Differentiated Instructions: Implementing Tiered Listening Tasks in Mixed-Ability EFL Context

Natasha Pourdana[*]
Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran
Mehdi Shahpouri Rad
Karaj Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch, Iran

Abstract
Language teachers are usually faced with the challenging classrooms wherein the students with mixed language abilities sit together. One solution to deal with this situation is to apply differentiated instructions in terms of tiered task strategy. By definition, tiered tasks are extracted from the same material or skills, and personalized according to students' readiness, interest and preferred modes of learning. In the same vein, this experiment investigated the role of tiered listening tasks on 46 mixed-ability Iranian EFL learners in 9 intervention sessions. The participants were pre-assessed and assigned into 3 divisions of high, mid and low achievers. While the control group in this research experienced the conventional one-size-fits-all instructions to listening comprehension, the divisions in the experimental group received open-ended, multiple choice and true-false tiered listening tasks. Moreover, upon the individual's performance on tiered tasks, their division arrangement changed every 3 sessions so that they either remained or to be removed to higher or lower divisions. Findings statistically implicated the effectiveness of the tiered tasks on the participants' listening comprehension improvement. However, the observed matrix of multiple correlation coefficients failed to show any powerful association between the participants' mixed-levels of language proficiency and their successful performance on tiered tasks. The researchers' concluding remarks on the assessment and teaching benefits of differentiated instructions in EFL contexts were provided too.

 Keywords: Differentiated Instruction; Tiered Tasks; Listening; Mixed-Ability;

1. Introduction

Administering placement tests is a perquisite to arrange homogeneous classes in most language schools, despite the fact that the enrolled classrooms usually turn out to become heterogeneous in many various aspects. Foreign language mixed-ability classrooms are as varied as the types of the students enrolled in those classes; hence classmates communicate at a variety of different levels of foreign language proficiency and skills. The mixed-ability classroom, therefore, is one of the biggest challenges every language teacher most likely faces. Even if the learners are enrolled in classes according to their level of language competence, any class, in one way or another, is a colorful group of individuals. Ur (2005) simply asserts that the best definition of a mixed-level group is "in a class of two - when you have only two students - you have more than one level" (p. 70). Valentic (2005) defines a mixed-ability classroom as one in which "the students being different in terms of their participation, achievement and their level of readiness for learning a foreign language" (p.20). Bremner (2008) modifies this definition by stating that "mixed-ability classes do not just contain students with different abilities, but also students with a different range of learning styles and preferences" (p. 23).

If we define the role of a teacher as teaching the standard subject-matter course of study, we will most probably ignore the "readiness, interests and learning preferences" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. V) of struggling students who do not grasp or master it when it is taught, as well as those of advanced students who have already nailed it long before even the class starts. There is nothing fair or justifiable about focusing simply on teaching the standard course of study (Robinson, 2003). In school, therefore, "differentiating the instructions for students with different range of readiness and interests is more comfortable, engaging, and inviting" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 91).

As a coping strategy, in classes with mixed-ability students, novice teachers may prefer teaching in tune with either high or low achieving students, so that while the higher achievers will enjoy the instructions most, the lower achievers will become frustrated or challenged for the rest of the course. Provided that one of the major responsibilities of all teachers is to ensure majority of their students would master the standard course of study, classrooms should look like a different place: instead of encouraging the whole class to learn in the same way and to do the same thing, the teachers need to grant them the liberty to work on different tasks and activities. Similar to "kids who can choose from a variety of clothing to fit their different sizes, styles, and preferences, one-size-fits-all instructions can inevitably sag the students who differ in their needs and readiness" from the majority (Tomlinson, 2001, p. vii).

Language teaching pedagogy recently acknowledges the vitality of identifying and addressing the individual needs of the language learners. Foreign language learning classrooms are diverse places not only in terms of their location, grade and setting, but also in terms of individual learners' capacity, interests and goals. But how can we differentiate the students and

still remain *fair* to all of them? How do we meet all their needs and still follow the predisposed curriculum of the standard course of study? How do we invest on every advanced or struggling language learner's full abilities sitting beside one another in a heterogeneous classroom?

One way of achieving the goal of simultaneously meeting the needs of language learners at multiple levels of proficiency is to apply tiered tasks and assignments (Rost, 2002). In short, *tiering* involves teaching the same material to the whole class participants but present them with different (tiered) tasks according to their individual needs. Tomlinson (1999, p.38) describes tiered tasks as "the meat and potatoes" of differentiated instruction. A tiered lesson addresses a particular standard, key concept, or generalization, but allows several pathways for students to arrive at an understanding of these components. In a tiering lesson plan, therefore, each lesson's tasks are self-contained; students may be in one tier for one lesson but may be assigned into an upper or lower tier when a different lesson, topic or skill is presented by the teacher (Pierce & Adams, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2003; Hogan, 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differentiated Instruction

One way of attending equally to the needs of language learners at multiple levels of language proficiency in a classroom is to apply *differentiated instruction.* Differentiation can be applied to "the content, process, product as well as to learning environment" (Tomlinson, 1999, p.44). Content or input includes what teachers teach and expect the students will achieve. To Tomlinson and Strickland (2005), differentiating the content means "to provide multiple ways to receive the facts, concepts, generalizations or principles, attitudes, and skills related to the subject matter – foreign language system in an L2 classroom - as well as the materials that represent those elements" (p.7). Differentiation can be applied to the process of teaching and learning or how the students internalize the second/foreign language. To differentiate the process of learning, options are provided for the teachers and learners in expressing their opinions, concepts and facts (Purpora, 2004; Nordlund, 2003; Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated process can also be directly pertained to the content and assist the learners in grasping the required language knowledge and skills (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005).

The third area that differentiation can be applied to is the variety of language learning products or outputs. Teachers differentiate such outputs by providing a variety of strategies and techniques such as oral presentations, playing games, writing essays or preparing a report after attending a lecture. In this way, the students can employ their efforts and understanding to demonstrate what they have learned (Williams, 2002; Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). "The differentiated content, process, and product should be tuned up to the students' strength, needs, and learning styles" (Levy, 2008, p. 78) and to the individual students' "readiness, interests, and learning profiles"

(Tomlinson, 2001, p. 22). Such differentiating adjustment may be made in various aspects, such as complexity level of the content (e.g., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation), the students' preferred learning modalities (e.g., auditory, visual or kinesthetic), and learner interests. Differentiating EFL educators interact with students as learning facilitators, role models, resources, and nurturers, while the students find meaning in what they do through purposeful activity and reflection. They are provided access to the skills and knowledge with which to fulfill their goals of communication (Buck, 2001).

The last area to differentiate is the learning environment. Teachers create differentiation by renovating the classroom structure so that the students can move within and between groups (Tomlinson, 1999). As the ultimate goal of the differentiated instruction, the teachers create a user-friendly environment wherein they can flexibly adapt reasonable approaches to better language learning and to find alternative channels for conveying meaning in response to their students' differing needs (Keef, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Heward, 2003; Lewits & Batts, 2005). According to Tomlinson (2001), the students in

> "mixed-ability classrooms are immensely different and unpredictable and if teachers want to maximize their students' individual progress, they have to meticulously attend to individual differences. Otherwise, the students may become resentful, confused, and reluctant to participate in the learning process; thus, a certain group of students may always be unsuccessful in school" (p.3).

Reyes and Rodrigues (2006) highlight such difference in terms of cognitive abilities in the students and believe that in a mixed-ability classroom while some students are ready enough for easy and quick comprehension, some challenging ones have severe difficulty in comprehending even basic information. There are also students who fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Bowler and Parminter (2002) soundly argue that perhaps no teacher can afford to teach three different course books with one class; one for smart students, one for the weak, and one for the average. But when faced with a mixed-ability class and an unhelpful course book, what can we do as teachers? How possibly can we adapt listening and reading activities to suite both good and poor students?

A call for research has explored the efficacy of different strategies of differentiated instruction including grouping, tiered tasks, dynamic assessments and so forth. Utilizing the qualitative technique of observation, Miller (2007) found that in mixed-ability classrooms, successful teachers skillfully exploit small-group instructions, pair-working and collaborative group work more than less successful or inexperienced language teachers. In a longitudinal study, Hawkins (2007) figured out the reasons of some schools' being successful in Rhode Island, USA. The outcomes of his study revealed that incorporating small group instructions and using manipulative, as the

manifestations of differentiated instruction were highly effective in improving education at primary schools as long as science and math are concerned.

In another mixed experimental research, Chen (2007) explored the learners' perspective on differentiated instructions, specifically on the tiered assessment. In collecting data, different techniques were employed including observation, interview, videotaping, and artifacts. The researcher reported that tiering assessment was successful in boosting the students' motivation, efforts, and English skills as well as confidence. Similarly, Bantis (2008) investigated the impact of task-based differentiated writing instruction on EFL learners' language acquisition. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through administering interviews, transcriptions of writing conferences and subject work samples. One English teacher and 10 the 3rd grade students participated in the study. The statistical findings of the study reported the efficacy of task-based writing, as a beneficial type of differentiated instruction to fulfill the students' needs in mixed-ability language classrooms.

2.2 Tiered tasks as a differentiated instruction

One of the major strategies of differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms is *tiered tasks*. The process of tiering involves selecting similar materials to a mixed-ability class of students but presenting them with layered or tiered tasks which are roughly matched to different individual needs (Robinson, 2003). Tiered instruction integrates assessment and classroom instruction. As a requisite to every session of instruction, the teacher completes a pre-assessment to determine what students know; so that he prescribes content materials and tasks that promote continued learning for individual students.

Tiered instructions roughly align the complexity of the contents to the readiness levels and needs of students. "Ideally, tiered tasks engage students slightly beyond what they find easy or comfortable in order to provide genuine challenge and to promote their continued learning" (Buck, 2001, p. 53). Optimally, a tiered task is neither too simple to cause boredom nor too difficult to bring frustration to the students. As Tomlinson (2001) believes, "only when students work at appropriate challenge levels, do they develop the essential habits of persistence, curiosity, and willingness to take intellectual risks" (p.77). In this sense, tiered tasks are highly motivating as they encourage the students to accomplish tasks at their individual levels of readiness; they are all winners. Like a stairway, a tiered task provides safe and swift access within a large building called learning; the bottom represents the prepared learning tasks for challenging students with less degree of readiness and skills. The stairway is gradually turning in to the appropriate challenge for advanced students with more skills and deeper understanding. In this way, in a heterogeneous classroom, a teacher adopts tiered tasks to ensure that students can explore ideas to their own intellectual level and to prompt continued growth and optimum satisfaction.

As practiced by Levy (2008), content lessons can be tiered or tuned into (i) the students' level of readiness or their ability to understand those contents at particular level of complexity, (ii) the students' learning profile or learning styles and (iii) the students' interest in certain topics or genres. The number of tiers corresponds to the range of ability levels in the classroom (Hogan, 2009). In tiered lessons, students can flexibly work in teacher-assigned groups. Such a grouping plan is initially based on the students' current level of understanding of the topic. The number of students in every tier and the number of groups in a class can vary according to the size of the class and the nature of the tasks. The size of the groups can be different and unequal in every classroom (Willard-Holt, 2003).

In tiered lesson planning, the prepared tasks are self-contained; they are conducted according to the teacher's prognostic or pre-assessment of the students, so that a certain student may be assigned to a tentative tier in session one, but for the next lesson he may rise up to an upper or fall into a lower tier (Pierce & Adams, 2004). In designing tiered tasks, the tiers can be classified as Tier 1 (low-achievers who are approaching to the standard level); Tier 2 (mid-achievers who are ready for the standard); and Tier 3 (high-achievers who are moving above the standard). By this classification, the low-achievers in the tier 1 require the teacher's constant support for the basic skills or background knowledge to accomplish the task. Mid-achievers in the tier 2 understand the material while they may occasionally need the teacher's guidance and support. High-achievers in the tier 3 have shown mastery of the standard in the pre-assessment and now they need to be challenged with materials of more depth and complexity (Allen et al, 2008).

Pierce and Adams (2004) emphasize that "tiering is an organized yet flexible technique of proactively adjusting the teacher's instructions to meet the students where they are and help

them achieve maximum growth as successful learners" (p. 59). Tiered tasks are the way of taking the same concepts and essential understanding of a lesson and adapting them to the various complexity levels (e.g., knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation), students' preferred learning styles (e.g., auditory, visual or kinesthetic), and interests (Tomlinson, 2001). McBride (2004) pointed out to the role tiered tasks as the means to build positive change in student's performance, because the one-style-fits-all approach seldom works in a real classroom.

After pre-assessing the students based on their readiness level (for example, by checklists, quizzes, class discussion, portfolios, entry/exit cards or self-reflections), the teachers will tier high-achievers who have already mastered the lesson content aside/above those low achievers who have not fully acquired the content yet. Accordingly, the higher-achievers will be fed with harder and more complicated tasks where the mid- and low-achievers will work with less challenging and easier tasks (VanSciver, 2005). Learning products or the task outcomes are assessed individually as the evidence of individual students' learning output.

Bowler and Parminter (2002) proposed a sample for illustrating tiered task design where three versions of items with similar content were conducted for the weak, the average and the strong students. For weak students (the bottom tier), simple matching items were prepared which seemed an easy test format to work on; for average students (the middle tier) multiple choice items were prepared each with 3 options; and for the strong students (the top tier) open-ended or essay-type items were designed.

In another experimental study, Willard-Holt (2003) provided a set of tiered tasks for the science course of the 4th grade students in K-12 schooling system in Australia. In a mathematical task of Organizing and displaying data using illustrations, the high achieving students in the tier 3 were required to draw a bar graph and a scatterplot diagram to demonstrate the average monthly temperatures and rainfall in Sydney and New York city. To do this assignment, the students had to collect the weather reports data before they incorporate them into a bar graph and a scatterplot diagram. The mid-achieving students in the tier 2 were asked to transfer the logged verbal information into graphics in order to show the proportion of rainy days to sunny days, and the average rainfall in Sydney and New York city. Finally, the low achieving students in the tier 1 were given the illustrations followed by a number of multiple choice items that required them to simply check in and check out the given information on temperature and rainfall statistics in Sydney and New York city illustrated in the graphs. In both experiments, significant progress was reported in the individual students regarding both their written and oral productions (Bowler & Parminter, 2002) and analytical performance and academic writing (Willard-Holt, 2003). On the same line of research to incorporate the tiered task in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom with mixed-ability students, the current research was conducted to keep track of their participants' listening comprehension improvement. The primary objective of this experiment was to develop differentiated instructions in terms of tiered listening tasks that would challenge and enhance language learning for individual students in a mixed-ability EFL classroom. The researchers designed and implemented engaging instructions that were differentiated in three complexity levels of high-achieving, mid-achieving, and low-achieving tiers. Accordingly, the following research questions were raised and addressed in this study:

RQ1: Do tiered tasks have any meaningful impacts on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension achievement?

RQ2: Do tiered listening tasks have any differentiating impacts on Iranian EFL learners at different levels of language proficiency?

3. Method

The primary objective of the present study was to clarify whether incorporating tiered tasks in a mixed-ability EFL classroom could enhance the students' listening comprehension more favorably in comparison with traditional-based teaching. This study, therefore, was a two-group, pre-test post-test quasi-experimental research. No randomization was planned in the

sampling procedure of the participants to maintain the mixed levels of language proficiency among the participants (Bowler & Parminter, 2002; Aliakbari & Khales Haghighi, 2014).

3.1 Participants

One experimental and one control groups (n1=23, n2=23, N=46) selected from the female Iranian EFL learners at the age range of 18 to 30 years contributed to this study. The participants were selected from the EFL learners whose general English language proficiency was assumed at pre-intermediate level based on their placement test scores regularly conducted as the admission test in a private English language academy in Karaj, Iran. To verify the normality of the research sample, the measure of Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test conducted on the placement test scores was 1.490, insignificant at p=.980>.050. Accordingly, the normality of the scores was assumed as legitimate.
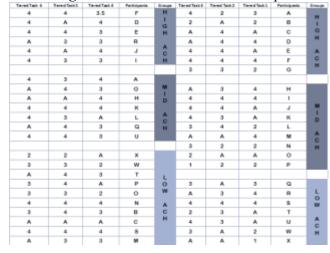
3.2 Instruments and Materials

The participants' scores on an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) were initially used as (1) pre-intervention test and later (2) a yardstick test of membership in order to layer/divide the experimental group into three divisions of high-achievers (scores range of 85.00 to 56.00), mid-achievers (score range of 55.00 to 50.00), and low-achievers (score range of 50.00 to 0.00). After an interval of three sessions of 75 minutes, the arrangement of the students' divisions and their membership inside those divisions in the experimental group used to change based on the participants' performance on the assigned tiered tasks. The researchers' major purpose was to investigate the subjects' meaningful progress in terms of within-group's variances as a result of performance on tiered listening tasks (Table 1). After the intervention, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was run with both the control and the experimental group as the post-test.

The participants in the experimental group received the tiered listening tasks in terms of a number of audio-video tapes for 9 sessions. The raw materials for preparing the tiered tasks were selected from Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab *(www.esl-lab.com).* Nine short audio-video tapes were selected with the themes of *A Fun Day, New Clothing, Apartment Living, Shopping for the Day, Dinner Ideas, Airport Arrival, Phone Numbers, Train Tickets* and *My Sick Day*. Every tape was originally followed by 4 multiple-choice items. In order to construct the three parallel versions of the tasks that challenge the divisions appropriately, the researchers prepared 4 open-ended (to fit the high-achievers) and 4 true-false (to fit the low-achievers) sets of tiered listening tasks for every single audiotape. The mid-achievers were supposed to work on the 4 original multiple-choice items (see the Appendix).

Table 1.
The low, mid and high achievers' divisions in the experimental group*

Tiered Task 4	Tiered Task 3	Tiered Task 4	Participants	Groups	Tiered Task 3	Tiered Task 2	Tiered Task 1	Participants	Groups
4	4	3.5	F	HIGH ACH	4	2	3	A	HIGH ACH
4	A	4	D		2	A	2	B	
4	4	3	E		A	4	A	C	
A	3	3	R		4	4	4	D	
4	A	4	J		4	4	A	E	
4	3	3	I		4	4	4	F	
					3	3	2	G	
4	3	4	A						
A	4	3	G	MID ACH	A	3	4	H	MID ACH
A	A	4	H		4	4	4	I	
4	4	4	K		4	4	A	J	
4	3	A	L		4	3	A	K	
A	4	3	Q		3	4	2	L	
4	4	3	U		A	A	4	M	
					3	2	2	N	
2	2	A	X		2	A	A	O	
3	3	2	W		1	2	2	P	
A	4	3	T	LOW ACH					
3	4	A	P		3	A	3	Q	LOW ACH
3	3	2	O		A	3	4	R	
4	4	4	N		4	4	4	S	
3	4	3	B		2	3	A	T	
A	A	A	C		4	3	A	U	
4	4	4	S		3	A	2	W	
A	3	3	M		A	A	1	X	

* To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, the alphabetical letters were used as pseudonyms.

In pre-listening phase, the topic of the audiotapes session was introduced to the class and the students in both control and experimental groups were demanded to negotiate over the topic. After listening phase was over, the divisions in the experimental group received the roughly-tuned tiered tasks to work on individually as the post-listening task. After the interval of 3 classroom sessions, the arrangement of the divisions had to change based on the division members' scores on the tiered listening tasks. Therefore, if their scores showed no measurable progress, they remained in their division. Otherwise, they were sat to higher layer or lower division. After the nine 75-minute sessions of treatment, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered as the final assessment of the participants' listening comprehension progress over the course. The scores on PET and EPT were later pooled for statistical analysis and verifying the research null hypotheses.

4. Results and discussion

Differentiated instructions is a framework or philosophy for effective language teaching which involves providing different students with different avenues to successful learning in terms of acquiring content, processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas. In this study, attempts were made in an Iranian EFL context of private language institute to examine the language learners' degree of progress in performing on tiered listening tasks prepared and presented to a mixed-ability classroom.

In order to investigate the first research question raised in this study, a null hypothesis was formulated as *Tiered Tasks have no impact on EFL learners' listening comprehension achievement.* Verifying this assumption, the researchers were required to trace the listening comprehension improvement in the experimental group after receiving intervention in terms

of tiered listening tasks. To this aim, a paired sample t-test was conducted between the total number of participants' scores on OPT as pre-intervention test and PET as post-test in the experimental (Table 2).

Table 2.
Paired Samples t-test for the scores of the experimental group on OPT andPET

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig.(2-
		Paired Differences							tailed)
		Mean	Std.	Std. Err Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair1	Experime ntal Pretest-Posttest	-26.08	6.00	1.00	-29.08	-23.09	-18.052		.033

As Table 2 displays, the index of paired samples t(2)=-18.059 is significant at p=.033<.05. The Cohn's measure of effect size was calculated as d=5.097 which is considered as a very large effect according to literature (Cohn, 1988). The significant index of t with such a large effect size was interpreted as the meaningful improvement in the students' listening comprehension after receiving tiered listening tasks as their treatment. Therefore, the first assumption in this study was rejected and the null hypothesis was reformulated as *Tiered Tasks have a significant impact on EFL learners' listening comprehension achievement.*

In order to verify the second null hypothesis in this study as *Tiered listening tasks have no differentiating impacts on Iranian EFL learners at different levels of language proficiency,* the researchers had to run a matrix of correlation coefficients to examine the probability of such a discrimination among the divisions in the experimental group. The second null hypothesis neutralized the possibility that EFL learners at different levels of language proficiency (high, mid and low achievers) would perform differently on the tiered listening tasks with increasing complexity of the output (open-ended, multiple choice and true-false). This null hypothesis was verified by means of a multiple test of non-parametric Spearman's rho correlation, as the number of participants in every division was not large enough to run a parametric test ($n_{High-achievers}=7$, $n_{Mid-achievers}=9$, $n_{Low\ achievers}=7$) (Table 3). As displayed in Table 3, the results of Spearman's rho correlation coefficients can be summarized as following:

(i)The measure of Spearman's rho between the low-achievers' scores on pre- and post-assessment is 0.00 and insignificant at p<.050;

(ii)The measure of Spearman's rho between the mid-achievers' scores on pre- and post-assessment is .004 and insignificant at p<.050; and

(iii)The measure of Spearman's rho between the high-achievers' scores on pre- and post-test is 0.00 and insignificant at p<.050.

Based on the statistical results, in spite of significant improvement in all high, mid and low achievers' listening comprehension, their performance on tiered tasks showed no association to their level of language proficiency.

Table 3

Matrix of correlation coefficients among the high, mid, low achievers' OPT

			High Ach Pre	Mid Ach Pre	Low Ach Pre	High Ach Post	Mid Ach Post	Low Ach Post
Correlations								
Spearman's rho	High achievers Pretest	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.083	.000	.000
		N	7	7	7	7	7	7
	Mid Achievers Pretest	Correlation Coefficient	.000	1.000	.000	.000	.004	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
		N	7	9	7	7	9	7
	Low Achievers Pretest	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000	1.000	.000	-.055	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
		N	7	7	7	7	7	7
	High Achievers Posttest	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000	.000	1.000	.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.083	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
		N	7	7	7	7	7	7
	Mid Achievers Posttest	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.004	-.055	.000	1.000	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
		N	7	9	7	7	9	7
	Low Achievers Posttest	Correlation Coefficient	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.
		N	7	7	7	7	7	7

and PET scores

To further study the pattern of within-subject divergent improvement, the diagram of estimated marginal means for the divisions' post-assessment was created.
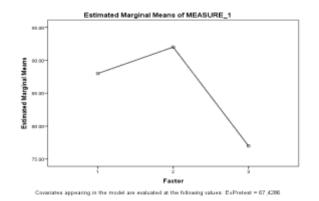
Figure 1. *Estimated marginal means for high, mid and low achievers on post-assessment. (1=High-achievers, 2=Mid-achievers, 3=Low-achievers)*

In Figure 1, the high-achievers' mean score on the post-intervention test of EPT is illustrated as Factor 1 in the axis X, mid-achievers' mean score illustrated as Factor 2, and low-achievers' mean score illustrated as Factor 3. Accordingly, the mid-achievers showed a more considerable improvement than the high-achievers and low-achievers after receiving tiered listening tasks. This superiority of mid-achievers is accompanied with the decreasing size of the mid-achievers' division by the end of interventions ($n_{High-achievers}=6$, $n_{Mid-achievers}=7$, $n_{Low\ achievers}=10$), as presented in Table 1.

Statistics, therefore, did not ensure any link between the students' language proficiency level and their gained benefits from tiered listening tasks. The researchers' interpretation of the findings, however, were restricted due to the missing data on the tiered listening tasks to which they referred in assigning the new division arrangement after every 3 sessions. Counting on both practical limitations and statistical analysis, the second null hypothesis was restored as *Performance on tiered listening tasks has no differentiating impacts on the EFL learners at different levels of language proficiency.*

5. Conclusions and Implications

In this study, statistics supported the significant improvement of the EFL learners' listening comprehension after receiving the tiered tasks, despite the within-subject divergence in the experimental group in terms of the independent performance of the high-, mid-, and low-achievers from their levels of language proficiency. Since their scores did not show a significant pattern of associations, it could not be predicted that the high-achievers would benefit the most from the tiered tasks or the low-achievers the least. On the contrary, the mid-achievers were proved to be the most beneficiary division in this study.

Similarly, Richards and Omdal (2007) examined the use of differentiated instructional methods and materials in mixed-ability classes. In their study, the grouping of the learners was based on their prior language skills and the background of content knowledge. Tiering the classroom tasks

was done so that it required the students to have a wide range of background knowledge on the subject matter. Statistics supported the usefulness of the tiered tasks. Apparently, making adjustment to the students' level of background knowledge by means of tiering the tasks allowed them to have confidence that they could learn the new contents better and faster as accommodated into their current level of knowledge and skills. The students with lower background knowledge on the subject matter could benefit from the teacher's presentation as much as the learners with the average or high range of background. The empirical results showed that tailoring the tasks to the students' background knowledge, interests and personal profiles would eventually lead to progress of the low-achieving students.

Richards and Omdal (2007) confirmed that language curriculum divisions through tiered tasks could be the ultimate solution to increase the academic achievement of the challenging students.   Furthermore, implementing a differentiated curriculum would allow the advanced and motivated students to spend the entire school time learning more challenging contents, and to elevate their existing schemata, rather than merely reviewing the contents or performing on tasks that are below their current level of competence. According to Richards and Omdal (2007), therefore, differentiated instruction in general and tiered tasks in particular can have positive and encouraging influences on language learners' improvement of communicative skills. In their study, the low achievers benefited most from the tiered instructions relative to advanced or average students.

Those teachers who are willing to differentiate language instructions in mixed-ability classrooms usually wish for challenging learning experiences for all their students. "These teachers realize that sometimes a task that is not challenging enough for some language learners is frustratingly complex to others" (Levy, 2008, p. 30). Moreover, the experienced teachers in mixed-ability classes recognize the urgent need to push their students to take more responsibility for their own growth. "It is much easier sometimes in large classrooms to give the students everything they need, rather than guiding them to think creatively on their own, and develop a sense of pride in every baby step they take" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 70). In a differentiated classroom, on the other hand, it is necessary for language learners to be active in making and evaluating the classroom decisions. Teaching students to share such a thoughtful responsibility enables their teacher to work with groups or individuals proactively. "It also prepares the students far better for life. Differentiated instruction is a blend of whole-class, group, and individual instructions" (p. 73).

The major goal of differentiated instruction for the teachers in language classroom is to make certain that everyone - gifted or challenging - grows in all the basic language skills and knowledge areas, to encourage the students to move forward from their starting points and to turn them into more independent learners. As Hogan (2009) believes,

In a differentiated classroom, the teacher closely assesses and monitors the students' obtained skills, knowledge levels, and interests in determining the most effective ways to learn. Differentiated lessons, therefore, reflect the teacher's best understanding of what will help a student to grow best in understanding at a given moment. That understanding evolves gradually as the course continues and as the students develop" (p.39).

Differentiated instructions can be incorporated into applying, demonstrating, and extending language knowledge, or practicing communicative skills and personal attitudes to monitor the achievement of goals. This might include peer/self-assessment. The assessment of learning is the *culminating or summative* type which takes place after the learning has occurred and students have demonstrated what concepts and/or skills they have learned.

Differentiation can also be used in terms of a variety of assessment instruments such as tests, projects, demonstrations, writing performances, and alike. Such alternative assessment techniques can help the teachers know their students and their needs so much better that they can choose effective teaching/learning strategies and interventions to maximize students' achievement. The diagnosis of the choral and individual students' responses not only provides dynamic feedback to enhance the teaching experience for the teachers, but for the students and parents too. Teachers can use ongoing assessment to gather information about their students' acquired knowledge and capabilities, to direct his/her future planning, to monitor their progress, and to measure up their achievement. Students and parents can also use the results of such assessment to reflect and understand their own preferences and wishes.

All students should not be assessed by making reference to certain standards, rather their level of success in the assigned work should be appreciated. Students who struggle in a particular subject can be given an assignment which become more tuned into their abilities. It does not mean they should be given the same grade for a given accomplished task, relative to a student who does not receive such an adjusted assignment.

The content of lessons may be differentiated according to the degree of the familiarity of the students. Some students in a class may be unfamiliar with the concepts in a lesson, some students may have partial exposure to the content - or display some vague ideas about it, and some students may show complete mastery of the content even before the lesson begins. A possibility for the teacher is to differentiate the content by preparing tasks for the groups of students following the ladder of cognitive complexity demands in Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy. For example, students who are unfamiliar with the concepts may be required to complete tasks on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy such as knowledge or comprehension.

Students with partial mastery may be asked to complete tasks in the application or analysis areas, and students who have high levels of mastery may be asked to complete tasks in synthesis or evaluation layers. In these instances, the teacher is not varying the course objectives or lowering performance standards for the individual students. The teachers may use different texts, novels, or short stories at a reading level appropriate for each individual student. Or, the teachers may set flexible groups and ask the students log in different groups for listening to audiobooks or accessing specific internet sources. Students could have the liberty to work in pairs, groups, or individually, but all students are working towards the same standards and the same objectives.

The results of this study supported the use of tiered tasks in teaching listening comprehension as they allow the students in a mixed-ability classroom to do tasks according to every bit of information they seize. It can be inferred from the results of this study that preparing tiered tasks can informatively assess the students' progress so that the future tasks would be better matched to their level of skills and competence. Furthermore, the use of tiered tasks along with many other individual and collaborative learning strategies can be used at different stages of teaching listening in L2 context. The fact that the current researchers could not track any meaningful relationship between the students' various levels of language proficiency and their improvement of listening comprehension could be interpreted both as positively and negatively. On the one hand, it is possible to assume that all divisions members at high, mid, and low achievement levels can relatively benefit from the tiered tasks, despite the mid-achievers turning out to be rewarded with their considerable outperformance on tiered listening tasks in this study. On the other hand, if at the end of a given language course, the classroom divisions so smoothly transformed that most the students fell into one single division, the class would turn into a homogeneous language learning context which by itself is a huge success in an educational setting.

The results of this study provided further supports for theoretical and pedagogical values of tiered tasks in EFL contexts. From the theoretical point of view, this study was based on TBLT which is still salient and provoking in L2 teaching pedagogy. In this framework, the tiering language tasks are based on dividing the students into small groups from different proficiency levels and providing them with graded tasks but with standard outcomes expectation. The dynamic nature of the tiered tasks is proved to be a confident way of enhancing listening comprehension especially in mixed-ability classrooms. From a pedagogical viewpoint, it is highly plausible for the language teachers who are in charge of large and mixed classrooms to consider using tiered tasks as they definitely have significant impact on learners' achievements as the findings suggest.

In EFL classroom context, the teachers can lower the language learning affective filters and anxiety level by choosing tiered tasks method because the tasks the learners receive are compatible with their proficiency level; hence

they comparatively feel more confident and less stressed. Tiered Tasks can help them to gradually improve their learning capability and students are encouraged to challenge themselves with classroom tasks as they are counting on themselves as someone who can eventually accomplish the task at hand.

Making the tasks challenging-still-possible for high-achieving or advanced students is another benefit of the tiered tasks. This empowering situation encourages the gifted students to self-assess their success after every classroom task by making their progress visible. Therefore, the teaching, learning and assessing cycle can surely create a dynamic situation for improving language components, skills and strategies. Various methods and techniques have been developed so far to teach and assess listening comprehension in EFL/ESL contexts. Applying tiered tasks seems to equip the EFL teachers with an informative assessment device for monitoring the students' language learning progress.

6. Limitations of the Study

Research does not take place in vacuum. Similar to all experimental studies, the current research faced a number of limitations and shortcomings. Despite the initial plan to select the participants from several private language schools to enlarge the scope of the research, the researchers had eventually to limit the size of the sample to one private English academy in Karaj, Iran due to unexpected logistic and practical restrictions. Furthermore, the divisions inside the experimental group were exclusively made according to the students' various proficiency levels as the major grouping variable in this study, not their gender or learning profile, nor their interests in the type of tasks. However, to the researchers' opinion, including such factors might have caused radical changes to the research findings.

For assigning the participants into divisions inside the experimental group, they were labeled as low-achievers, mid-achievers and high-achievers. The researchers believe that the dynamicity of the teaching environment in this study was somehow biased towards the concept of achievement which could be eliminated by simply numbering the divisions. Finally, regarding the selection of research variables and designing tiered tasks, the scope of the research was narrowed only into listening comprehension, eliminating other language skills and components. Furthermore, the tiered listening tasks were limited exclusively to three parallel forms of open-ended, multiple choice and true-false items.

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Appendix
Tiered Listening Tasks
Session 1: A Fun Day
Open-ended Items for High-achievers

❖Listen to the tape and try to write the best answer to the following questions.

1. Where does the young girl want to do with her father?
2. Who are they going with?
3. Based on the conversation, what time they most likely leave?
4. What does the father suggest to do at the end of the day?

Multiple Choice Items for Mid-achievers

❖Listen to the tape and choose the best answer.

1. Where does the young girl want to go with her father?
   a. To the park
   b. To the movies
   c. To the swimming pool
2. Who are they going with?
   a. The girl's mother
   b. The girl's best friend
   c. The girl's elder brother
3. Based on the conversation, what time they most likely leave?
   a. 10:30 am.
   b. 12:45 pm.
   c. 2:00 pm.
4. What does the father suggest to do at the end of the day?
   a. Go to a restaurant
   b. Watch a firework
   c. Play a game board

True-False Items for Low-achievers

❖Listen to the tape and choose the best answer.

1. The girl goes to the swimming pool with his father.
   TrueFalse
2. They go with the girl's elder brother.
   TrueFalse
3. They with most likely leave at 12:45.
   TrueFalse
4. They will go to watch the firework at the end of the day.
   TrueFalse