saying that some teachers were better than others at utilizing this time for planning.

In DI, there is an especially significant area of concern regarding assessment and related tasks. Teacher D made a specific comment regarding the inability to modify assessment activities, which is a need for all university teachers. Teacher D stated, *"might be people say 'Wow'. Still, I need to do more work. It should be more like 'Wow', this is great or I can learn a lot from this student to see their learning level".* On the contrary, teacher E addressed a significant matter. According to his statement, certain teachers should provide students with timely and constructive criticism. He expressed the opinion that it is not sufficient to solely emphasize the assignment and grades. The feedback provided should be relevant and meaningful to the learner, enabling them to effectively apply it to their studies. The implementation of DI implies the modification of student assessment methods and the provision of continuous feedback both play crucial roles in its efficacy. According to Tomlinson (2014), this type of approach facilitates enhanced learning outcomes and academic performance among students.

## 6. DISCUSSION

In the present investigation, researchers aimed to gain a better understanding of how ESL teachers conceptualise and apply a concept known as "differentiation" in the classroom. Researchers were intrigued by two significant advancements. First, there is an urgent need to change the way teachers are educated. They must learn how to instruct a variety of students, including those who differ greatly from one another. This entails improving their college-level training, particularly in terms of differences. Second, studies have shown that when teachers model best practices in ESL classrooms, it helps ESL learners learn effectively. Therefore, researchers were interested in finding out if teachers were applying DI in their classrooms.

The notable quantitative finding of this study is the alignment between teachers' perceptions and practices with the paradigm proposed by Tomlinson. However, teachers admitted in interviews that they are unable to fully implement DI concept in their practices because of different factors. These noteworthy interactions involve teachers' understanding of the diversity of students' readiness levels and their skillful application of this awareness to modify their teaching techniques to accommodate students across a spectrum of readiness levels. Given how well it trains ESL teachers to negotiate the wide range of readiness levels experienced in real classroom settings, this

pedagogical competency is of utmost importance. The paper also highlights how deeply committed teachers are to providing a positive and welcoming learning environment. Their diligent work includes creating a sense of community among students, being approachable to learners, and being committed to ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to participate. This initiative serves as a model for ESL teachers and teaches them important lessons about how to create a welcoming and happy learning environment in their own classrooms. Additionally, teachers have several effective teaching methods in their repertoire. Their instructional toolkit includes various forms of assessment, active solicitation and incorporation of student perspectives into the pedagogical process, dynamic student organisation to promote greater understanding of the subject matter, and presentation of course materials through a variety of modalities. This comprehensive strategy has a lot of potential since it replicates the strategies used in actual classroom settings to meet the unique learning needs of learners with different learning preferences.

The research found that despite certain teachers' ideas and instructional practices being in line with Tomlinson's model for incorporating diverse students, they do not always provide their students with a thorough environment of differentiation. This result is consistent with other research which has repeatedly emphasised that teachers still fail to fully comprehend the pedagogical benefits of modelling. Teachers do not give much weight to understanding students' learning profiles because learners from different backgrounds could greatly benefit from a comprehensive understanding of learning profiles. Teachers must place a high priority on the specifics of learning profile traits. Teachers rarely give students the chance to choose their own groups or consciously establish groups based on factors like readiness, interest, or learning style despite using various grouping techniques. Moreover, the study's limited sample size makes it difficult to determine whether years of teaching experience have impacts on the process of DI implementation. According to Suprayogi, Valcke, and Godwin (2017) and Watson and Wildy (2014), it was found that teachers with greater professional experience exhibited enhanced proficiency in employing a vigilant DI strategy. Similarly, Goodnough (2010) in Canada found that years of teaching experience increase teachers' commitment and trust in adopting DI.

As a result, learners pass up the chance to interact with variable grouping structures, a crucial aspect of difference. Teachers tend to give more attention to students who struggle in their learning while giving less attention to those who need more intellectual challenge. This asymmetrical pattern confirms findings from ESL classrooms, highlighting the need for teachers to serve as models of efficient methods for meeting the requirements of all students. Effective distinction requires comprehensive and varied assessment techniques. Regrettably, ESL teachers do not routinely evaluate the readiness, interests, and learning profiles of candidates. This shortcoming prevents teachers from developing the necessary abilities for properly utilising assessment data, a crucial aspect of differentiation. The results imply that many teachers have not yet completely adopted a comprehensive model of differentiation, potentially limiting their learners' ability to succeed in challenging and varied educational situations.

Teachers highlighted a lack of planning time, teaching time, and set systems of organization like time management barriers to implementing DI successfully in their classes. Researchers from all around the world have highlighted several obstacles, including a lack of time, to the effective application of DI (Al-Breiki et al., 2025; Corley, 2005; Gaitas & Alves Martins, 2017; Hewitt & Weckstein, 2012; Shareefa, Moosa, Zin, Abdullah, & Jawawi, 2019; Whitley, Gooderham, Duquette, Orders, & Cousins, 2019). These results demonstrate that assistant professors who have administrative roles also at this university have a sufficient grasp of DI. Teachers are aware that they must take into account the various requirements of their students while planning lectures, delivering instruction, and grading students, regardless of whether the administration of universities sets high expectations and encourages teachers to satisfy each student's learning needs. They acknowledge that in addition to planning for particular needs, they also require sufficient classroom time to provide diverse learning activities and assessment tasks that fit different groups of learners. ESL teachers also need cooperation from administration about the reduction of their credit hours to plan and implement DI efficiently. Two teachers, however, made no mention of

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any issues with DI preparation or teaching. Instead, their main concerns were relating to assessments which were not addressed by other teachers.

This study disproved the myth that DI is only appropriate for use with children who study at primary or secondary school or gifted students (Sharp, Jarvis, & McMillan, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to enhance teachers' ideas and comprehension regarding the utilization of DI as a complete pedagogical framework applicable to students of different levels of competence. Both pre-service and in-service teachers in schools and universities must possess fundamental skills that include knowledge, abilities, and practical experience regarding DI to address the wide range of capacities among learners in contemporary educational settings. Teachers must be aware of general concepts regarding DI, appropriate curriculum designing, and skilled classroom leadership to include DI in teacher training programs. According to Gaitas and Alves Martins (2017), empirical evidence suggests that the effective implementation of DI in educational settings is based upon the administrators of instructions who acknowledge its significance as a pedagogical approach within the university setting.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on teachers' perceptions and practices of differentiation. The results lay the groundwork for additional investigation and offer prospective directions for development. This study investigated the DI understanding and practices of ESL teachers to teach learners in ESL classrooms. This feature is important to understand because it has a direct impact on how learners with a variety of learning preferences learn. It is noteworthy that a number of teachers lack particular instructional strategies that can be unfavourable for learners with a variety of learning difficulties. However, some lecturers said that they would be open to investigating and utilising these strategies in the future. Teachers' perceptions about teaching are generally consistent with this paradigm, although it appears that they do not fully implement DI. These findings are consistent with previous research that revealed teachers did not fully implement DI to its fullest capacity. Moreover, teachers also experience several obstacles when seeking to implement DI. These hurdles include managing large class numbers, dealing with heavy workloads, facing limited time, achieving high expectations from administration, and addressing concerns related to student assessment. Providing teachers with the necessary support to enhance their expertise in DI through professional development programs is crucial for its successful implementation. The provision of administrative assistance, such as allocating sufficient time for teachers to design lectures and integrating DI into the given schedule, plays a crucial role in enabling teachers to effectively use DI in their everyday instructional practices. The study draws attention to crucial areas that require more research and promotes ongoing discussions between teachers, researchers, and policymakers to better prepare ESL teachers for the challenges presented by various learning settings. In the end, researchers believe that current research will assist ESL teachers in employing efficient teaching techniques in their curricula, exactly as they ought to be instructing ESL learners. All of this contributes to improving ESL teaching and ensuring that every student can achieve his or her full potential.

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