TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH IN TEACHING LARGE AND MIXED ABILITY LEARNERS IN ELT: A THEMATIC REVIEW

Ankita Dhungana[a] & Dhurba Prasad Timalsina[b]

[a] *School of Education, Kathmandu University.*

[b]*Kathmandu Model College, Kathmandu.*

Corresponding author: dhurbaprasad80@gmail.com

English Language Teaching (ELT)classroom today are increasingly large, diverse and mixed in learners that poses educators to ensure equitable participation and meaningful engagement of the students. This paper presents a thematic review of transformative approaches that address these challenges in ELT context. Drawing literature published from 2010 to 2023, the review synthesizes studies on learner centered strategies, technology integration, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These approaches are discussed within the theoretical Lens of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy to highlight how transformative practice grounded in dialogue, empowerment and social justice support equity and participation in ELT classroom. The findings indicate that transformative practices not only support language acquisition but also help teachers address pedagogical issues in the classroom such as accommodating diverse learner capacity, sustaining engagement and promoting equity. The paper contributes insights into how transformative pedagogies can help to foster inclusive and effective ELT practices in increasing large, diverse and mixed ability classroom context.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, differentiation, ELT, technology, student engagement

1. Introduction

Transformative approaches to English Language Teaching are increasingly recognized as essential in addressing the realities of large and mixed ability classrooms. Such approaches emphasize learner centeredness, equity and inclusivity making them particularly relevant in context where students bring diverse linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural background. In Today's classrooms the complexity and diversity of learners is rapidly increasing, which has caused a considerable shift in pedagogical thinking. Traditional teacher centered model are proving insufficient. Transformative approaches provide strategies to create more inclusive and effective learning environment. In this regard, mixed ability classrooms pose both challenges and opportunity to adopt their instructional practices as learners differ in competence, language proficiency and learning capacities.

Transformative teaching practices prioritize equity by valuing different experiences and advocating for the contributions of students with varying abilities and backgrounds (Biglow et al., 2018). Transformative teaching models work to establish learning environments where all students feel like they belong, have been heard as valued contributors, and are acknowledged for their strengths. By utilizing and integrating differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and technology, teachers can create more engaging, student-centered classrooms that advocate for the various learning needs of their students (Fey & Morse, 2024). For example, technology enables personalized learning experiences and allows students with different skills and backgrounds to progress at their own rates (Procel et al., 2024).

These transformative teaching practices provide students with a sense of belonging and empowerment by providing them with an

opportunity to engage with the information and with each other in a much more engaging way. Not only does this create a learning atmosphere conducive to learning, but it promotes additional skills standards such as critical thinking, collaboration, and self-regulation- all critical skills for lifelong learning and success. In other words, because transformative teaching focuses less on passive and more on active learning, so that students take ownership of their own learning path.

The complexity and diversity of classrooms today is increasing, causing a considerable shift in the world of English language teaching (ELT). In contrast to quieter spaces, pedagogical inclusivity and effectiveness is difficult to achieve in increasingly more complex classroom environments that often consist of larger mixed ability classrooms, as many practitioners are now witnessing the arrival of new learners. This thematic review discusses the importance of pedagogies that can transform inclusivity and effectiveness in increasingly more complex classroom contexts.

Discussions of classrooms today note continuing diversity of learners in terms of competence, language, learning capability, and socio-cultural backgrounds, particularly in relation to ELT contexts (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2022). For example, with respect to linguistic diversity and complexity, Schleicher (2006) reported that one-fourth of students in urban schools from OECD countries speak a language other than the language of instruction at home. In the case of multilingual contexts, diversity with respect to linguistic and cultural backgrounds found in spaces such as classrooms is complex and unique e.g., India, Canada (Marshall & Moore,2016). These aspects of a teacher's practice can often create difficulty in relation to their instructional methods.

Regular reflection and formative assessment, as commonly practiced in the UK, can aid future pedagogical practices and enable live adjustments to instruction practices for equitable learning for all learners. Cultivating an equitable culture promotes transformative teaching in education whilst also enabling learners to become owners of their learning. The successful implementation of inclusive practices by educators in New Zealand and Canada have demonstrated that practices producing inclusivity, academic outcomes, and personal development of learners represent the best of education for all.

More traditional models of teaching, such as grammar-translation and lecture-based approaches, may fail to meet the needs of the various learners we see today. In most cases these models are teacher-focused and direct, placing a heavy emphasis on students passively absorbing the instructional content that cannot support engaging and collaborative teaching. Take grammatical translations, where resources and assessment opportunities support students in memorizing information about specific concepts (grammatical rules) and vocabulary but do not promote practical application of the language or expand communicative competence. Similarly, teacher lecture-based model can alienate students from the wider implications of the content being taught and provide little opportunity for students to engage with the content effectively and develop critical thinking skills. This thematic review offers a critical look at transformative teaching practices within the ELT context and provides a detailed discussion of the implications of transformative teaching for addressing challenges within large and mixed-ability classrooms. The review provides important discussion of the main strategies and theoretical foundation of transformative teaching and highlights current evidence supporting it as a way of creating an inclusive learning environment. The review also remarks on some practical methods to promote success within the teaching of English to speakers of other languages that are learner-centered and customized to learners' needs in order to help all learners in the same classroom or learning space. In this review we engage with the broader conversation in the English teaching space to exemplify effective practices which allow for inclusionary pedagogies to be taken up in a spatial and cultural condition where diversity is salient (Sharma, 2023).

The literature recognizes that there are a few matters related to how to address mixed ability learners we have a limited understanding of how

to change our teaching practices in cramped and under-resourced settings. Many authors tend to suggest potentialities of Universal Design of learning(UDL)originally proposed by Rose and Meyer (2006)as a framework for designing flexible learning environment that accommodate learner differences or collaborative learning approach, but both ways have not fully been accounted for overcrowded classrooms and per-formed contexts. Anstead (2016) acknowledged that UDL has merit, but did not consider how it might work in classrooms with large class sizes and few resources. Alam and Mohanty (2023) acknowledged the value of collaborative learning, but not how these types of approaches and strategies can reinforce the education inequities experienced when placing students with diverse abilities or learning styles into heterogeneous groups with no supports. Real examples from urban schools with learners from diverse educational, social, and cultural backgrounds can best illustrate some of the constraints on the implementation of these frameworks, as this show why we need research that explores how to adapt teaching practices to better support learner diversity without compromising future systemic interventions. The review presented in this paper supports the recent research that will inform the practice of teaching for inclusive classrooms, where students can develop in social just ways, engage meaningfully, and reach their full potential.

There are many challenges teaching large and mixed ability learners in ELT such as managing diverse learning capacity, addressing varied language proficiencies, sustaining learner engagement, and ensuring equitable participation for all students. These challenges are from the inherent diversity in competence, socio-cultural backgrounds and learning needs that is present within a single classroom. To respond these realities, this review has the research question as follows:

> How can transformative approaches address the challenges of teaching large and mixed-ability learners in ELT to foster inclusivity and engagement?

2. Theoretical Framework

English Language Teaching (ELT) today often places students in classes rich in linguistic, cognitive and socio-cultural diversity. Large, mixed-ability classes are the norm and present many challenges and opportunities for teachers. Such contexts lead to a pedagogical shift from traditional models such as grammar –translation method, rote memorization, and lecture –based instruction. These models are largely teacher-centered and a single way of teaching to be more inclusive - offering responsive, flexible models to meet student needs. A transformative model of teaching provides an excellent way to engage with diversity by promoting equity, learner engagement as well ensuring relevance within a context.

One of the most widely known and influential models which supports and underpins transformative teaching is Critical Pedagogy (CP), introduced by Paulo Freire (1970). CP aims to espouse dialogue, empowerment and social justice - these three principles provide educators with a framework for creating learning spaces which promote active participation amongst all students regardless of their ability. Within CP, dialogue is considered an essential learning approach that includes interaction between the teacher and students and amongst peers, enabling learners to co-construct knowledge and develop as critical thinkers. Consequently, these forces produce an inclusive classroom and culture with the fullest sense of collaboration. Empowerment is another key principle of CP that acknowledges learners take responsibility for their learning process and valuing learner autonomy. When students start to assume ownership of their learning, they raise confidence and self-efficacy which are critical for successfully developing learning in diverse classrooms. Equally significant is the principal of social justice, which emphasizes addressing inequality and valuing every learners background, voice and experience. In a classroom where there is social justice, teachers critically reflect on power relation, challenge biases, and ensure that all learners irrespective of their ability, language or social background are provided with equitable opportunity to participate and succeed.

In addition, CP synchronizes well with differentiated learning and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate for adaptable and flexible processes of teaching and learning that can be used to scaffold an infinite number of learner profiles. The CP framework works well with culturally responsive teaching as well as recognizing and acknowledges student cultural identities in the process of learning (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Together, these pedagogical approaches promote responsive and inclusive teaching practices and learning environments which extend beyond language to become both authentic, and critical in constructively representing and considering critical consciousness. In theory, dialogic practice is not just incidental conversation, but a participatory stance and practices which in the case of learning and teachings, allows learners to participate and voice their ideas, codes, negotiate meaning, and engages in critical thinking about the ideas under discussion with others. In this paper, it is suggested that dialogic practice is a powerful practice to help teachers work in thoughts and skills needed for their students to learn to navigate diverse and ambiguous multiple language competencies as they prepare to teach in a classroom with a diverse group of learners (Kaendler et al., 2015).

Any pedagogical practice that encourages reflection is significant towards mutual learning with teacher and student, and this helps to usher the power of teacher lessons to student, toward the practice involved with student learning that is contextualized. The social justice dimension of CP can work to disrupt systemic inequities that find their way into classrooms to create learning opportunities for students through inclusive curricula and by offering a multiplicity of means to access those learning opportunities (Kaur, 2012). Furthermore, the imposition of students' socio-cultural contexts provides classroom discourse with a level of synergy, while providing the learners deeper and more robust relationships with their learning and subsequently their educational experience.

While CP provides an anchor for researchers and practitioners, its inability to really bring in other complementary theories of learning prohibits it from being fully realized in ELT situations. Employing other compatible models, whether they are different schools of thought such as constructivism, multiple intelligences, or socio-cultural theory, makes the practical realization of CP possible. When the complementary theories are merged with CP, an integrative and flexible pedagogy begins to evolve, which was more responsive to difference among learners and encourages engagement in the classroom.

Ultimately, the distinctive purpose of transformative teaching in an ELT environment is not to enhance the language learning process, but to provide opportunities for learners to be critical thinkers, to be agents of change. Grounded in the notions of CP and informed by complementary models, teaching approaches employed in large mixed-ability classrooms goes far beyond traditional pedagogy, to become strategies of individual development (and collective change).

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a thematic review approach to synthesize studies and findings from published peer-reviewed research papers that were either qualitative or quantitative, published between 2010 and 2023.This time frame was chosen to capture the latest trends and development in transformative teaching methods and strategies for teaching English Language Teaching (ELT) to large/mixed-ability classrooms.

A systematic search was applied using curated key word terms in academic databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, and JSTOR, to ensure literature was located. The significant terms were "transformative teaching", "mixed-ability learners", and "inclusive ELT practices". The articles and peer reviewed journals articles were focused on examining and supporting new and inclusive instructional approaches and strategies for students within an ELT context with a diversity of students.

Inclusion criteria specifically prefer research studies into teaching practices and strategies in mixed-ability learners. Exclusion criteria included non-ELT studies or studies that did not have empirical data from a peer-reviewed publication. A thematic analysis was applied following Braun

and Clarke's (2006) six step framework which involved (i) Familiarizing with the data through repeated reading (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for theme (4) reviewing themes (5) defining and naming themes, and (6)producing the final report.

4. Findings and discussion

The transformative approach in teaching large and mixed ability learners in ELT is explored by this study, based on studies published between 2010 and 2023.The three key themes are learner-centered approaches, including technology, and ensuring an inclusive cultural approach. Guided by Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy, the finding emphasizes dialogue empowerment and social justice as core principles for inclusive teaching. Learner centered strategies such as differentiated instruction and universal design of learning helps to promote participatory and equity, technology enhances engagement and access, and culturally responsive teaching confirms learner diverse identities.

These approaches reflect a transformative vision of ELT that challenges traditional hierarchies and promotes equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Theme1: Learner-Centered Strategies

In English Language Teaching (ELT), transformative, learner-centered approaches are being recognized for their importance in the context of learners' diverse needs. Grounded in the principle of Critical Pedagogy, dialogue, empowerment and social justice, these approaches encourage teachers to see as active participants who co- construct knowledge rather than passive recipients. The principle of differentiated instruction engenders rekindling of content, process, and assessment for the differing levels of ability of learners (Leblebicier, 2020), is the core of such approaches. The reality of differentiated instruction implies important flexibility to engage effectively in a way that empowers both novice and expert learners.

Differentiated instruction has been highly effective for promoting engagement and improved learning for a range of students. By differentiating the content, process, and assessments based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014), teachers can provide every student with the challenge and support that they need. With content differentiation, learners must interact with content that varies in complexity, whereas other types of process differentiation afford learners engagement through multiple pathways, having met the needs of their individual learning styles. The basis for some differentiation can also take form of assessment differentiation. This enables the teacher to utilize assessments that are multiple forms of evaluation which measure students' level of understanding moves toward demonstrating success, namely progress. One of the major strategies of differentiated instruction is flexible grouping, which organizes groups of students based on strengths, struggles, and learning needs using the grouping structure (Tomlinson et al., 2008). By organizing groups regularly, with diversity in abilities and learning needs, this approach enables students to work together to develop understanding that they could not achieve independently. This reflect the dialogic principle of Critical Pedagogy, where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction, dialogue and shared meaning, rather than imposed by the teacher. In addition to the issues raised above regarding flexible grouping, another critical aspect of learner-centered instruction is formative assessment as it provides timely feedback for both teachers and students by amending instructional strategies (Shore et al., 2016). This consistent development of feedback foreshadows any misunderstandings or gaps in understanding before they blossom into barriers for learning, reflecting adoption of a responsive approach to instruction.

The conceptual framework of student-centered practices is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory in particular the idea of scaffolding. Vygotsky's central concept being in order to learn students must learn within their social zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the range of what a learner can do independently and the entire potential of what a learner can do with the help of another more knowledgeable person or teacher (Vygotsky, 1978). A scaffolding approach provides a series of temporally designed

structures of support to learners in order for them to accomplish a task, which they never would have been able to complete independently. The purpose of scaffolding to begin to reduce their support as a learner becomes more independent (Walqui, 2006).

Peer teaching and collaborative group work were also two strategies found in the literature to be beneficial and effective with respect to developing language proficiency as well as being collaborative. Anggraenya and Khongputb (2022) advocate that peer teaching creates a safer space for students to be able to explain concepts to their peers; therefore, while supporting a peer, they are also developing their own understanding and knowledge. This reciprocal model promotes students' language and communicative skills, collaboration, problem-solving skills, all fundamental and interrelated skills that are necessary for academic and real-world success. Such collaboration reinforces dialogue and social justice, as all the learner voices are valued and included in the learning process regardless of ability or background. There could be other types of peers teaching based assessments which further the opportunity for students to include.

Learner-centered approaches like differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, scaffolding, and formative assessments are important to support students' individual learning trajectories in English language teaching, or ELT. The theoretical underpinning of these approaches derives from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes social interactions and collaborative learning. Each method has limitations. For example, implementing differentiated instruction takes time and resources to ensure the needs of students are accommodated in diverse classrooms. Scaffolding is also difficult in larger groups because many students will require individual attention. Peer teaching and working collaboratively with others can help foster a cooperative environment and promote communicative competence. However equally, some students may contribute less than others, resulting in unbalanced learning experiences. In summary, these methods are useful, but to gain the greatest benefits from learners-centered approaches, it is important to consider and mitigate their limitations

Theme 2: Integration of Technology

Technology incorporation in English language teaching (ELT) has been an interesting way to create independent individualized learning, especially informed by diverse-mixed ability groups. Technology encourages learner autonomy and empowerment, aligning with Freire's praxis, the unity of reflection and action. It allows learners to take control of their learning through meaningful engagement with digital tools.

Digital tools encourage a more individualized learning experience and facilitate differentiation, essentially permitting students the space to learn from their present position and to bridge poorly defined gaps of learning through instructional resources across a spectrum from language-learning apps to multimedia merchant, to digital content, to others and virtual classrooms, (Procel et al., 2024). The potential for engagement has increased through the variety of digital sources available and languages can be made accessible to more learners. Through technology, learners can access with content that suits their individual needs. It allows learning at their own pace and with respect to their expression of learning.

There are a broader range of adaptive learning pathways available through digital platforms; learners are able to access content at the level of their development. This supports the ability to develop learning tasks and resources around the specific abilities of the learner so that they can be challenged and develop academically without frustration or disengagement from the learning process. Furthermore, technology supports the accessibility of learning materials (i.e. text-to-speech availability, subtitling-language input), and adaptive technologies ensure that learners who need accommodation are provided with equitable participation experience. As Broek V. D et al. (2018) suggest, the purpose using technology should be intentional and designed to have equitable participation multiplied through technology. Freire's concept of *praxis*, the integration of reflection and action is evident in how technology enables learners to address real-world problems. Takona (2024) demonstrates how

platforms like Moodle and Google Classroom support collaborative projects that help students to apply theoretical concepts to practical scenarios. This helps students reflect to their own learning and connecting them with real life problems

Technology in English Language Teaching (ELT) nourishes linguistic and critical thinking development. For example, language learning platforms, like Duolingo and Babbel, engage students with real-world contexts, for instance, ordering food in a restaurant or negotiating in business. The students can develop their language and contextual knowledge by getting language-based exposure to different context-based language use. The benefits of using technology in teaching larger, mixed-ability groups are immense. Using tech in this way provides a unique opportunity for individualized learning that is principled and meets the needs of students' different proficiency levels. For example, learning games, like Kahoot! and Quizlet, measure student performance and milestones on a task and provide a simpler or more difficult task for students based on this progress. A further use of technology for Language Teaching in large mixed-ability groups is to gamify the learning experience, which generates more engagement and dynamic learning experiences for students. These pedagogical practices complement Freire's praxis theory by allowing students to make sense of their learning within the context of the world around them.

Technology can support individuals if they experience a large range of learning styles and levels. Inclusive and interactive learning experiences create an environment where all students can engage in a wide range of equitable and effective learning outcomes, regardless of their proficiency level.

Theme 3: Fostering Cultural Inclusivity

In the broader context of a transformative approach to teaching diverse and mixed-ability learners in ELT, developing cultural inclusivity is an important theme. Students come into increasingly diverse classrooms with a plethora of cultural identities, beliefs, and life experiences. Using inclusive pedagogies to acknowledge these differences celebrates the learners' identities and provides a richer learning experience.

Understanding cultural inclusivity is an essential component of creating meaningful learning places (Prayitno et al., 2024) specifically in an ELT classroom that has to cater to diverse and mixed-ability learners. Exploring a transformative approach emphasizes the need for teaching practices that involve cultural responsiveness whereby the socio-cultural contexts of learners are integrated into the curriculum. Therefore, meaningful inclusive teaching contributes to facilitating engagement and, in the end, relevance of experience for students' education.

Freire (1970) is a proponent of incorporating students lived experiences into the curriculum, and he stresses the importance of critical inquiry and dialogue in this process because it creates a greater sense of relation to the learning materials. Freire emphasizes that by drawing on and amplifying learners' socio-cultural realities in the education process, learners are authorized to engage in critical discussions, which go beyond the learner's immediate learning experience, and enable learners to connect language learning to their everyday life contexts. Providing opportunities for students to engage in critical discussions about their socio-cultural realities allows ELT practitioners to shift from learning contexts of superficial engagement to environments where learners feel present, valued, and willing to fully engage with the learning process—key features of transformative, inclusive educational experiences.

In this sense, culturally responsive pedagogy promotes the use of authentic texts, open-ended issues, and critical discourse (Sapp et al., 2024). By incorporating these pedagogical approaches, learners can draw from their personal and cultural lived experiences in a way that increases not only their engagement but can also facilitate an increase in comprehension. This is particularly important when working with ELT, as it allows learners to interact with the language in a real-world context and to move from use of the language based merely on linguistic competence to include cultural competence. In fact, authentic texts, whether literature, media, or resources from other cultures open a channel for learners to consider global issues through the texts while they

are developing empathy and understanding from shared cultural story lines.

Sharma & Phyak (2017) clearly demonstrates that culturally relevant tasks initiate positive engagement and comprehension in a diverse classroom. These tasks are intended to consider the cultural experiences of the students, allowing them to take an active role in the learning process. Culturally relevant learning experiences cannot only reinforce student's identities, but they also help promote intrinsic motivation and learning through meaningful learning content connected to real-life contexts (Walker, 2019). For example, tasks where learners consider issues or topics related to their cultural experiences or societal challenges can lead to building student agency. Freire (1970) is a proponent of incorporating students lived experiences into the curriculum, and he stresses the importance of critical inquiry and dialogue in this process because it creates a greater sense of relationality to the learning materials. Freire emphasizes that by drawing on and amplifying learners' socio-cultural realities in the education process, learners are authorized to engage in critical discussions, which go beyond the learner's immediate learning experience, and enable learners to connect language learning to their everyday life contexts. Providing opportunities for students to engage in critical discussions about their socio-cultural realities allows ELT practitioners to shift from learning contexts of superficial engagement to environments where learners feel present, valued, and willing to fully engage with the learning process-key features of transformative, inclusive educational experiences.

Additionally, advancing cultural inclusivity extends beyond content; it can relate to the instructional practices we adopt. Teachers need to be flexible and adaptable to the range of cultural views and experiences the learners bring into the classroom (Corno, 2008). This flexibility might involve a different style of communication, or ensuring expectations of non-verbal communication are considered and allowing students to communicate their cultural background using the language they are learning. In this way, the classroom represents the world in a diverse space, and a student's background is not considered as an add-on, but as an essential element of the learning process. Thus, promoting cultural inclusivity as a transformative approach would not only encompass improved language learning for the students from diverse backgrounds, but it would provide the students with an environment where they feel acknowledged, connected to the community of learners, and sufficiently motivated to meaningfully interact inside and outside the class in ways that extend learning beyond the classroom context.

A transformative approach in English Language Teaching (ELT) takes on the challenge of addressing the various needs of mixed-ability learners through practices that promote inclusivity and engagement. By embedding culturally relevant elements into both curriculum and practice, we can create a more inclusive and holistic learner experience in the classroom (Farmer et al., 2019). In partnering with learners about their socio-cultural worldviews and learning, the curriculum becomes accessible and meaningful for students of different backgrounds as they learn

5. Conclusion

Transformative approach informed by Critical Pedagogy is a strong approach for working with the intricacies of teaching in large, mixed-ability English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. Similarly, technology is essential to ensuring the design and delivery of differentiated instruction that responds to those learning preferences. Digital environments, digital multi-media materials, adaptive learning software, etc. all have the ability to create informative and responsive instruction. These tools promote equity of access to learning opportunities and increase opportunities for student engagement to support students through a more collaborative educational experience (Emma, 2024). However, supporting teachers' and their ability to enact transformative teaching strategies in large, diverse classrooms relies heavily upon systemic support, and a commitment to ongoing professional development. If educators are to enact transformative approaches, they need professional development that equips them not only with

theoretical understandings but also with practical context-specific knowledge and skills.

In conclusion, transformative approaches offer great potential to strengthen and develop educational experiences for diverse learners in ELT contexts. By situating pedagogical practices within inclusive, culturally responsive and critical frameworks which aim to support equity and engagement for all students in a single classroom context; we can connect some of these transformative pedagogical perspectives. However, in order to transform these pedagogies from academic discourse into practices with meaning requires coordinated efforts that include continuous professional development, institutional policy support, stakeholder engagement, and ongoing research. Then we can be able to transform short-term action into longer term, context responsive practices that flourish in real classrooms.

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