# SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES AND STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN MIXED-ABILITY EFL CLASSROOMS: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS

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**Abstract**: *Student participation in mixed-ability EFL classrooms is often hindered by differences in English proficiency and learning preferences. This study investigates the role of scaffolding strategies in supporting classroom participation from the perspectives of non-English-major students in a private university in Vietnam. Using an action research approach, data were collected through classroom observations and student surveys. The findings indicate that scaffolding provides structured support that encourages students to engage more actively in learning tasks, regardless of their proficiency levels. From the students' viewpoints, scaffolding helps reduce anxiety, build confidence, and promote interaction with peers. The study highlights the effectiveness of scaffolding in fostering inclusive learning environments and enhancing participation in mixed-ability EFL classrooms, offering practical implications for teachers working with diverse learner groups.*

**Keywords**: *EFL Classroom activities; Mixed-Ability Classes; Scaffolding; Non-English-Major Students; Student Participation.*

## 1. Introduction

Learner participation is widely recognized as a core element of communicative language classrooms, as it enables interaction, language practice, and output essential for language development (Ellis, 2006). Active participation has been shown to enhance learners' motivation, confidence, and learning outcomes (Rai, 2022). However, promoting active and equitable participation remains challenging in mixed-ability EFL classrooms due to differences in proficiency, learning readiness, and confidence. These challenges are particularly pronounced for non-English-major students, who often have limited exposure to English and lower confidence levels. As a result, participation tends to be uneven, with lower-proficiency learners becoming passive while higher-proficiency peers dominate classroom interaction (Chea & Kuon, 2024). Such patterns are especially evident in many Asian educational contexts, where cultural and affective factors may further constrain students' willingness to participate orally (Tani, 2005).

Tomlinson (1995) highlights the importance of flexible instructional design and differentiated support to meet diverse learner needs (Canh & Thuy, 2010). Within this pedagogical orientation, scaffolding—originally conceptualized by Bruner (1980)—has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for supporting learners at different proficiency levels and promoting active engagement in EFL classrooms (Chea & Kuon, 2024; Nagendra et al., 2024). However, limited empirical research has examined how scaffolding strategies are perceived by non-English-major students and how these strategies influence their classroom participation in mixed-ability EFL contexts, particularly in Vietnamese higher education. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to evaluate scaffolding strategies used at a private university in Vietnam to find out the benefits that these approaches bring to students' participation in mixed-ability EFL classrooms under students' perspectives.

## 2. Research overview

### *2.1. Student participation and mixed-ability in EFL contexts*

Mixed-ability classes, characterized by differences in learners' language proficiency, learning styles, pace of learning, and background

knowledge, have drawn increasing attention from educators and researchers, particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction (Heng et al., 2023; Tice, 1997). According to Valentic (2005), variations in proficiency levels within EFL classrooms are reflected in learners' grammatical knowledge, fluency, accuracy, vocabulary range, and both receptive and productive language skills. Beyond linguistic competence, learners also differ in age, motivation, cognitive ability, self-discipline, literacy skills, attitudes, and personal interests (Hess, 2001). In addition, mixed-ability classes are frequently described as multi-level or heterogeneous classrooms, as achieving complete homogeneity is rarely possible in real educational contexts (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Al-Subaiei, 2017; Chea & Kuon, 2024). Even when students are grouped based on specific criteria, creating entirely homogeneous classes remains unrealistic (Çopur, 2005). This inherent diversity poses significant challenges for teachers' instructional decision-making and classroom management (Chea & Kuon, 2024; Hasa, 2023; Ur, 1996).

Student participation has been conceptualized as varying degrees of engagement, ranging from active involvement to minimal participation or silence, and encompassing both on-task and off-task behaviours (Peacock, 1997; Abdullah et al., 2012). Participation may be expressed through verbal behaviours, such as speaking and asking questions (Lee, 2005), as well as non-verbal behaviours, including body language, eye contact, and temporal aspects of interaction such as pausing or waiting (Darn, 2005). Extensive research suggests that active participation plays a critical role in language development and learning outcomes by increasing learners' interaction with teachers, peers, and instructional materials (Abdullah et al., 2012; Rai, 2022).

Participation in mixed-ability classrooms is shaped by a range of learner-related and contextual factors (Abdullah et al., 2012). Learners with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to participate actively (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995), whereas those with low confidence or insufficient preparation tend to remain passive (Fassinger, 1995; Gomez et al., 1995; Mustapha et al., 2010). Additionally, large class sizes often limit opportunities for meaningful interaction and individualized support, further complicating instructional practices in EFL contexts (Em, 2022; Heng et al., 2023).

Student participation is considered one of the most salient challenges in mixed-ability EFL classrooms, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who often lack the confidence to engage actively in classroom activities (Kolaj, 2022). Differences in language proficiency, prior learning experiences, and interest levels may lead to boredom among more advanced students and confusion among less proficient learners, thereby reducing overall classroom engagement (Ur, 1996). Over time, these disparities can widen the gap between fast and slow learners and negatively affect patterns of classroom interaction (McDermott & Zerr, 2019).

As a result, these participation-related challenges highlight the necessity of instructional approaches that address learner diversity and foster inclusive engagement. Within this context, scaffolding strategies have increasingly been recognized as a pedagogically appropriate means of supporting learners and managing mixed-ability classrooms in English language teaching (Nagendra et al., 2024).

### *2.2. Scaffolding strategies used in mixed-ability classes*

The concept of scaffolding, originally introduced by Bruner (1980) and grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, has been widely examined in second and foreign language education (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003; DelliCarpini, 2006; Gibbons, 2002, 2003; Ko et al., 2003). Drawing on its architectural metaphor, scaffolding refers to a temporary support structure that facilitates learning until learners are able to perform tasks independently, after which the support is gradually withdrawn (Kim & Kim, 2005). In educational contexts, scaffolding encompasses instructional assistance—such as modelling, prompting, and guided practice—that supports learners in acquiring new knowledge or skills and promotes autonomous learning as competence develops (Gibbons, 2002).

Scaffolding is inherently interactive and dialogic in nature, involving the adjustment of input, negotiation of meaning, feedback provision, and emotional support to enhance learning (Walqui & van Lier, 2010). Van Der Stuyf (2002) conceptualizes scaffolding as a process that nurtures learners' cognitive development through activities such as summarizing, questioning, and clarifying. These forms of interaction play a crucial role in skill development by enabling learners to construct knowledge through the integration of language use and experience (van de Pol et al., 2010).

In mixed-ability classrooms, scaffolding strategies are particularly valuable because they address learners' diverse needs and proficiency levels. Based on previous studies (Chea & Kuon, 2024; Heydarnejad et al., 2022), commonly employed scaffolding components include motivation, which enhances learners' willingness to engage in learning tasks (Bon et al., 2022; Em & Khampirat, 2024; Sor et al., 2022); comprehensible input, which supports understanding through accessible and meaningful language use (Krashen, 1982); and interaction, which helps clarify linguistic forms and prevent misunderstanding (Long, 1983). Feedback is also essential, as it encourages reflection and self-regulation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), while negotiation of meaning supports deeper comprehension by addressing gaps in understanding (Ellis, 2021).

Additionally, scaffolding techniques include collaboration, which promotes peer support and shared meaning-making (Johnson & Johnson, 2018); provision of clues that guide learners toward solutions without removing cognitive challenge (Gibbons, 2015); modelling, whereby teachers demonstrate target skills for learners to emulate (Bandura, 2018); and questioning strategies that stimulate active cognitive and linguistic engagement (Chin, 2006). The use of varied teaching materials—such as word cards, visual organizers, and audio resources—also plays an important role in scaffolding learning activities effectively (Tomlinson, 2012).

Overall, scaffolding functions as an effective instructional strategy in mixed-ability EFL classrooms by enabling teachers and more capable peers to support learners who require additional assistance. Through structured support and gradual withdrawal, scaffolding fosters meaningful interaction, promotes learner participation, and facilitates more inclusive classroom engagement (Canh & Thuy, 2010).

In this study, modelling (Bandura, 2018) and collaboration (Johnson & Johnson, 2018) were selected as the two primary scaffolding strategies implemented during the action stage. Modelling was implemented first to provide learners—particularly non-English-major students with lower proficiency and confidence—with clear examples of task expectations, language use, and performance standards. This initial support was intended to reduce uncertainty and cognitive overload, thereby lowering affective barriers to participation. Subsequently, collaborative activities were introduced to enable students to apply the modelled language and strategies through peer interaction. This sequencing aligns with sociocultural perspectives on learning, in which guided demonstration precedes shared meaning-making and gradual independence (Gibbons, 2015; Johnson & Johnson, 2018). By combining teacher-led modelling with peer-supported collaboration, the study aimed to create a scaffolded learning pathway that progressively fostered student participation and engagement in mixed-ability EFL classrooms.

## 3. Research methods

This study adopted an action research design, adapting the framework proposed by Somekh (2006), and involved thirty-one second-year students majoring in law and accountancy at Thanh Do University. Quantitative data were collected across three stages: pre-action, during-action, and post-action. The process of data generation was summarized as below:

**Table 1. Data collection procedure**

| Stages | Data instruments |
|---|---|
| **Pre-action:** Need analysis | Questionnaire (S)<br>The final results of the previous English course (S)<br>Observations (R & T) |
| **During-action:** Scaffolding | Observations (R & T) |

| | |
|---|---|
| strategies implementation | |
| **Post-action:** Reflection | Questionnaire (S) |

According to table 1, the students' English proficiency levels were identified through the final results of the previous English course

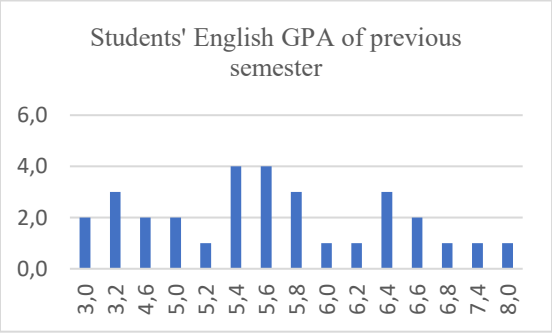
In this study, classroom observations were conducted both before and during the action stage using an observation sheet adapted from Peacock (1997). The observations were carried out by the teacher and the researcher to collect quantitative data on students' on-task behaviour in English classroom activities. In addition, questionnaires were administered at two points: prior to the action stage and at the end of the action stage. All questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932). The initial questions aimed to identify the students' perception of their level of participation in English classroom activities and find out the main causes of the problem, while the post questions examine the effectiveness of using the suggested teaching method in English lessons of a mixed ability class.

After being collected, data were analyzed by SPSS 21.0 to find out the effects of scaffolding strategies on students.

## 4. Research results

Descriptive statistical analysis of GPA results from the previous English course revealed clear variations in students' English proficiency levels.

**Figure 1. Current students' English level (according to previous semester's English GPA)**




GPA scores range widely from approximately 3.0 to 8.0, indicating a clear mixed-ability cohort. The largest proportion of student's cluster in the mid-range between 5.0 and 6.4, with noticeable peaks around 5.4 and 5.6, suggesting an average level of proficiency for most learners. In contrast, relatively few students achieve high GPAs above 7.0, while a smaller group records lower scores below 4.0. This uneven distribution highlights significant proficiency gaps among students and underscores the instructional challenges of addressing diverse learning needs within the same EFL classroom.

### *4.1. Student's current attitude and participation in classroom activities*

First, students demonstrate a strong awareness of the importance of English. The item "Learning English is very important" records a mean score of 4.00, with both the median and mode at 4, and a maximum value of 5. The relatively low standard deviation (SD ≈ 0.93) indicates a high level of consensus among students regarding the significance of English in their academic and professional lives.

**Table 2. The importance of learning English**

| | |
|---|---|
| Mean | 4 |
| Standard Error | 0.167203 |
| Median | 4 |
| Mode | 4 |
| Standard Deviation | 0.930949 |
| Sample Variance | 0.866667 |
| Kurtosis | 2.638674 |
| Skewness | -1.32491 |
| Range | 4 |
| Minimum | 1 |
| Maximum | 5 |
| Sum | 124 |
| Count | 31 |
| Largest (1) | 5 |
| Smallest (1) | 1 |
| Confidence Level (95.0%) | 0.341475 |

However, instead of high awareness of the importance of learning English, students presented low level of participation in English classroom activities.

**Table 3. Students' self-evaluation of their participation**

| | |
|---|---|
| Mean | 1.741935 |
| Standard Error | 0.173315 |
| Median | 1 |
| Mode | 1 |
| Standard Deviation | 0.964978 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Sample Variance | 0.931183 |
| Kurtosis | -0.05155 |
| Skewness | 1.037366 |
| Range | 3 |
| Minimum | 1 |
| Maximum | 4 |
| Sum | 54 |
| Count | 31 |
| Largest (1) | 4 |
| Smallest (1) | 1 |
| Confidence Level (95.0%) | 0.353957 |

According to the descriptive statistics, the mean score is 1.74, with both the median and mode equal to 1, suggesting that most students perceive their participation at the lowest level of the scale. The standard deviation (0.96) shows moderate variation, indicating that while participation is mostly low, a small number of students report higher engagement. This is reflected in the range from 1 to 4, with a maximum value of 4. The positive skewness (1.04) suggests that responses are clustered toward lower participation levels. With 31 participants and a 95% confidence interval of ±0.35, the findings consistently point to low student participation.

Similarly, data from observations using observation sheet adapted from Peacock (1997) by teacher and researcher reveal a stable pattern of student participation, though sustained on-task behavior remained limited for many learners.

**Table 4. Students' on-task behaviour through observations**

| No of times students were on-task | Number of students ( Total: 31) | |
|---|---|---|
| | Lesson 2 | Lesson 3 |
| 11 times | 1 | |
| 10 times | 1 | 1 |
| 9 times | 2 | 2 |
| 8 times | 0 | 2 |
| 7 times | 4 | 0 |
| 6 times | 3 | 4 |
| 5 times | 3 | 7 |
| 4 times | 3 | 7 |
| 3 times | 8 | 3 |
| Twice | 4 | 3 |
| Once | 2 | 2 |
| Percentage | 34.76% | 35.24% |

As shown in Table 3, students demonstrated varying levels of on-task engagement across the two lessons. In Lesson 2, the highest frequencies of on-task behaviour were observed at three times (8 students) and seven times (4 students). Similarly, in Lesson 3, the most common frequencies were five times (7 students) and four times (7 students). Only a small number of students maintained consistently high on-task behaviour, with one student recorded at 11 times in each lesson.

The table presents students' self-reported perceptions of affective factors influencing participation in English classroom activities.

| Content of questions | Number of students (Total: 31) | | | | | *1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = neither disagree nor agree 4 = agree 5 = strongly agree* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| I am shy to participate in English classroom activities. | 0 | 8 | 15 | 6 | 2 | |
| I am afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by others. | 1 | 7 | 15 | 6 | 2 | |

**Table 5. Students' Self-Reported Participation Barriers**

The data reveals most students (15 out of 31) selected a neutral response, indicating ambivalence towards shyness in participation and fear of making mistakes. A smaller group expressed agreement or strong agreement (suggesting some level of apprehension. These findings highlight a need for strategies to reduce anxiety and promote confidence in classroom activities.

Moreover, students' learning preferences were also investigated in the table below:

**Table 6. Students' learning preferences**

| | *Individual work* | *Pair work or small group work* | *Groups with the same English level* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 3.064516129 | 3.225806452 | 3.225806452 |
| Standard Error | 0.153353088 | 0.151761538 | 0.136859377 |
| Median | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Mode | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Standard Deviation | 0.853833859 | 0.844972482 | 0.762000762 |
| Sample Variance | 0.729032258 | 0.713978495 | 0.580645161 |
| Kurtosis | -0.03545957 | 0.992865759 | 0.468685763 |
| Skewness | 0.558610589 | -0.110258936 | 0.551079989 |
| Range | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Minimum | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Maximum | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Sum | 95 | 100 | 100 |
| Count | 31 | 31 | 31 |
| Largest (1) | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Smallest (1) | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Confidence Level (95.0%) | 0.313188788 | 0.309938408 | 0.279504136 |

Both pair/small group work and same-level grouping recorded a mean score of 3.23, exceeding that of individual work (M = 3.06). This suggests a generally positive inclination toward interactive learning environments. The median and mode values of 3 across all formats indicate that most students selected a neutral-to-positive response.

Notably, groups with the same English level exhibited the lowest standard deviation (SD = 0.76), reflecting greater consensus among students regarding this learning arrangement. In contrast, pair or small group work showed a wider response spread (Range = 4; Minimum = 1), suggesting more varied perceptions.

Overall, the findings suggest that while no single learning style is overwhelmingly preferred, students tend to feel more comfortable and consistent in collaborative settings, especially when grouped with peers of similar proficiency. These patterns point to the relevance of instructional support, such as scaffolding, in facilitating participation and sustaining engagement in mixed-ability EFL classrooms.

### *4.2. Student's participation in classroom activities with the help of scaffolding strategies*

Quantitative data on students' classroom participation were collected through systematic classroom observations conducted during the implementation of scaffolding strategies and an online survey administered in the final week of the semester. The data were analyzed primarily using descriptive statistics to summarize patterns and changes in students' participation levels across stages.

**Table 7. Students' self-evaluation of participation while scaffolding strategies were implemented**

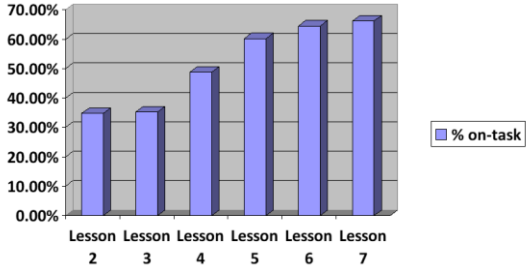
| No of times students were on-task | Number of students ( Total: 31) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lesson 4 | Lesson 5 | Lesson 6 | Lesson 7 |
| 12 times | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 11 times | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10 times | 9 | 10 | 11 | 13 |
| 9 times | 2 | 4 | 6 | 6 |
| 8 times | 7 | 4 | 4 | 3 |
| 7 times | 0 | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| 6 times | 5 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 5 times | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 times | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 times | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Twice | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Once | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Percentage | 48.81% | 60.20% | 64.52% | 66.19% |

Firstly, classroom observation data illustrate the frequency of students' participation during the action stage, revealing a clear upward trend in on-task participation across Lessons 4 to 7.

Table 7 shows the percentage of on-task behaviour in lesson 4 was 48.81%, with most students being on-task 10 times (9 students) or fewer, and no students reaching 11 or 12 times. In lesson, on-task participation increased to 60.20%, accompanied by a rise in higher-frequency engagement. Specifically, 10 students were on-task 10 times, and 2 students reached 11 times. This trend continued in Lesson 6, where the percentage further increased to 64.52%, and the number of students on-task 10 times or more rose to 15 (11 students at 10 times and 3 at 11 times, 1 at 12 times). By Lesson 7, on-task behaviour reached its highest level at 66.19%. A substantial proportion of students demonstrated sustained engagement, with 13 students recorded at 10 times, 4 at 11 times, and 2 at 12 times. Concurrently, the number of students with low participation (five times or fewer) decreased markedly.

In comparison with the pre-action stage, it can be easily seen that the level of students' participation obviously increased when scaffolding strategies were implemented (see Figure2).

**Figure 2. Students' participation between pre-action stage (Lesson2-3) and action stage (Lesson 4-7) through observation**




The chart illustrates a clear difference in students' on-task participation between Lessons 2–3 (Pre-action stage) and Lessons 4–7 (During-action stage). In the initial stage (Lessons 2 and 3), the proportion of on-task behaviour remained relatively low and stable, at approximately 34.76% and 35.24, indicating limited student engagement. By contrast, during the action stage (Lessons 4–7), a steady and marked increase in on-

task participation was observed. The percentage rose to 48.81% in Lesson 4, 60.20% in Lesson 5, 64.52% in Lesson 6, and reached 66.19% in Lesson 7. Overall, the data demonstrate a substantial improvement in student engagement during Lessons 4–7 compared to Lessons 2–3, suggesting that the instructional intervention implemented in the action stage was associated with enhanced classroom participation.

Secondly, findings from the online survey conducted in the final week of the semester provide additional evidence of students' participation, as reflected in the descriptive statistics presented in Table 8.

**Table 8. Students' self-evaluation of participation level (action stage)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Mean | 2.483870968 |
| Standard Error | 0.121557701 |
| Median | 3 |
| Mode | 3 |
| Standard Deviation | 0.676804637 |
| Sample Variance | 0.458064516 |
| Kurtosis | -0.147983579 |
| Skewness | -0.972343294 |

The descriptive statistics indicate a moderate level of student participation. The mean score of 2.48 suggests that, on average, students rated their participation slightly below the midpoint of the scale, while both the median and mode at 3 show that most students perceived their participation as moderate. The standard deviation (SD = 0.68) reflects relatively low variability, indicating fairly consistent responses among students.

The negative skewness (–0.97) suggests that responses were concentrated toward the higher end of the scale, with fewer students reporting very low participation. Meanwhile, the kurtosis value (–0.15) indicates a relatively flat distribution, implying no extreme concentration around the mean. Overall, the data suggest generally stable and moderately positive self-perceptions of participation, with a tendency toward average-to-higher engagement rather than very low involvement.

As a result, compared with the pre-action stage, students' classroom participation showed a modest improvement during the action stage, as reflected in the subsequent quantitative results

**Table 9. Students' self-evaluation of participation level (pre-action and action stage)**

| | *Students' participation in Pre-action stage* | *Students' participation in Action stage* |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | 1.741935484 | 2.483870968 |
| Standard Error | 0.173315189 | 0.121557701 |
| Median | 1 | 3 |
| Mode | 1 | 3 |
| Standard Deviation | 0.964978132 | 0.676804637 |

The descriptive statistics indicate a noticeable improvement in students' participation from the pre-action stage to the action stage. The mean participation score increased from 1.74 before the intervention to 2.48 after the intervention, suggesting a higher overall level of student engagement during the action stage.

In addition, the standard deviation decreased from 0.96 in the pre-action stage to 0.68 in the action stage. This reduction indicates that students' participation levels became more consistent following the implementation of the intervention, with less variation among students.

Overall, the data suggest a gradual but meaningful improvement in students' participation in classroom activities following the implementation of scaffolding strategies.

Moreover, data from the questionnaire also shed light on students' evaluation of the scaffolding strategies used during the action stage. The results of questionnaire show that students generally perceived scaffolding strategies as supportive in encouraging them to complete classroom activities.

**Table 10. Students' self-evaluation of scaffolding strategies used in action stage**

| | |
|---|---|
| Mean | 3.25806452 |
| Standard Error | 0.20196743 |
| Median | 3 |
| Mode | 3 |
| Standard Deviation | 1.12450706 |
| Sample Variance | 1.26451613 |
| Kurtosis | 0.32469025 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Skewness | -0.5488369 |
| Range | 4 |
| Minimum | 1 |
| Maximum | 5 |
| Sum | 101 |
| Count | 31 |
| Largest (1) | 5 |
| Smallest (1) | 1 |
| Confidence Level (95.0%) | 0.41247252 |

According to table 8, the mean score was 3.26 (SD = 1.12), indicating a moderately positive evaluation, with responses tending slightly toward agreement. Both the median and mode were 3, suggesting that most students selected a neutral-to-agree option on the scale.

The range of responses extended from 1 to 5, reflecting noticeable individual differences in perceptions of scaffolding effectiveness. The negative skewness (–0.55) indicates that responses were somewhat concentrated toward the higher end of the scale, meaning more students reported positive rather than negative views. The kurtosis value (0.32) suggests a relatively normal distribution without extreme clustering.

With a sample size of 31 and a 95% confidence interval of ±0.41, the results consistently suggest that scaffolding strategies played a meaningful role in motivating students to engage with and complete classroom tasks, though the degree of perceived support varied among learners.

**5. Discussion**

The findings of this study provide important insights into the relationship between mixed-ability classrooms, students' affective factors, learning preferences, and the role of scaffolding strategies in enhancing classroom participation among non-English-major students.

First, the analysis of students' English GPA from the previous semester confirms that the research context is clearly characterized by mixed proficiency levels. The wide GPA range (from approximately 3.0 to 8.0), together with the concentration of students in the mid-range, highlights substantial proficiency gaps within the same classroom. This uneven distribution supports previous studies suggesting that mixed-ability EFL classrooms pose significant instructional challenges, particularly in terms of ensuring equitable participation and engagement (Ur, 1996; Chea & Kuon, 2024).

Despite students' high awareness of the importance of English, as evidenced by the strong agreement on the value of learning English (M = 4.00), their actual classroom participation remained low in the pre-action stage. Both self-reported data (M = 1.74) and observation results consistently indicate limited engagement. This mismatch between positive attitudes toward English and low participation aligns with earlier research emphasizing the role of affective barriers—such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence—in inhibiting active classroom involvement (Fassinger, 1995; Tani, 2005). The findings from Table 4 further reinforce this interpretation, as many students reported shyness and concern about negative peer evaluation, which likely contributed to passive classroom behaviours observed in Lesson 2 and 3.

In addition, students' learning preference data suggest that collaborative learning contexts, particularly grouping students with peers of similar proficiency, are perceived as more comfortable and consistent than individual work. Although no learning format was overwhelmingly preferred, the lower variability observed in same-level grouping indicates a sense of psychological safety and reduced pressure. This finding supports sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the importance of supportive peer interaction in lowering affective filters and facilitating participation, especially for lower-proficiency learners.

Most notably, the implementation of scaffolding strategies during the action stage was associated with a gradual and sustained improvement in classroom participation. Observation data reveal a clear upward trend in on-task behaviour from Lesson 4 to Lesson 7, with participation increasing from 48.81% to 66.19%. This improvement was not abrupt but progressive, suggesting that students required time to adapt to scaffolded instructional support. Importantly, the decrease in low-frequency participation and the increase in sustained engagement indicate that scaffolding helped students remain involved for longer periods during classroom activities.

Self-evaluation data collected at the end of the action stage further corroborate these findings. While participation levels did not reach a high level, the increase in mean scores (from 1.74 to 2.48) and the shift in skewness from positive to negative suggest that more students moved away from minimal participation toward moderate engagement. This distributional change implies that scaffolding strategies may have been particularly effective in supporting previously passive learners rather than only benefiting already active students.

Overall, the findings suggest that scaffolding strategies functioned as an effective mediating mechanism between learner diversity and classroom participation. By providing structured support, reducing affective barriers, and aligning with students' collaborative learning preferences, scaffolding contributed to a more inclusive learning environment in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. Although the observed improvements were modest, they are pedagogically meaningful, especially within the context of non-English-major students who typically exhibit low confidence and limited willingness to participate. These results reinforce existing literature on scaffolding as a gradual, supportive process, in which instructional assistance is provided and withdrawn over time, rather than producing immediate effects (Gibbons, 2002; Van de Pol et al., 2010), and highlight its practical value in promoting student participation in mixed-ability EFL contexts.

**6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study examined the relationship between scaffolding strategies and student participation in mixed-ability EFL classrooms from the perspectives of non-English-major students. The findings indicate that although students demonstrated a strong awareness of the importance of English, their initial level of classroom participation was relatively low, largely influenced by proficiency differences, affective barriers, and varied learning preferences. These results reaffirm the challenges of fostering equitable participation in mixed-ability EFL contexts. Following the implementation of scaffolding strategies, both observational data and students' self-evaluations revealed a gradual improvement in classroom participation. Although the increase was modest, the consistent upward trend in on-task behaviour and the shift toward more moderate participation levels suggest that scaffolding provided meaningful instructional support. Notably, students perceived scaffolding as helpful in facilitating task completion and reducing participation-related anxiety, particularly when instructional support aligned with collaborative and same-level learning arrangements.

However, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was conducted with a relatively small sample size within a single institutional context, which may limit the generalizability of the results. In addition, the duration of the action stage was relatively short, preventing an examination of the long-term effects of scaffolding on student participation. Therefore, ffuture research could extend this investigation by involving larger and more diverse student populations, adopting longitudinal designs, or examining the differential impact of specific scaffolding techniques on various dimensions of learner engagement and language development.

Nevertheless, the study reinforces the view of scaffolding as a gradual, adaptive instructional process rather than an immediate solution. By mediating learner diversity and classroom demands, scaffolding can create more inclusive learning conditions that support participation in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. These findings offer pedagogical implications for EFL teachers working with non-English-major students and suggest directions for further research on the long-term impact of scaffolding on learner engagement and autonomy.

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# SCAFFOLDING VÀ MỨC ĐỘ THAM GIA CỦA SINH VIÊN KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH ĐA TRÌNH ĐỘ: GÓC NHÌN CỦA SINH VIÊN

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**Tóm tắt:** *Trong các lớp học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) đa trình độ, sự tham gia của sinh viên thường chịu tác động từ sự khác biệt về năng lực ngôn ngữ và phong cách học tập. Nghiên cứu này phân tích vai trò của các chiến lược scaffolding trong việc hỗ trợ và thúc đẩy sự tham gia trên lớp, từ góc nhìn của sinh viên không chuyên ngữ tại một trường đại học tư thục ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu được triển khai theo phương pháp nghiên cứu hành động, với dữ liệu thu thập thông qua quan sát lớp học và khảo sát sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy việc áp dụng scaffolding tạo ra sự hỗ trợ mang tính hệ thống, góp phần nâng cao mức độ tham gia của sinh viên vào các hoạt động học tập, bất kể sự khác biệt về trình độ tiếng Anh. Dưới góc nhìn của người học, các chiến lược này giúp giảm bớt rào cản tâm lý, tăng cường sự tự tin và thúc đẩy tương tác giữa các sinh viên. Những phát hiện này khẳng định vai trò của scaffolding trong việc xây dựng môi trường học tập mang tính hòa nhập và nâng cao sự tham gia của sinh viên trong các lớp EFL đa trình độ, đồng thời cung cấp cơ sở thực tiễn cho việc lựa chọn và vận dụng các chiến lược giảng dạy phù hợp với nhóm người học đa dạng*

**Từ khóa:** *Hoạt động lớp học EFL; Lớp học đa trình độ; Scaffolding; Sinh viên không chuyên ngữ; Sự tham gia của sinh viên.*