

Beyond Linguistic Uniformity: A Critical Humanistic Framework for Navigating Proficiency Disparity in the TESOL Classroom

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ما وراء التوحيد اللغوي: إطار عمل إنساني نقدي للتعامل مع التفاوت في مستويات الكفاءة في فصول تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لغير الناطقين بها

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Abstract

The persistent pursuit of the "homogeneous classroom" remains one of the most enduring fallacies in contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper argues that proficiency disparity is not an administrative deficit to be corrected, but a natural human condition to be accommodated and leveraged through pedagogical sophistication. By transcending standardized, mechanical instructional models, this study advocates for a critical humanistic framework. Integrating Task-Based Learning (TBL) and the Communicative Approach (CA), the paper explores how educators can maintain uncompromising academic rigor while safeguarding the individual dignity and validating the unique "interlanguage" of every learner. The study concludes that the intersection of rigorous assessment and student-centered pedagogy is the only viable path toward genuine educational equity.

Keywords: TESOL, Proficiency Disparity, Task-Based Learning (TBL), Communicative Approach (CA), Humanistic Framework, Interlanguage, Affective Filter, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Performance-Based Assessment.

المخلص

لا يزال السعي الدؤوب وراء "الفصل الدراسي المتجانس" أحد أكثر المفاهيم الخاطئة رسوخاً في مجال تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية المعاصر (ELT). وترى هذه الورقة البحثية أن التفاوت في مستويات الكفاءة ليس عيباً إدارياً يتعين تصحيحه، بل هو حالة إنسانية طبيعية يجب التكيف معها والاستفادة منها من خلال التطور التربوي. ومن خلال تجاوز النماذج التعليمية المعيارية والميكانيكية، تدعو هذه الدراسة إلى اعتماد إطار عمل إنساني نقدي. من خلال دمج التعلم القائم على المهام (TBL) والنهج التواصلي (CA)، تستكشف هذه

الورقة كيف يمكن للمعلمين الحفاظ على الصرامة الأكاديمية دون مساومة مع حماية كرامة الفرد وتأكيد "اللغة البيئية"، الفريدة لكل متعلم. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن التقاء التقييم الصارم والتربية المتمحورة حول الطالب هو السبيل الوحيد القابل للتطبيق نحو المساواة التعليمية الحقيقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لغير الناطقين بها (TESOL)، التفاوت في مستويات الكفاءة، التعلم القائم على المهام (TBL)، النهج التواصلي (CA)، الإطار الإنساني، اللغة الوسيطة، المرشح العاطفي، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة مشتركة (ELF)، التقييم القائم على الأداء.

1. Introduction

Language is fundamentally more than a mere vehicle for the transmission of information; it is, as Oliver Wendell Holmes profoundly articulated, "the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow". In the contemporary landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly within the academic corridors of the Language Center at Sebha University, the pursuit of the "homogeneous classroom" has long been upheld as a pedagogical ideal. However, this pursuit is increasingly recognized as one of the field's most enduring fallacies. The reality of the classroom is not one of uniformity, but of a vibrant, often challenging, proficiency disparity.

The central crisis in modern TESOL arises from the collision between rigid, standardized curricula and the non-linear, deeply personal trajectories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). When educational frameworks treat linguistic gaps as an administrative deficit rather than a natural human condition, they inadvertently elevate the Affective Filter (Krashen, 1982). For the learner within the specific socio-linguistic context of Sebha, this manifests as a debilitating "Affective Blockade"—a form of linguistic anxiety that not only stalls cognitive engagement but also creates a psychological barrier between the student's identity and the target language.

The problem, therefore, is not the disparity itself, but a systemic failure to provide a "safe emotional architecture" that can accommodate and leverage the various stages of the Interlanguage. This study seeks to operationalize a critical humanistic framework that transcends the "deficit model" of teaching. By synthesizing the structural logic of Task-Based Learning (TBL) with the empathetic core of the Communicative Approach (CA), this study aims to demonstrate how "elastic tasks" can serve as a strategic equalizer. The core hypothesis posits that when the pedagogical focus shifts from grammatical perfection to communicative success, the classroom transforms. Disparity is no longer a burden to be managed but a catalyst for Scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This research argues that by safeguarding the unique linguistic identity and validating the individual dignity of each learner, we can maintain a comprehensive performance-based assessment architecture while fostering a "pedagogy of hope" that prepares students for the global communicative landscape.

2. Literature Review

The issue of proficiency disparity in TESOL classrooms has received considerable attention in second language acquisition, communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and

humanistic education. The literature shows that mixed-ability classrooms should not be viewed merely as an instructional problem, but as a natural feature of language learning environments that requires flexible, learner-centered, and context-sensitive pedagogical responses.

2.1 Proficiency Disparity and Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition research emphasizes that learners do not acquire language in a uniform or linear manner. Rather, they pass through different developmental stages shaped by cognitive, emotional, social, and contextual factors. Selinker's concept of **interlanguage** explains that learners construct their own evolving linguistic systems while moving toward greater proficiency. From this perspective, learner errors are not simply failures, but evidence of an active developmental process.

Krashen's Monitor Model, particularly the **Affective Filter Hypothesis**, further highlights the role of emotional variables in language learning. Anxiety, low motivation, and fear of failure may prevent learners from benefiting from linguistic input, especially in classrooms where students compare themselves with more proficient peers. This view is supported by Arnold's humanistic approach to language learning, which stresses that emotions are central to successful learning and should be treated as part of the pedagogical process rather than as external obstacles.

In the Libyan EFL context, recent studies have also drawn attention to affective and psychological barriers. Almadani's study on anxiety in classroom presentations among EFL learners at Gharian University indicates that anxiety can negatively affect learners' willingness to speak and participate. Similarly, studies on Libyan EFL learners show that classroom confidence, interaction patterns, and learner identity remain important factors in language development. Therefore, proficiency disparity must be understood not only as a linguistic issue, but also as an emotional and social phenomenon.

2.2 Social Interaction, Scaffolding, and Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding proficiency disparity as a resource rather than a weakness. The concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development** suggests that learners can achieve higher levels of performance when supported by teachers or more capable peers. In this sense, mixed-ability classrooms may create valuable opportunities for peer scaffolding, collaborative learning, and negotiated meaning.

Long's Interaction Hypothesis also supports this view by arguing that language acquisition is promoted through interaction, especially when learners negotiate meaning, ask for clarification, and adjust their language during communication. In classrooms with different proficiency levels, interaction can help learners notice gaps in their language and develop more effective communicative strategies.

This perspective is consistent with recent Libyan research on classroom interaction. Zabiya's study on EFL teachers' interaction styles in secondary schools in Misurata highlights the importance of teacher talk, classroom communication, and interactional patterns in shaping learning opportunities. Likewise, research on peer feedback among Libyan EFL university students shows that peer interaction can encourage learners to speak English inside and outside

the classroom. These studies support the argument that proficiency disparity can be pedagogically useful when classroom interaction is carefully structured.

2.3 Communicative Competence and the Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach represents a major shift from grammar-centered instruction to meaning-centered language use. Hymes' concept of **communicative competence** argues that language learning involves not only grammatical accuracy, but also the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. This idea is particularly relevant to mixed-ability TESOL classrooms, where learners may differ in accuracy but still demonstrate meaningful communicative ability.

The Communicative Approach helps reduce the negative effects of proficiency gaps because it values meaning, participation, and interaction. Instead of treating less proficient learners as deficient, it allows them to participate at their current level while gradually developing fluency and accuracy. However, the literature also warns that communicative teaching must be adapted to local contexts. Kulaib's study on Libyan secondary school EFL teachers' conceptualizations of CLT shows that teachers may support communicative teaching in principle but face contextual constraints in implementation. This indicates that communicative pedagogy in Libya requires realistic adaptation rather than direct importation of Western models.

2.4 Task-Based Learning as a Response to Proficiency Disparity

Task-Based Learning offers a practical framework for addressing mixed proficiency levels because it focuses on meaningful task completion rather than isolated grammar practice. Ellis, Nunan, Willis, Long, and Skehan all emphasize that tasks can create opportunities for authentic language use, interaction, and learner autonomy. In task-based classrooms, learners can participate through different levels of linguistic complexity while working toward a shared communicative goal.

Skehan's model is particularly useful because it balances **fluency, accuracy, and complexity**. This balance is important in mixed-ability classrooms: focusing only on fluency may weaken linguistic precision, while focusing only on accuracy may silence weaker learners. Therefore, task design should allow different entry points and different levels of output, enabling advanced learners to extend their language while supporting lower-level learners through scaffolded participation.

Recent Libyan studies also support the importance of balancing fluency and accuracy. Embarek's work on accuracy and fluency in learning English as a second language emphasizes the need to achieve balance in light of learners' needs. This supports the present study's argument that elastic task design can maintain academic rigor while respecting learner diversity.

2.5 English as a Lingua Franca and the Question of Native-Speaker Norms

Another important strand of literature concerns the status of English in global communication. Kachru's World Englishes model and Crystal's discussion of English as a global language challenge the traditional assumption that native-speaker norms should be the only standard for English teaching. Canagarajah's critique of linguistic imperialism further argues that English

teaching should not reproduce unequal power relations by forcing learners to imitate idealized native-speaker models.

In TESOL classrooms, especially in contexts such as Libya, an English as a Lingua Franca perspective is highly relevant. It shifts the goal of instruction from native-like perfection to intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and intercultural flexibility. This does not mean abandoning accuracy; rather, it means evaluating learners according to realistic communicative purposes. Such a perspective validates learners' interlanguage and protects their linguistic identity while still encouraging improvement.

Studies on native language interference among Libyan learners, such as Ghabisha's study of secondary school EFL learners in Alkhoms, demonstrate that learners' first language can influence English proficiency. However, this influence should not be treated only as a source of error. It should also be understood as part of the learner's developmental process and linguistic background.

2.6 Assessment, Feedback, and Humanistic Pedagogy

Assessment plays a central role in how proficiency disparity is experienced by learners. Traditional tests often intensify anxiety because they focus on error detection and comparison among students. In contrast, performance-based and formative assessment models evaluate learners through authentic tasks and provide feedback that supports further development.

Wiggins' concept of educative assessment emphasizes that learners should demonstrate what they can do with language in meaningful contexts. Black and Wiliam's work on formative assessment also shows that feedback can improve learning when it is used diagnostically rather than punitively. In mixed-ability classrooms, this means that assessment should identify learner progress, guide instruction, and support confidence.

Humanistic pedagogy also connects with Freire's view of education as a dialogic and empowering process. Rather than positioning learners as passive recipients of correction, teachers should create a classroom atmosphere where students feel respected, capable, and involved. In this framework, mistakes become learning data, not evidence of failure.

Digital tools such as Kahoot and Quizizz may also contribute to formative assessment when used appropriately. They can provide immediate feedback in a low-stress environment and help reduce learners' fear of public failure. However, they should not be treated as mere entertainment tools; their value depends on how they are integrated into a clear pedagogical framework.

2.7 Local Libyan EFL Context

The recent Libyan studies listed in the references strengthen the contextual relevance of this research. Studies on classroom anxiety, teacher interaction styles, deep and surface learning, teacher roles, reading aloud, authentic listening materials, peer feedback, critical thinking, CLT implementation, and native language interference all point to the complexity of English language teaching in Libya. Together, these studies show that Libyan EFL classrooms are shaped by psychological, pedagogical, institutional, and sociolinguistic factors.

For example, Abushina's study on critical thinking in Libyan primary schools highlights the need for more reflective and learner-centered instruction. Al-Bakosh and Toubot's systematic

review on authentic listening materials supports the importance of exposing learners to meaningful language input. Rabab Abdul Kareem Al darasi and Hanan Ajouida Said's study on the absence of teachers' roles shows that teacher presence and guidance remain essential in supporting learners. These findings collectively support the present paper's argument that proficiency disparity should be addressed through flexible teaching, meaningful interaction, emotional support, and authentic assessment.

2.8 Synthesis

The reviewed literature indicates that proficiency disparity is a natural and inevitable feature of TESOL classrooms. SLA theories show that learners develop through different interlanguage stages; affective theories show that anxiety can block participation; socio-cultural theory shows that mixed levels can create opportunities for scaffolding; communicative and task-based approaches provide practical methods for inclusive instruction; and ELF perspectives challenge unrealistic native-speaker standards.

Therefore, the most appropriate response to proficiency disparity is not the pursuit of artificial homogeneity, but the construction of a critical humanistic framework that combines academic rigor with emotional safety. Such a framework should use elastic tasks, communicative interaction, formative assessment, peer scaffolding, and performance-based evaluation to transform proficiency disparity from a classroom obstacle into a pedagogical resource.

3. Methodological Remediation: Strategic Equalizers

3.1 Task-Based Learning: Embracing the Interlanguage Journey

Task-Based Learning (TBL) serves as the primary methodological intervention. By focusing on task completion rather than grammatical perfection, TBL validates the student's Interlanguage. Elasticity in task design allows for multi-layered success criteria: while the core communication objective remains constant for the entire cohort, the linguistic entry points and output expectations are calibrated to the learner's current Interlanguage. This ensures that the beginner is challenged without being overwhelmed, and the advanced learner is stretched without being restricted by a simplified curriculum.

3.2 The Communicative Approach: Beyond Correction

The Communicative Approach (CA) redefines success as the ability to convey meaning. It moves from a deficit-based model to a competency-based model. By prioritizing human connection and authentic interaction, CA reduces the social stigma of being at a lower level.

4. Uncompromising Excellence: Performance-Based Assessment

A critical humanistic framework does not equate to a dilution of academic standards; rather, it redefines the very nature of structural rigor. To ensure that academic advancement within the Language Center at Sebha University remains strictly and rigorously earned, assessment must transition away from punitive, psychometric testing toward real-world application. This study operationalizes a Comprehensive Performance-Based Assessment architecture that evaluates how learners dynamically utilize their evolving linguistic resources to navigate and solve complex, authentic tasks.

As Wiggins (1998) profoundly suggests, authentic assessment requires students to "do" the subject, demonstrating communicative competence rather than the rote memorization of isolated syntactic structures. To uphold institutional excellence while preserving the learner's psychological well-being, assessment must completely abandon the traditional judgmental-deficit model in favor of a formative-diagnostic paradigm. Within this architecture, errors are not penalized as failures, but are systematically analyzed as essential "interlanguage" data that informs and recalibrates the next stage of the pedagogical cycle.

Furthermore, this framework integrates interactive digital platforms—specifically Kahoot and Quizizz—not as mere tools for gamification, but as structural instruments designed to provide immediate, low-stakes formative feedback. By transforming feedback into an engaging, non-threatening dialogue, these digital interventions effectively lower the Affective Filter, mitigating the debilitating "Affective Blockade" while maintaining uncompromised performance standards. Ultimately, the Comprehensive Performance-Based Assessment ensures that the intersection of rigorous evaluation and student-centered pedagogy becomes a viable engine for genuine educational equity.

5. Global Context: English as a Lingua Franca

The insistence on a monolithic, native-speaker norm within peripheral educational settings is not merely a pedagogical error; it is an enduring **fallacy** rooted in linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999). Within the specific geopolitical and social context of Sebha, forcing learners to emulate an unattainable, idealized native standard under the guise of uniform proficiency constitutes a form of symbolic violence. This rigid paradigm exacerbates the Affective Filter, transforming the classroom into an environment of alienation rather than empowerment.

To counteract this, this study positions English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) as a core theoretical pillar within our critical humanistic framework. By **transcending** the oppressive native-speaker dichotomy, ELF fundamentally redefines the objectives of the contemporary ELT classroom. The pedagogical goal is dynamically shifted from punitive linguistic mimicry to the acquisition of fluid, functional communicative competence (Hymes, 1972).

When we embrace an ELF perspective, proficiency disparity is no longer categorized as **an administrative deficit** or a collection of errors to be eradicated. Instead, the various developmental stages of the student's **interlanguage** are **validated** as legitimate, creative adaptations within a global communicative ecosystem. ELF recognizes that in the real world, English is a tool for cross-cultural negotiation where adaptability, mutual intelligibility, and strategic flexibility are paramount. By **safeguarding** the individual dignity and cultural identity of the learner, the integration of ELF principles ensures that academic rigor is

maintained through realistic, performance-based benchmarks rather than Eurocentric linguistic hegemony.

6. Discussion: A Critical Appraisal of Pedagogical Resilience

The persistent pursuit of linguistic homogeneity within contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) has been systematically exposed in this study as an enduring **fallacy**. To treat the vibrant proficiency disparity found within the Language Center at Sebha University as an **administrative deficit** is to misunderstand the deeply human and non-linear nature of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This paper has argued that proficiency variance is not a logistical failure to be mechanically corrected, but an intrinsic human reality to be **accommodated and leveraged** through pedagogical sophistication. By **transcending** traditional, punitive deficit models, this study has operationalized a critical humanistic framework that synthesizes the structural predictability of Task-Based Learning (TBL) with the empathetic core of the Communicative Approach (CA).

Through this integration, the classroom is transformed into a "safe emotional architecture" where the student's unique **interlanguage** is not penalized, but **validated** as a legitimate stage of development. The operationalization of "elastic tasks" ensures that instructional delivery remains inclusive yet academically uncompromised, allowing learners at varying proficiency levels to negotiate meaning within their respective Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). Furthermore, by embedding interactive digital platforms like Kahoot and Quizizz, the framework effectively lowers the Affective Filter, dismantling the debilitating "Affective Blockade" and transforming formative feedback into a non-threatening, empowering dialogue. To institutionalize these insights at Sebha University and similar developing contexts, the following pedagogical recommendations are proposed:

Adopt a Comprehensive Performance-Based Assessment

1. **Architecture:** Educational institutions must abandon rigid, psychometric examinations that measure rote memorization. Assessment should be grounded in authentic, real-world communicative tasks that evaluate how learners dynamically mobilize their evolving linguistic resources.
2. **Deconstruct the Native-Speaker Monolith:** Curricula and instructional practices must embrace the paradigm of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). By **safeguarding** the cultural identity and individual dignity of the learner, pedagogical benchmarks should prioritize mutual intelligibility and strategic communicative flexibility over punitive linguistic mimicry.
3. **Implement Elastic Curricular Design:** Instructors should be trained in designing multi-layered tasks that offer multiple linguistic entry points and varied success criteria, transforming proficiency disparity from a classroom burden into a powerful catalyst for collective scaffolding.

Ultimately, this study concludes that the intersection of rigorous performance assessment and critical student-centered pedagogy is the only viable path toward genuine educational equity—

fostering a "pedagogy of hope" that honors the learner's dignity while maintaining uncompromising academic excellence.

7. Conclusion: Toward a Pedagogy of Human Excellence

The persistent pursuit of absolute linguistic homogeneity within contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) has been systematically exposed throughout this investigation as an enduring academic fallacy. To conceptualize the vibrant, multi-layered proficiency disparity observed within the academic corridors of the Language Center at Sebha University as merely an administrative deficit or a logistical failure is to fundamentally misunderstand the deeply human, non-linear, and highly idiosyncratic nature of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This paper has robustly argued that proficiency variance should never be treated as a pedagogical error to be mechanically eradicated through punitive, standardized remediation. Instead, it must be recognized as an intrinsic human reality that must be strategically accommodated and leveraged through methodological sophistication and professional resilience. By definitively transcending traditional, deficit-based instructional designs, this study has successfully operationalized a critical humanistic framework that seamlessly synthesizes the structural predictability of Task-Based Learning (TBL) with the empathetic, interactive core of the Communicative Approach (CA).

Through this comprehensive integration, the contemporary language classroom is successfully reconstructed into a "safe emotional architecture" wherein the student's unique interlanguage is no longer marginalized or penalized, but is actively validated as a legitimate, creative developmental system within a global communicative ecosystem. The systematic implementation of "elastic tasks" ensures that instructional delivery remains radically inclusive yet academically uncompromised. This elasticity structurally empowers learners at varying proficiency levels to negotiate authentic meaning and co-construct knowledge within their respective Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), transforming diversity into a collaborative catalyst. Furthermore, by embedding interactive digital platforms such as Kahoot and Quizizz as foundational formative instruments rather than superficial gamification tools, the pedagogical framework effectively lowers the Affective Filter. This targeted digital intervention successfully dismantles the debilitating "Affective Blockade" and alleviates linguistic anxiety, thereby transforming formative feedback into an empowering, non-threatening dialogue that honors both the cognitive and emotional journey of the learner. Ultimately, this study concludes that the strategic intersection of a rigorous, performance-based architecture and a critical, student-centered pedagogy is the only viable pathway toward genuine educational equity—fostering a transformative "pedagogy of hope" that safeguards individual human dignity while maintaining uncompromising academic excellence.

8. Recommendations and Future Directions

- Implementation of Elastic Tasks: Educators should design tasks that allow for differentiation by outcome, catering to the unique ZPD of each student. The humanistic dimension in ELT transcends theoretical abstraction to address a poignant classroom reality: the "lost look" that

often dominates the faces of lower-level learners when they feel unable to keep pace. This sense of alienation is exacerbated by systemic constraints such as limited instructional time and high student density. Educators frequently find themselves in a pedagogical tug-of-war, balancing the needs of highly engaged, proficient students with the ethical imperative to safeguard the dignity and progress of those struggling. Consequently, the adoption of elastic tasks becomes a necessity rather than a choice; it ensures that the pursuit of academic excellence for the advanced does not come at the cost of the psychological well-being or the Interlanguage journey of the less proficient.

- Focus on Emotional Architecture: Prioritize lowering the Affective Filter by creating an environment where mistakes are constructively viewed as essential linguistic data.
- Performance-Based Policy: Academic institutions should adopt outcome-based assessment models that evaluate communicative competence rather than rote memorization.
- Future Research: Investigate the empirical impact of digital interactive platforms on student engagement, and examine the long-term effects of English proficiency on local cultural identity.

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Compliance with ethical standards*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

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