



Technology-Fused English Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: From Individual Differences to Being Different Individuals

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APA Citation

Waluyo, B. (2024). Technology-fused English teaching and learning in higher education: From individual differences to being different individuals. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 17(2), 42-47.

Received
12/03/2024

Received in revised form
17/06/2024

Accepted
25/06/2024

ABSTRACT

This article explores the proficiency variance among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners based on my research findings from Indonesian and Thai universities. Key variables influencing English learning outcomes include individual differences, learning emotions, and technology integration. Fostering learner agency—encompassing intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-efficacy—is crucial. Positive emotions such as enjoyment and confidence enhance proficiency, while negative emotions like anxiety hinder it. Integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT), alongside innovative methods like flipped classrooms and gamification, significantly improves student engagement and learning outcomes. However, a gap persists between teachers' beliefs in ICT and their actual practices. This article emphasizes the need for a flexible, informed approach to EFL education that leverages technology and addresses diverse learner needs to enhance English proficiency.

Keywords: English proficiency, individual differences, learning emotions, technology integration

What Makes More and Less Proficient EFL Learners?

Understanding the factors that differentiate more and less proficient English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is a complex challenge for educators. Variability in learner proficiency often stems from individual experiences and pedagogical strategies. As EFL learners and teachers, our journeys from initial struggles to achieving proficiency and eventually teaching the language shape our identities and influence our beliefs about student success. However, recognizing that each student has unique learning modalities and objectives adds complexity to EFL instruction, necessitating tailored approaches to meet diverse classroom needs. Comparing personal experiences with empirical research and the experiences of others further enhances our understanding. My combined teaching and research experience in Thailand and Indonesia, within an outcome-based learning framework, reveals that individual differences, learning emotions, and technology use are critical variables influencing EFL proficiency. This multifaceted and context-dependent understanding calls for a flexible and informed approach to EFL education.

Outcome-Based Learning (OBL) aims to define clear, measurable outcomes for students and align curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment with these goals (Baron & Boschee, 1996). In the context of English proficiency, OBL sets specific targets for reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar, utilizing interactive and task-based methods. Continuous assessment and feedback are crucial for measuring progress, providing support, and ensuring systematic achievement of English proficiency. Integrating an understanding of Individual Differences (IDs)—enduring personal characteristics that vary among individuals—into OBL enhances its effectiveness (Dörnyei, 2006). IDs research provides insights into what drives students, how they learn best, and their unique paths to success, enabling teachers to better meet the needs of all students and help them become more proficient in English.

Students in Indonesia and Thailand encounter several significant barriers to achieving English proficiency, largely due to limited exposure to the language outside of academic settings. In these countries, English is rarely used in daily interactions, which minimizes practical opportunities for students to practice and immerse themselves in the language, especially in rural areas where access to English-language media and interactions with native speakers are notably scarce. Additionally, the quality of English education is compromised by a shortage of well-trained teachers who predominantly employ traditional, grammar-focused teaching methods rather than modern communicative techniques. Consequently, English instruction

often centers on rote memorization and the mastery of grammar rules at the expense of speaking and listening skills, which are crucial for functional language use. The educational curricula in both countries tend to be overly theoretical and focused on exam preparation, which does not adequately prepare students for real-world language application. National exams further reinforce this trend by emphasizing reading and grammar, thus incentivizing teachers to prioritize test results over communicative competence. Moreover, student motivation and confidence are severely affected by perceptions of English as a challenging subject and a fear of making mistakes, leading to reluctance in participation and practice in language classes. This fear, often rooted in a concern over ridicule, discourages active engagement and impedes language acquisition by limiting opportunities for practical use.

Drawing upon my published research findings on EFL learners from both countries, it is evident that integrating technology in English teaching and learning in higher education can significantly transform individual differences among EFL students, helping them evolve into distinct individuals with enhanced English capabilities. First, it is very important for teachers to help their students develop agency in their English learning. Agency-driven learners are those who do things because they want to, and they are actively involved in building and controlling their learning process (Ranjan et al., 2021). For learners to effectively manage their own English learning, they must develop the four core properties of human agency: intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. Research indicates that Thai EFL learners exhibit a high level of learning agency, showing they can act as planners, forethinkers, self-regulators, and self-evaluators. However, their agency for learning exhibits a weak, negative correlation with English proficiency, explaining only a small variance in outcomes (Maretha & Waluyo, 2022).

Second, it is crucial to influence learners' emotions positively. Building emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, pride, excitement, relief, and curiosity while minimizing negative emotions like anxiety, boredom, frustration, and fear can significantly impact learners' proficiency. A positive classroom social climate is a strong predictor of English proficiency (Waluyo & Tuan, 2021). Research reveals that teacher and peer support, class satisfaction, and personal pride influence foreign language enjoyment, while disengagement and extended learning duration lead to boredom, which impacts online English teaching outcomes (Apridayani & Waluyo, 2022). Additionally, research at a Thai university indicates that self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies significantly enhance online learning outcomes, whereas anxiety levels are not significant predictors (Apridayani et al., 2023). Integrating flipped and gamified learning into online courses improves student enjoyment and motivation, though it may increase anxiety. This

hybrid pedagogical model enhances listening, reading, and overall TOEFL scores but does not impact structure or written expression (Arsyad et al., 2024). Another study on Thai students highlights that self-confidence, motivation, grit, and willingness to communicate (WTC) positively correlate with speaking performance, with motivation being the sole significant predictor (Waluyo & Bakoko, 2022). Finally, the use of e-portfolios during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly improved speaking performance and self-efficacy in university students, demonstrating the importance of innovative teaching methods (Kusuma & Waluyo, 2023).

The integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into English teaching and learning is increasingly recognized as essential. However, despite widespread agreement on the necessity of ICT, my research indicates a significant gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices (Waluyo & Apridayani, 2021). Moreover, the effective use of ICT, when combined with an integrated-skills approach and formative assessment strategies derived from smart classroom and active learning concepts, has been shown to enhance students' English learning outcomes (Waluyo, 2020). Additionally, gamification applications such as Quizlet, Quizizz, and Kahoot have proven beneficial in improving vocabulary, grammar, and TOEFL skills among lower-level students (Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2022; Waluyo & Bucol, 2021; Waluyo & Tran, 2023). However, it is noteworthy that these outcomes sometimes mirror those achieved through traditional teaching methods (Panmei & Waluyo, 2022), suggesting that while ICT can be a valuable tool, its impact may vary depending on the context and implementation.

To sum up, addressing the multifaceted factors that influence English proficiency among EFL learners in higher education is crucial. Individual differences, emotional influences, and technology integration significantly impact learning outcomes. Fostering learner agency, including intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-efficacy, can transform students into active participants in their learning process, although its direct correlation with proficiency may vary. Positive emotions such as enjoyment, confidence, and curiosity, supported by a positive classroom environment, are strong predictors of proficiency, while negative emotions like anxiety and boredom hinder progress. Innovative approaches such as flipped and gamified learning, as well as the use of e-portfolios, improve student engagement and motivation, but they may also introduce challenges such as increased anxiety. Despite the recognized importance of ICT in enhancing English learning, a gap remains between teachers' beliefs and their implementation in practice. Effective integration of ICT, combined with a focus on communicative competence and formative assessment, can significantly improve learning outcomes, though its success depends on contextual factors. Therefore, a

flexible, informed approach that adapts to individual learner needs and leverages technological tools is essential for fostering English proficiency in diverse educational contexts.

About the Author

Budi Waluyo: An assistant professor at Walailak University's School of Languages and General Education, Thailand. He earned a BA from the University of Bengkulu, Indonesia, supported by scholarships from the Indonesian Ministry of Higher Education. His pursuit of education continued abroad, earning an MA at the University of Manchester, UK, with the International Fellowship Program (IFP) from the Ford Foundation, USA, and a PhD from Lehigh University, USA, under a Fulbright PhD Presidential Scholarship. Recognized as a Fellow by the UK's Higher Education Academy (FHEA), his research spans English language teaching, educational technology, and international education, contributing significantly to peer-reviewed journals and teaching and learning practices.

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