

Meeting Students' Needs Through Effective ESL Classroom Activities: A Case Study Involving a Portuguese-Speaking Learner

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Abstract

Effective English language instruction necessitates a nuanced understanding of learners' individual profiles, particularly in increasingly diverse multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Learners bring with them distinct linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, and cognitive preferences, all of which shape how they acquire a second language. This study explores the extent to which learner-centered instructional strategies can support language development for a Portuguese-speaking English as a Second Language (ESL) student. The research was conducted as part of a CELTA training program in London and employs a qualitative case study approach. Over the course of five weeks, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, diagnostic assessments, and targeted interventions. The focal participant, a 37-year-old Brazilian mathematics teacher, presented with a range of linguistic challenges, including verb pattern misuse, pronunciation difficulties related to vowel length and consonant articulation, and limited lexical variety. These challenges were analyzed in the context of first language (L1) interference, as documented in literature on Portuguese-speaking learners. Based on the diagnostic findings, a series of tailored classroom activities was designed to address the learner's specific grammatical, lexical, and phonological needs. The findings reveal that personalized instruction grounded in the learner's background and communicative needs led to observable improvements in language performance. Post-intervention assessments indicated enhanced grammatical accuracy, more precise pronunciation, and an expanded vocabulary range. Additionally, the learner demonstrated increased confidence and participation in classroom interactions, suggesting gains in communicative competence and language self-efficacy. The study contributes to the broader discourse on differentiated instruction in ESL contexts and affirms the importance of needs analysis and individualized pedagogy in promoting effective language acquisition.

Keywords: ESL instruction, learner needs analysis, individual differences, second language acquisition, Portuguese-speaking learners, classroom strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction necessitates a nuanced understanding of the individual characteristics of learners, including but not limited to their linguistic and educational background, cognitive learning styles, levels of motivation, and specific linguistic needs. Language learning is not a single process; rather, it involves the dynamic interaction of cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors that influence how a student acquires and uses a new language. Learners are not simply absorbing a new system of vocabulary and grammar—they are simultaneously navigating a novel cultural context and reshaping their communicative identity.

In this regard, pedagogical approaches grounded in learner-centered methodologies are paramount. Instructional strategies must be tailored to the learner's background and preferences, creating a supportive environment that fosters both linguistic competence and intercultural awareness. Recognizing the unique profiles of learners enables educators to implement activities that are not only meaningful and relevant, but also motivational.

The present study examines how systematic identification of learner needs and targeted instructional responses can promote measurable language development in an ESL context. The focal point of this research is a case study involving a Portuguese-speaking learner whose specific language difficulties—shaped by first-language interference and individual learning preferences—were addressed through a series of customized classroom interventions.

The primary research inquiry guiding this study is: *How can learner-centered instructional strategies improve the language skills of a Portuguese-speaking ESL student within a short-term instructional period?* The following section elaborates on the specific research questions and objectives that underpin this investigation.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study was guided by two central research questions designed to explore both the nature of the learner's difficulties and the effectiveness of tailored pedagogical interventions. First, the study sought to investigate the specific linguistic challenges encountered by a Portuguese-speaking ESL learner, with a focus on how her first language (L1) influenced her acquisition of English. Second, it aimed to evaluate the impact of targeted instructional activities in addressing those challenges and improving the learner's overall language performance.

In line with these research questions, the study pursued the following objectives:

To conduct a detailed analysis of the learner's language production in order to identify recurring error patterns in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation that could be attributed to L1 interference.

To design and implement a series of instructional strategies and classroom activities specifically tailored to the learner's linguistic profile, needs, and learning preferences.

To assess the effectiveness of these interventions by measuring short-term gains in the learner's grammatical accuracy, lexical development, and pronunciation through both formative and summative evaluations.

Together, these objectives provided a structured framework for addressing the study's central aim: to examine how individualized, needs-based instruction can support more effective language learning in an ESL context.

1.3 Limitations

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights into needs-based ESL instruction, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the duration of the intervention—limited to five weeks—may constrain the depth and sustainability of the observed linguistic improvements. Language acquisition is an inherently gradual process, and longer-term studies may yield more comprehensive outcomes.

Second, the study focuses on a single learner, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Although the qualitative case study design enables in-

depth exploration, future research involving larger, more diverse participant samples would enhance the external validity of the findings.

Finally, the absence of a control group limits the ability to attribute observed gains exclusively to the instructional interventions. While qualitative data supports the effectiveness of the strategies employed, additional empirical controls would strengthen causal inferences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is informed by key theories in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that highlight the importance of individualized and contextually grounded instruction in supporting learner development. Central to this framework is Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language most effectively when they are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency, (Krashen, 1985). According to Krashen, this input must also be meaningful and contextualized, underscoring the need for instructional materials that are both accessible and sufficiently challenging to stimulate development.

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory further supports this view by emphasizing the inherently social nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) argues that cognitive development is mediated through interaction within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where assistance—referred to as scaffolding—from teachers or more capable peers enables the learner to accomplish tasks they could not complete independently. This theory justifies the integration of guided practice and collaborative learning in ESL instruction.

Complementing these perspectives, Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis suggests that conscious attention to linguistic features is a prerequisite for language acquisition. According to Schmidt, learners must actively notice grammatical forms, vocabulary usage, and phonological distinctions in order to internalize them and incorporate them into their interlanguage systems.

Further theoretical support comes from research on individual learner differences. Dörnyei (2005) explores how variables such as motivation, aptitude, and personality significantly impact the success of second language acquisition. Similarly, Ellis (2004) highlights the role of age, cognitive styles, and learning strategies in shaping language development. These studies collectively argue for differentiated instruction that accounts for learner variability in order to maximize engagement and effectiveness.

The role of the learner’s first language (L1) is also critical in shaping ESL performance, particularly in relation to error patterns and language transfer. Lado’s (1957) contrastive analysis hypothesis asserts that many of the difficulties learners face in acquiring a second language can be predicted by analyzing differences between the L1 and the target language. This is especially relevant to the present study, which focuses on a Portuguese-speaking learner. As Swan and Smith (2001) note, Portuguese speakers often exhibit specific difficulties with English pronunciation, such as the shortening of long vowels, misplacement of word stress, and freer syntactic constructions, all of which can lead to persistent errors (p. 121).

In addition to linguistic theories, curriculum design literature highlights the importance of needs analysis and instructional differentiation. Brown (1995) emphasizes that a well-designed language curriculum should begin with a systematic assessment of learners’ needs, preferences, and proficiency gaps. This process allows educators to create targeted instructional plans that address specific learner profiles. Tailored instruction,

when grounded in diagnostic analysis, is particularly effective in mixed-level or multicultural ESL classrooms.

Harmer (2007) reinforces these ideas by cautioning against a one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching. He underscores that learners differ not only in terms of proficiency and age but also in cognitive and motivational characteristics. Effective ESL instruction, therefore, must be flexible, learner-centered, and responsive to individual needs.

Collectively, these theoretical and empirical perspectives support the pedagogical approach adopted in this study. They justify the emphasis on needs-based, individualized instruction as a means to improve specific areas of linguistic performance—particularly in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary—for learners influenced by their L1 background and shaped by their unique learning histories.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study design within the framework of experiential action research. The research was conducted during a CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) training program in London and focuses on a single participant—a 37-year-old female Portuguese-speaking ESL learner from Brazil, referred to here as the student. The aim was to identify her specific linguistic needs and implement targeted instructional strategies to support her English language development.

3.1 Data Collection Procedures

Three primary instruments were employed for data collection:

Semi-structured Interviews: These were conducted to gather detailed information about the learner's linguistic background, educational history, learning preferences, and motivation for studying English. The open-ended format allowed for in-depth exploration of the learner's self-perceived strengths and challenges.

Classroom Observations: The participant was observed over a five-week period during regular CELTA course sessions. Observations focused on identifying language strengths and weaknesses across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), as well as patterns of interaction, task engagement, and error types. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the observation phase.

Experimentation and Testing: Based on diagnostic observations, individualized instructional activities were designed to address the learner's areas of difficulty. Formative assessments were embedded within classroom tasks to monitor progress. Additionally, a pre-test was administered at the beginning of the instructional period, and a post-test was conducted at the end to evaluate measurable improvement in key language domains.

3.2 Data Analysis Approach

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic coding. Error types were categorized into grammatical, lexical, and phonological domains. Interview transcripts and observation notes were examined for recurring patterns and learner behaviors. Comparisons between the pre- and post-intervention assessments provided insights into the effectiveness of the targeted instruction and the learner's developmental trajectory.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from the participant, who was fully briefed on the aims and procedures of the study. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, all identifying information was anonymized. The participant's data were used solely for academic purposes and with her permission.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Learner Profile: Data from Interviews

The participant in this case study is the student, a 37-year-old mathematics teacher from São Paulo, Brazil. Her native language is Portuguese, and she holds a university degree in Mathematics. Although she began studying English in high school and continued throughout her university years, her exposure to English had been limited prior to her relocation to London.

The student's motivation for improving her English is both professional and practical. She is preparing to return to her teaching role in a bilingual school in Brazil, where she will be required to teach mathematics in English. Additionally, since she is currently living in London, the ability to communicate effectively in English is essential for her day-to-day interactions.

Regarding her learning preferences, the student reported a strong interest in engaging activities that integrate multiple language skills. She expressed a preference for writing tasks, as well as group discussions and pair work, and believes that classroom learning should include enjoyable and dynamic activities. She enjoys exercises that combine listening, reading, and writing skills and values tasks that are relevant to her personal and professional life.

4.2 Language Skills Assessment: Data from Observations

Reading Skills

The student demonstrated competence in reading activities that required skimming and scanning. She was attentive during lessons and able to identify main ideas and key details effectively. However, she experienced difficulty with intensive reading tasks that required close analysis and inference. Lexical limitations occasionally hindered her comprehension of unfamiliar words, although she showed partial ability to deduce meanings from context. She favored activities such as matching, synonym recognition, and summarizing.

Listening Skills

During the interview and classroom observations, the student was generally able to understand spoken English, provided it was delivered at a moderate pace. When the pace increased or sentence structures became more complex, her comprehension declined. She benefited from rephrasing and repetition. In structured listening tasks, she was particularly effective at identifying the gist of conversations but struggled with detailed comprehension. Her performance suggested a need for more exposure to authentic spoken English and interactive listening practice.

Writing Skills

the student's writing reflected a good command of basic sentence structure and word order. She was capable of constructing short, grammatically correct sentences using familiar vocabulary. She occasionally attempted more complex sentences but encountered difficulty with clause structure, verb patterns, and word formation. Her writing showed appropriate use of basic linkers (e.g., but, when) and correct punctuation,

although vocabulary range was limited. She avoided repetition but relied heavily on high-frequency words.

Speaking Skills

the student’s oral production showed promise in terms of accuracy and clarity at the sentence level. When uninterrupted, she was able to construct three or four consecutive sentences, although fluency was limited. Her speech was generally intelligible, albeit somewhat slow and hesitant during extended discourse. Pronunciation difficulties were observed, including vowel shortening (e.g., pronouncing keep with /i/ instead of /i:/) and confusion between consonant sounds such as /p/ and /b/. She also occasionally misplaced sentence stress, particularly when shifting between subject pronouns and main verbs.

4.3 Error Patterns Identified in Writing and Speech

An analysis of the learner’s written work, specifically a short assignment on the topic of travel, revealed several recurring language errors across grammatical, lexical, and phonological domains.

In terms of grammar, one of the most prominent issues was the misuse of verb patterns following verbs of preference. For example, the learner wrote “*I prefer travel with my kids*” instead of the correct form “*I prefer travelling with my kids.*” This error likely results from L1 transfer, as Portuguese does not use the -ing form in the same grammatical context (Swan & Smith, 2001). A second grammatical error was observed in the use of tense: “*I had never have a bad experience*” was used instead of “*I have never had a bad experience.*” This suggests confusion between present perfect and past perfect forms, which may stem from either inadequate instruction or structural differences between English and Portuguese tense systems.

Lexical issues were also evident. One notable example was the incorrect use of a compound structure in the phrase “*I enjoy seeingsights,*” which should have been “*I enjoy sightseeing.*” This error appears to reflect a misunderstanding of compound word formation, likely influenced by differences in noun phrase structure in Portuguese (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 122).

Phonological errors were identified during oral tasks and classroom interactions. The learner mispronounced the word reach by shortening the vowel sound, pronouncing it /ri:f/ instead of the correct /ri:ʃ/, which resulted in confusion with the word rich. This kind of vowel reduction is typical among Portuguese speakers, who often produce long English vowels as short ones. Another pronunciation difficulty was observed in the articulation of the word general, which was pronounced as /ʒeneral/ instead of /ˈdʒenərəl/, with incorrect stress placement. This reflects a common phonetic transfer where Portuguese speakers pronounce the letter g before e or i as /ʒ/, rather than the English /dʒ/ (Swan & Smith, 2001).

These error patterns provided a clear direction for targeted instructional interventions to address the learner’s specific needs.

4.4 Instructional Interventions

In response to the diagnostic assessment, a series of targeted instructional activities was designed to address the learner’s challenges in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These interventions were delivered in a personalized manner and integrated into classroom practice over multiple sessions.

To address grammatical issues, particularly the misuse of verb patterns, the learner completed controlled exercises that required the correct application of -ing forms after verbs of preference. These tasks were contextualized using familiar content drawn

from the learner’s daily life and professional background, such as writing about daily routines and teaching experiences. In addition, sentence construction activities focused on increasing grammatical accuracy and reinforcing correct tense usage.

For vocabulary development, the learner engaged in compound word formation exercises, such as combining hair and cut to form haircut. These activities were complemented by contextualized vocabulary tasks centered on relevant themes such as travel, education, and leisure, which aligned with the learner’s interests and goals.

Pronunciation work focused on improving the articulation of problematic vowel and consonant sounds. The learner participated in minimal pair drills (e.g., ship/sheep, pub/bub) and listening discrimination tasks. These were designed to increase awareness of vowel length and consonant contrasts, areas that posed persistent difficulty. Repetition and pronunciation modeling were also employed to reinforce accurate production.

All instructional activities were aligned with the learner’s preferences and were intended to be engaging, meaningful, and directly connected to real-life communicative situations. This personalized approach was crucial in fostering motivation and retention.

4.5 Post-Intervention Outcomes

Following the implementation of targeted instructional strategies, post-intervention assessments indicated marked improvement in the learner’s language performance across several key areas. In grammar, the learner demonstrated increased accuracy in using verb patterns, particularly in contexts involving verbs of preference, and showed improved control of tense usage in both written and oral tasks.

Pronunciation also improved significantly. The learner exhibited more consistent articulation of long vowels and clearer distinctions between consonants such as /p/ and /b/, and /dʒ/ and /ʒ/. While occasional errors persisted, the learner’s increased awareness of these distinctions contributed to improved intelligibility.

In terms of vocabulary, the learner expanded her lexical range, using more precise and varied vocabulary in both speech and writing. She showed increased confidence in producing compound words and demonstrated an improved ability to apply new vocabulary in appropriate contexts.

Although the learner continued to face challenges in achieving fluency and syntactic complexity, the overall gains in grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and vocabulary confirmed the effectiveness of the individualized instructional approach. Furthermore, the learner’s enhanced participation and confidence in class interactions suggest a positive shift in communicative competence and language self-efficacy.

5. DISCUSSION

This case study reinforces the importance of aligning language instruction with individual learner profiles, particularly in multilingual ESL contexts. The tailored instructional strategies developed for the participant addressed her specific linguistic difficulties—many of which stemmed from first language (L1) interference. The design of meaningful, context-driven activities resulted in measurable improvements in grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and vocabulary use, thereby validating the efficacy of needs-based instruction.

The learner-centered approach adopted in this study is consistent with established Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. For instance, Krashen’s Input Hypothesis supports the idea that comprehensible and slightly challenging input fosters acquisition when situated within relevant communicative contexts (Krashen, 1985).

Additionally, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1978) highlights the role of scaffolding and interaction in promoting development within the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development, a concept clearly reflected in the collaborative and personalized classroom practices used. Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis (1990) further underscores the value of drawing learners’ conscious attention to linguistic forms, as was achieved through explicit grammar and pronunciation instruction.

Importantly, the learner’s background as a Portuguese speaker was central to the instructional design. As noted by Swan and Smith (2001), Portuguese-speaking learners often encounter specific difficulties in English pronunciation (e.g., short/long vowel contrasts), verb pattern usage, and noun phrase construction. By directly targeting these predictable error types, the intervention capitalized on cross-linguistic insights to improve instructional precision.

The results underscore that, even within a short instructional period, carefully designed and personalized activities can facilitate meaningful progress in language development. This affirms the value of diagnostic teaching and the integration of learner analysis into ESL curriculum planning.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that a focused, learner-centered instructional approach can lead to significant improvements in English language proficiency, even over a relatively brief period. Through individualized grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation activities tailored to a Portuguese-speaking ESL learner, measurable progress was observed in both spoken and written performance.

The findings confirm that understanding a learner’s background, motivations, and specific challenges is essential for designing effective pedagogical interventions. The student’s development, particularly in grammatical control and pronunciation accuracy, supports the conclusion that a small investment in targeted instruction can yield substantial learning gains.

While the learner still faces challenges in achieving fluency and mastering complex syntax, her progress in other core areas indicates a positive trajectory. Continued support and extended instruction are recommended to build on the improvements achieved in this initial intervention.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Building on the findings of this case study, several directions for future research are proposed. First, applying the same methodology to a larger sample of Portuguese-speaking ESL learners would provide valuable insight into the generalization of the instructional approach used. A broader participant pool would allow researchers to examine patterns across learners and validate whether individualized, needs-based instruction consistently yields positive outcomes.

Second, comparative studies involving ESL learners from different first language (L1) backgrounds—such as Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin—could further illuminate how specific L1 influences contribute to language learning challenges. Such comparisons would support the development of differentiated instructional strategies that are sensitive to the unique needs of diverse learner groups.

Additionally, longitudinal research would be beneficial in assessing whether the improvements observed in short-term interventions are sustained over time.

Tracking learners across extended periods would provide a deeper understanding of how language development progresses and whether periodic reinforcement is necessary to maintain gains in accuracy and fluency.

Another avenue for investigation involves the use of control groups to compare the outcomes of personalized, needs-based instruction with more traditional or generalized teaching methods. This would offer empirical support for the effectiveness of tailored interventions and enhance the validity of future findings.

Finally, the integration of educational technology into ESL instruction deserves further exploration. Digital tools such as speech recognition software, pronunciation feedback applications, and adaptive grammar platforms may offer efficient ways to address specific learner difficulties, especially in pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Investigating the impact of these tools could contribute to more innovative and accessible language learning solutions.

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APPENDIX 1

Sample activities related to grammar errors.

A. Write correct form of verb patterns

1. She loves _____ (teach) English in Brazil.
2. Tom likes _____ (travel) by plane.
3. Ann hates _____ (go) to the parties during week days.
4. My mum doesn't prefer _____ (travel) by train
5. I am very keen on _____ (swim).

(There is no source for this exercise because I made sentences by myself)

B. Write sentences about you. Say whether you like or don't like these activities. Choose one of these verbs for each sentence: like / don't like love hate enjoy , prefer, don't mind

Ex. (fly)- I don't like flying.

1. (play cards) I
2. (be alone) I
3. (go _____ to _____ museums)
I
4. (cook) I
5. (work _____ on _____ my _____ own)
I

Source: <http://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/grammar/beginner-grammar/verb-ing-or-verb-infinitive>

APPENDIX 2

Sample activity related to vocabulary error, compounds.

1. Try to build compound words with these words

Example: boy + friend = boyfriend

green, hair, room, go, printer, bed, licence, cut, washing, machine, driving, house, pool, cartridge, swimming, seeing

2. Now fill in the blank with a correct compound:

1. A place where you can grow vegetables and flowers = a _____.
2. In your house, there is a _____ where you can sleep.
3. My clothes are dirty. I put them into the _____.
4. Sarah went to the hairdresser's. She's got a very nice _____.
5. I need a _____ to use a car.
6. My printer doesn't work any longer. The _____ is empty.
7. The weather is very warm. Let's go to the _____!
8. London is interesting. Why don't you go _____.

Answers: greenhouse, bedroom, washing machine, haircut, driving license, printer cartridge, swimming pool, sightseeing

Source: <https://www.tolearnenglish.com/cgi2/myexam/voir2r.php?id=350>