



## Conversational Differentiated Instruction: Tutor's Strategies in Fostering Learners' Participation in Non-Formal Daily Talk Sessions

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### Abstract

This exploratory single-case study investigates the pedagogical strategies employed by a single tutor to foster learners' participation during Daily Talk sessions at English Cafe Malang, a unique non-formal, cafe-based learning environment. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interview insights coupled with direct observations of learner dynamics to ensure data triangulation. The results indicate that the tutor relies on group sharing within a conversational circle, utilizing relatable topics and a mandatory pre-speaking vocabulary module. To accommodate the highly heterogeneous language proficiency levels, the tutor implements spontaneous, "on-the-fly" conversational Differentiated Instruction (DI) alongside immediate, low-pressure translation support. Triangulated observation data reveal that these strategies successfully trigger strong emotional stability and independent cognitive strategies among participants. However, the relaxing environment presents a pedagogical trade-off, leading to behavioral distractions such as smartphone use and side-talk. While the scope of this study is limited to a single unit of analysis, it offers valuable micro-level insights into non-formal language instruction.

**Keywords:** Cafe-Based Learning, Communicative Language Teaching, Differentiated Instruction, Non-Formal EFL Environment

### INTRODUCTION

Speaking proficiency is an essential skill for EFL learners as it enables them to communicate clearly, exchange ideas and perspectives, and engage in meaningful conversations (Budiman et al., 2023; Hidayati et al., 2023; Zuhri et al., 2021). The global use of English has further reinforced the need for effective speaking skills, especially in non-native English-speaking countries, like Indonesia. According to (Vadriani et al., 2023), the English language is used in many aspects of life, from academic purposes, business, economics, health, to politics, emphasizing the critical role of speaking ability in professional and personal development. However, many EFL learners encounter challenges in developing their speaking proficiency due to many factors, such as limited exposure to native speakers, lack of

confidence, and the low opportunities to practice speaking skill for real-life purposes (Musabal & Abdalgane, 2023). These challenges lead to low participation rate in speaking classes, standing in the way of the development of significant oral communication skills. To address these challenges, English teachers have an important role to shape the learning environment which will affect students' academic achievement through their pedagogical practices (Putri et al., 2025).

Unlike traditional English learning through classrooms that mirror formal school settings, there are various institutions or programs that offer non-formal and relaxing settings to learn English. Some examples include English Cafe, English Clubs, and Kampung Inggris. They often apply diverse approaches and activities to help enhance English speaking proficiency (Andriani

et al., 2024; Octaberlina & Ikhwanul Muslimin, 2022).

English Cafe Malang is a non-formal English learning institution that offers a relaxing learning atmosphere by applying cafe-based learning. In Indonesia, English Cafe is spread across 7 big cities, with a total of more than 30.000 members. This institution carries a relaxing theme, making the impression of hanging out in a cafe between the learners and the tutors. Not only giving a hangout theme, English Cafe also applies things related to a cafe, for example, the tutors in English Cafe are called chefs and the module is designed in a way that resembles a menu book called secret recipe. English Cafe offers many programs, varying in the speaking program whose goal is to dare to speak, encouraging confidence in speaking, grammar program, TOEFL and IELTS program. There is also a speaking class called Daily Talk, in which members, as English Cafe refers to the learners, and chefs or tutors meet at the Cafe on a daily basis to talk and discuss. This activity differs from other courses in that English Cafe incorporates English into daily living and uses it for authentic communicative reasons. This activity is consistent with the concepts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasize that language learning occurs best through meaningful contact and real-life communications (Rahmatillah, 2019; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The communicative approach is adjusted according to the uniqueness of each learners' needs (Thamarana, 2015).

Learners' speaking participation is deeply related to engagement. According to (Fredricks et al., 2004), engagement is malleable, meaning that it is affected by their environment. Learners are not automatically active or

passive, but rather responding to how teachers teach and their learning environment. Learners' engagement are rooted into three aspects, namely, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004; Zhong et al., 2025).

The role of tutors is important to facilitate meaningful interactions between the learners and improve speaking engagement (Kaharuddin et al., 2025). The role of tutors is not limited in teaching, but tutors need to have the ability to facilitate an environment that overcomes the passiveness and lack of motivation often found in EFL speaking contexts. Tutors are also required to utilize different techniques and strategies as individual learners possess different learning styles, language proficiency, speed in understanding, self efficacy, interest, and personality (Susilawati et al., 2024; Tomlinson, 2001). To accommodate this variability, tutors frequently use Differentiated Instruction (DI). Differentiated Instruction is a teaching method that requires lessons to be adapted to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles to make sure that all students can succeed (Darra & Kanellopoulou, 2019; Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017, 2022).

Historically, the conceptualization and empirical evaluation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) have been heavily anchored within formal educational institutions, such as schools and universities. In these structured settings, DI operates as a highly systematic, pre-planned framework where instructors rely on formal curriculum guidelines, standardized diagnostic tests, and longitudinal student profiles to adapt content, process, and products

(Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). This traditional execution of DI assumes a predictable environment: a static classroom layout, fixed scheduling, a demographic baseline of age-matched peers, and a relatively controlled ambient environment. Within these formal parameters, differentiation is deliberate, premeditated, and deeply dependent on the instructor's ability to plan interventions long before the lesson begins.

However, transporting the orthodox principles of DI into a fluid, non-formal cafe ecosystem introduces a deep pedagogical paradox. In a lifestyle-focused environment like English Cafe Malang, learning occurs without rigid syllabus or formal grading structures. Tutors do not have the luxury of reviewing standardized student profiles beforehand; instead, they face a constantly shifting conversational circle where middle schoolers, university students, and corporate professionals drift in and out during a single session. This environment inherently disrupts traditional planning, demanding that differentiation be executed entirely "on-the-fly." Spontaneous DI in a cafe setting requires the tutor to perform micro-assessments of language readiness in real-time, instantly adjusting vocabulary complexity, scaffolding prompts, and wait-times mid-conversation, all while navigating the ambient distractions of a public, lifestyle space.

This extreme shift from classroom-based pedagogy highlights a critical theoretical and empirical gap in current EFL literature. While existing research thoroughly documents how formal DI enhances academic outcomes through pre-planned tracks, it fails to explain how differentiation can be operationalized as an organic,

conversational strategy in unregulated spaces. There is a lack of critical insight into how a tutor can maintain the core principal of DI, maximizing individual potential according to readiness, when stripped of structural control and formal planning tools. By examining how a tutor dynamically fuses Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with spontaneous, real-time differentiation within a multi-generational, distraction-prone conversational circle, this study fills a necessary gap, expanding DI theory beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom into the realm of informal language communities.

Numerous teaching strategies aimed at reducing students' speaking anxiety and promoting communicative competence have been highlighted in previous studies on non-formal English learning environments. In order to progressively move students toward independent speaking proficiency, (Sari & Rozimela, 2021) highlight the systematic application of scaffolding tactics through four systemic stages: modeling, mimicking, eliminating, and accomplishing. According to (Andriani et al., 2024), tutors use motivational ice-breaking, "English-Only Areas," and a strategic balance of immediate and delayed error correction to address common pedagogical challenges in the classroom, such as learner passivity, over-reliance on the mother tongue, and large class sizes. Additionally, by removing the burden of formal grading, (Octaberlina & Ikhwanul Muslimin, 2022) show that low-pressure, interactive tasks like public speaking and small talk within a Community Language Learning (CLL) framework drastically minimize learners' affective filters. All of these researches show that encouraging speech engagement outside of the official

education system requires adaptable, supportive, and low-anxiety pedagogical approaches.

However, there is still a significant empirical gap in understanding tutor strategies within highly heterogeneous spaces like an English Cafe, despite the fact that existing literature thoroughly examines systematic scaffolding stages, tutor challenges, and group-based language clubs in non-formal settings like Kampung Inggris or high school clubs. A cafe-based learning framework brings together middle schoolers, high school students, and working professionals in a single, fluid conversational circle, introducing an extreme layer of diversity in contrast to the relatively demographic-specific groups or intensive settings investigated in previous studies. Previous research has primarily concentrated on either macro-level classroom management or peer-to-peer collaboration among age-matched peers. Rarely do they look at how a tutor effectively engages learners with wildly different language readiness, social backgrounds, and communicative requirements in a synchronized session by using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) along with Differentiated Instruction. In order to close this gap, this study examines how a tutor at English Cafe Malang contextually modifies teaching methods to promote learners engagement in a non-formal, lifestyle-focused setting across a range of demographic and competency backgrounds.

The research objectives of this study were addressed to answer two research questions, namely identifying what teaching strategies are used by a tutor at English Cafe in Malang to encourage learners' speaking

engagement, and exploring how these specific strategies promote learners' speaking engagement during English Cafe sessions.

It is expected that this study will enrich the existing literature on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning within non-formal settings. It contributes new insights into how the principles of Differentiated Instruction (DI) can be dynamically integrated with "on-the-fly" instruction to manage conversational circles that are heterogeneous in terms of age and also language proficiency.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative case study design to deeply understand the teaching strategies used in daily talk sessions. In this setting, qualitative study allows deep exploration of social interactions between the tutor and diverse learners (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach will reflect a pedagogical modifications needed in a non-formal learning environment by concentrating on a single system at English Cafe Malang.

Over the course of four weeks, 15 learners (referred to as "members") and an operational staff who also works as a Daily Talk tutor at one of the branch of English Cafe Malang participated in this study. The particular tutor was purposefully chosen based on her eight months of experience leading Daily Talk session and her track record of a total more than 50 members joining Daily Talk throughout her experience. The 15 members represented a highly heterogeneous demographic, which included junior high school students, senior high school students, and even a professional corporate workers.

A total of 20 items observation checklist and 14 questions semi-structured interview were organized according to the combination of theoretical frameworks; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices, Differentiated Instruction (DI) implementation, and also Learner Engagement Theory. Daily talk session observation was carried out to explore the teaching strategies and members' speaking participation in the session. After observation on three daily talk sessions, the researcher then administered an interview with the daily talk tutor with the intention to deeper exploration about the strategies employed, the implementation of strategies in daily talk sessions, and also her view about the members' speaking participation and engagement. To ensure the objectivity of the data and to avoid subjectivity bias, the researcher established a layered observation protocol designed to map three distinct dimensions of learner engagement. First, behavioral indicators documented physical signs of engagement and disengagement, tracking eye contact, task-switching behaviours, and disruptions. Second, emotional indicators to look for the affective signs within the session, such as visible clues of speaking anxiety, hesitations or retreating from the conversations versus psychological safety clues, such as laughter, spontaneous willingness to speak, and relaxed gestures. Lastly, the verbal engagement data shows the linguistic dynamics of the members, exploring the use of independent cognitive strategies during dialogues.

To analyze the data, the researcher uses thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and recognizing

similar patterns (theme) of a data where a researcher is making a generalization of ideas from coded data occurrence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lochmiller, 2021). The process of thematic analysis includes five steps, namely: (1) data preparation; (2) coding the data; (3) generating themes; (4) data triangulation; (5) interpreting and reporting. Crucially, the fourth step served as the primary step for empirical validation. Tutor's responses during the interview are treated as a pedagogical hypothesis that requires a cross-examination rather than treating it as a definitive claims. The researcher checked the consistency between the notes from the observation, detailing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive indicators and tutor's self-reported answers. Moreover, tutor's perceptions about learner participation were matched and validated by behavioral notes from the observation tracking the existence of device distractions and side-talk. This triangulation process minimized the subjectivity bias, ensuring that this study is consistent with the analysis of the field data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Result

The empirical results from three classroom observation sessions and a semi-structured interview with the tutor at English Cafe Malang are presented in this part. The data are structured around the two research questions of this study.

### Teaching strategies used by the tutor (RQ 1)

The tutor uses particular communication and teaching strategies to lead the daily talk discussion sessions, which are based on the multi-session

observation checklists and the interview transcripts.

### **The use of Group Sharing in Daily Talk Sessions**

The observation data gathered from all three Daily Talk sessions presents that the tutor uses only group sharing during the session. From common options like role-play, problem-based learning, or discussion, the tutor exclusively utilizes group sharing. Topics are carefully matched to the attendance' demographic characteristics while the tutor organizes the session into a conversational circle. The tutor described her method for choosing topics during the interview:

Sometimes I'm searching on the internet for the topic, so I will choose a specific topic suitable for the members if I already know the members, so that we can share our similarities that we have discussed before. So I choose the topic to be discussed that is related to the members. (Interview result, Question #1)

By asking the members one by one to share their opinion or experience, the tutor maintains the conversational flow. Prompts such as "How about you?" are used to invite the learners' personal viewpoints regarding the topics such as favorite travel destinations.

### **Pre-speaking Module Implementation**

Before the speaking session on Daily Talk begins, there is a mandatory module containing a list of vocabularies that needs to be completed by the learners, the observation indicated that:

The members were asked to fill out the module for exercise (they need to create sentences using vocabularies on the module). After they are done, tutor will

check the sentences, and after all the members are done, the speaking session will then start (Observation Checklist, item #3)

This routine performs as a preparation step, to ensure that learners learn new vocabulary in every session.

### **Strategies implementation and learner engagement (RQ 2)**

The second objective of this study is to observe how these strategies are utilized into mixed-level groups and how learners respond behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively.

### **Adaptivity for Diverse Proficiency Levels**

Mixes of levels (Level 1 to Level 3) are gathered in the same group on Daily Talk sessions, making it very heterogeneous. The tutor makes quick, on-the-fly language corrections to account for these differences. Observation Item #5 demonstrates that "when learners face difficulties in understanding the instruction and questions, tutors help them by repeating the questions with easier words".

Furthermore, Based on the errors made by the students, the tutor adjusts her intervention. While post-speaking grammatical and pronunciation adjustments are offered (Observation Checklist, Item #4), the tutor actively translates for the student without interfering with their speech flow when they fully pause because of a missing English word, the tutor stated that:

Sometimes they also directly speak in Bahasa but I help them to translate it into English. For example when they say 'kemarin aku pergi ke...' I will say 'Oh, yesterday you went to...'. However, I do not say things like 'you should say...'. I do not

dictate them, I just help them to translate it. (Interview result, Question #12)

### **Multi-Dimensional Learner Responses**

From the observations of three daily talk sessions, learners participation showed behavioral, emotional, and cognitive indicators

**Behavioral Participation:** The observation notes indicated that “even when needing a longer processing time, learners showed an active attempt to complete the task and state their opinions to the group” (Observation Checklist, Item #15 & #17). However, some behavioral distraction was also found because “in the first and third daily talk session being observed, some learners were engaged with side-conversations while their peers were speaking, some of them were also playing with their phones” (Observation Checklist, Item #20).

**Emotional Responses:** A high level of support and mutual comfort were observed in this study. Learners actively validate each other by giving nods and showing agreement to their peers’ opinion. It was shown through phrases like “ I agree with her/his opinion, I think...” (Observation Checklist, Item #16)

**Cognitive Investment:** Independent strategies were performed by the learners when they are struggling to express their opinion, “some learners used an analogy to express their ideas” (Observation Checklist, Item #19). Additionally, a learner was observed to be writing down ideas and opinions in their phone before sharing it to the group.

### **Discussion**

To analyze the results, this section compares the previous findings of non-formal English learning and maps

the tutor’ practices into the theoretical frameworks of Learner Engagement, Differentiated Instruction (DI), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

### **The Interplay of CLT and Differentiated Instruction**

The principles of CLT are reflected solely on group sharing. The tutor values genuine and personal conversation between the learners, in contrast to traditional classrooms that emphasize grammatical perfection. Tutor use the language as a tool of social interaction rather than academic subject by choosing relatable topics and using conversational questions (e.g., “How about you?”)

However, the major pedagogical challenge in Daily Talk sessions is the diversity of the conversational circle. While traditional DI models from (Tomlinson, 2014) prescribe a pre-planned, modifications across Content, Process and Product levels, the fluid nature of the cafe settings forces a radical solution. Within this non-formal forum, the differentiation did not occur at the Content or Product level, as in the session, the topics and communicative goals remain the same for all members. Instead, Differentiated Instruction is heavily modified in the Process level through a spontaneous mechanism. The tutor utilizes a real-time “on-the-fly” instructions to alter linguistic complexity, simplifying vocabularies and offering a direct low-pressure translation for lower-level learners and maintaining more complex inquiries for higher level learners based entirely on their verbal readiness level.

Furthermore, this approach suits CLT’s modern execution where communicative competence and authentic interaction is prioritized over

structural correctness and grammatical perfection (Littlewood, 2022; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). (Bondie et al., 2019) also suggest that responsive adjustments during interactions is more reliable to do in fluid spaces rather than pre-planned lesson drafts, this reactive adaptation is called “*spontaneous scaffolding*”.

Additionally, the mandatory use of the pre-speaking module acts as an instructional scaffold. When learners create a sentence from vocabulary lists on the module, the tutor strikes a balance between immediate language needs of lower-level learners and the fluency goals for higher-level learners, providing a psychological safety net that keeps beginner learners from withdrawing from the social space.

### **How the Relaxed Environment Boosts Learner Participation**

From the evaluation of how these Process-level strategies encourage learners’ participation, the result shows a strong relationship between the non-formal settings and the multi-dimensional framework of Learner Engagement.

As (Fredricks et al., 2004) conceptualize, which was later supported by (Hiver et al., 2024), that in language learning context, learner engagement is deeply affected by the environment, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The casual, lifestyle-oriented “cafe vibe” is important to foster Emotional Engagement. In traditional classroom settings, students often experience high language anxiety due to clear grading pressures and fear of negative evaluation (Andriani et al., 2024; Musabal & Abdalgane, 2023). This emotional filter is systematically removed in Daily Talk sessions at English Cafe Malang. The tutor's use of

non-dictated translational support, where she seamlessly helps translate learners’ Indonesian thoughts into English without explicitly penalizing the language errors, creates a supportive conversational space. The observed peer interactions, in which, “learners consistently nodded in agreement and participated in constructive peer-correction” (Observation Checklist, Items #16 & #18), demonstrate this high level of emotional stability.

Behavioral and cognitive engagement are facilitated through this high emotional security. Because learners feel safe, they create the bravery to speak in English even if they make grammatical or vocabulary errors. Moreover, it promotes a high cognitive engagement in which the learners put out mental effort (Fredricks et al., 2004; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). When learners face a vocabulary deficit, instead of shutting down, they choose to write down their thoughts then read it out loud or use analogies to express themselves. This aligns with Community Language Learning (CLL) impacts observed by (Octaberlina & Ikhwanul Muslimin, 2022), where low-stakes, interactive activities successfully trigger independent strategies by the learners. Furthermore, (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2022), stated that learners will naturally transition from passive observer into active communication partner when a learning environment successfully fulfills learners’ emotional engagement.

### **The Structural Trade-Off of Non-Formal Spaces**

Despite the high emotional and cognitive engagement, the findings reveal a crucial vulnerability regarding sustained behavioral engagement, which are the presence of smartphone

distractions and side-talk during discussions. Stricter behavioral compliance is often maintained in highly structured non-formal environments like Kampung Inggris Pare by having rules like “English-Only Areas” (Andriani et al., 2024; Sari & Rozimela, 2021).

However, because English Cafe Malang operates as a leisure-based learning environment, formal disciplinary procedures are lacking. The tutor cannot easily punish smartphone usage without damaging the relaxing vibe that supports learners’ emotional comfort. The environment that successfully lowers learners’ speaking anxiety and encourages them to speak also makes it more difficult to sustain their behavioral attention when they are not the active speaker. The tutor successfully manages this not through traditional classroom discipline, but by shifting conversational turns quickly, demonstrating that in Daily Talk sessions, where cafe-based learning is present, instructional pacing must replace formal authority to maintain learner engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that fostering speaking engagement in a heterogeneous, non-formal environment requires integrating Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with spontaneous Differentiated Instruction (DI). By utilizing a low-pressure setting and a mandatory pre-speaking module during Daily Talk sessions at English Cafe Malang, the tutor established a psychologically safe space that lowered learners’ affective filters, thereby stimulating active participation and independent cognitive strategies. However, the leisure-based setting

introduced behavioral challenges, notably smartphone distractions and side-talk. To counter this lack of formal discipline, fast-paced instructional pacing was essential to sustain attention. Given the limitations of this single-case study, future research should expand to multi-case designs across diverse non-formal communities and incorporate direct learner perspectives.

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