

A Descriptive Analysis of University ESL Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Maria Arif

mariaarifiif786@gmail.com

MS English Linguistics Scholar, Humanities Department, COMSATS University Islamabad, Vehari Campus

Dr. Muhammad Imran Saeed

imransaeed@cuivehari.edu.pk

Lecturer, Humanities Department, COMSATS University Islamabad, Vehari Campus

Dr. Asma Kashif Shahzad

asmashahzad@cuivehari.edu.pk

Associate Professor, Humanities Department, COMSATS University Islamabad, Vehari Campus

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Asma Kashif Shahzad asmashahzad@cuivehari.edu.pk

Received: 04-01-2026 Revised: 18-01-2026 Accepted: 03-02-2026 Published: 17-02-2026

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore how university ESL teachers perceive the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms and apply them. The research aims to examine the conceptions and practices of UDL by teachers on dealing with learner diversity and inclusive education. The issue of the limited inclusivity in the classroom is discussed in terms of how instruction in the ESL classroom is uniform in terms of the needs of all students and how this is not the case. The design used was qualitative research and methods used to collect data were semi-structured interviews with the ESL teachers in the university. Themes were identified through the process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) from the collected data and patterns linked to teachers' perceptions, instructional strategies, and challenges implementing UDL strategies were determined. The results suggest teachers in general have positive views of UDL and are aware of the potential benefits it has for improved student engagement, motivation, and learning. The study also identifies a number of challenges that face effective implementation such as a lack of professional training, inadequate resources, and institutional support. This study helps to supplement the body of literature on inclusive education with practical suggestions on how to implement UDL in ESL settings. It also presents suggestions for teachers and policymakers to enhance teaching practices and create more inclusive and flexible learning environments.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, ESL Teachers, Inclusive Education, Teaching Practices, Learner Diversity

INTRODUCTION

The need to address diversity in classrooms, including English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms that are diverse in cultures, languages, and academics has led to growing attention on the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in education (CAST, 2018). UDL was originally created to serve students with disabilities and is now a comprehensive instructional design strategy that offers many ways to engage, represent, and express the information to all students (Rose & Meyer, 2002). In higher education settings, students often experience problems with language barriers, education levels and different proficiency levels, limiting them from participating and understanding in regular class systems (Gunderson, 2013). Traditional methods of teaching that tend to establish a single way of teaching and learning may not be effective in meeting these differences (Zaman, Jawad, & Buriro, 2025). As a result there is a need for flexible and inclusive pedagogical practices, which are able to cater for learner variation.

UDL provides a useful model to overcome these obstacles by encouraging flexible teaching approaches that make information accessible and motivating. These principles guide the creation of learning contexts that can accommodate different learning needs, especially in ESL classrooms where students can enjoy a different way to receive input and to express themselves (Rao, Ok, & Bryant, 2014). Yet, even though there is potential for use, the implementation of UDL in academia, particularly in the field of ESL, is still limited.

In addition, previous studies have ignored the actual classroom experiences and perceptions of teachers and students about how UDL strategies are implemented in their actual classroom settings, especially in developing regions of South Punjab, Pakistan. To assess the applicability and impact in the field of ESL, it is important to have an understanding of these perspectives. This study will have a qualitative approach that will help understand how ESL teachers & Students at the university perceive & experience UDL strategies implementation. This study's qualitative approach uses semi-structured interviews to provide in-depth insight into classroom practices, the implementation barriers of UDL strategies & their perceived impacts on teaching and learning. The findings will be used to inform the creation of more contextually responsive higher education pedagogy for all students.

Research questions

1. In what ways do ESL learners experience & understand UDL-based instructional method of learning within the university environment?
2. What institutional, pedagogical, and practical implications have an impact on implementing UDL Methods of Teaching & Learning ESL Students?

Significance of the study

This study provides useful information on implementing UDL in ESL university classrooms in South Punjab, Pakistan. Additionally, it looks at both teachers' and students' points of view and will offer greater understanding of how to create more inclusive and accessible learning environments for students who speak different languages, using UDL principles of engagement, representation, and expression. This research is relevant to the field of ESL instruction and identifies potential teaching strategies to improve student engagement, language growth, and learning experiences. The findings from this research will inform teachers of the challenges associated with UDL and, thus, help guide future professional development and institutional support. The final results and conclusions of this research may support teachers' movement to more flexible and learner-centred approaches. The findings of this study also have implications for curriculum developers, policy makers, and schools. This research adds to the knowledge base in the field and provides research-based evidence and context-specific recommendations to improve teaching practices in ESL and inclusive education at post-secondary levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a lot of attention given to the concept of inclusive education over the past several years with the growing diversity in classrooms, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments. Today's education is about equity and inclusion, giving all learners the equal opportunity to learn regardless of their language or culture (UNESCO, 2020). The traditional approaches to teaching that tend to be teacher centered and static are unsuitable for meeting the needs of diverse learners, which may hinder learning and participation (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a successful model that provides flexibility in teaching and learning to overcome these challenges. The three principles of UDL are: multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression, all of which work towards removing barriers to learning and supporting a diverse learner (CAST, 2018). With these

principles in hand, teachers can plan curriculum that addresses the diverse learning styles, abilities, and preferences of students, especially in the ESL classroom where language and culture differences may pose a challenge. (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Multiple studies emphasize the positive impact UDL has on engaging students and enhancing their learning. For example, it has been shown that UDL-based instruction approaches increase student motivation and engagement as they have multiple avenues to access and understand information (Meyer et al, 2014). Likewise, the use of multimedia technology and flexible teaching methods enables ESL learners to comprehend complex language concepts effectively, which improves their comprehension and memory. Similarly, the use of multimedia technology and flexible teaching methods helps ESL learners to understand the complex language concepts, improving their comprehension and memory. (Scott et al., 2017). The evidence reviewed in the comprehensive literature on the impact of UDL on teaching for diverse students suggests that UDL can provide a real benefit for teachers who teach in linguistically diverse classrooms and want their students to receive multiple supports through their curriculum and instruction.

Teacher attitudes and beliefs about UDL have been shown to affect teachers' use of UDL principles when working with their students. One study by Al-Azawei, Serenelli, and Lundqvist (2016) demonstrated that when teachers had received training in UDL, they tended to provide their students with an inclusive learning environment and implement practices that were supportive of student learning. However, according to Edyburn (2010), many teachers are unable to effectively implement UDL strategies in the classroom for a variety of reasons, including training that has not been provided, insufficient resources, and lack of time. As a result, teacher education programs need to prepare teachers with the background and skills needed to implement UDL in ESL classrooms.

In addition to teacher perceptions and attitudes about UDL, student perceptions of UDL can also play an important role in the successful implementation of UDL in the classroom. Studies have demonstrated that children who are in an ESL environment appear to have more positive attitudes toward the use of flexible methods of teaching and learning that provide them with multiple ways to access information (Rao, Ok, & Bryant, 2014). Because the language barrier is an ongoing challenge for many children, it is essential that ESL teachers have the UDL strategies they need to use visual supports, for example, in the classroom. Interactive activities, and group work help build confidence and engagement in students (Nation, 2013). These methods not only enhance students' language skills but also help them feel a sense of belonging. Technology is another tool that can be integrated into the UDL framework that further increases its effectiveness. The use of digital materials like e-books, multimedia presentations, and online learning platforms offers a variety of ways to represent and engage with content, making learning more accessible and interactive (Kennedy et al., 2014). Studies have indicated that technology-based UDL interventions can greatly enhance the reading comprehension and vocabulary of ESL learners (Coyne et al., 2012). This is proof of the possibilities of using technology to enhance UDL for creating inclusive learning contexts.

Recent research still shows the benefits of UDL in higher education and ESL settings. The use of flexible instructional designs, for instance, has benefits for students' academic outcomes and participation in university classrooms (Lambert et al., 2023). Likewise, studies have shown that UDL teaching methods are effective in improving critical thinking and communication abilities for ESL learners (Li & Li, 2024). The results confirm the need for implementing inclusive pedagogical approaches in higher education institutions. Moreover, UDL, as a valuable approach, has been recognised for tackling language diversity problems in developing countries. UDL is a pragmatic approach that helps to ensure equitable learning opportunities, especially in contexts like South Punjab where students have diverse educational and cultural backgrounds (Saini, 2024). Teachers can use these strategies to make their classrooms more culturally relevant and flexible, thereby providing more engaging and accessible learning experiences for their ESL students.

The implementation of universal design for learning (UDL) presents many benefits, but there are also challenges associated with it. Some of the top obstacles that teachers face in implementing UDL are large class sizes, lack of institutional support, and limited resources (Asiri, López Contreras, & Al Wadei, 2023). Additionally, the teaching methods and self-centered nature of how we teach inhibit the implementation of the UDL teaching method (Han & Lei, 2024). The challenges facing the implementation of UDL highlight the need for institutional policies and support systems that promote your ability to implement inclusive teaching strategies effectively. There are other considerations of UDL; UDL impacts teacher satisfaction and professional development as well as research findings showing UDL teachers' increased motivation to serve students who are diverse through their increased confidence in meeting the needs of their diverse students (Guskey, 2002). This ultimately enhances the effectiveness of your teaching, and creates a positive classroom atmosphere. Continuing to work collaboratively and through ongoing professional learning will support UDL and its continued implementation in your schools (CAST, 2018).

In conclusion, the UDL framework appears to have significant potential to support progress toward inclusive education when applied to English as a Second Language (ESL). UDL will help increase the engagement of the students through implementing flexible teaching strategies which can lead to increased academic performance and success in learning. However, for it to be successful, teacher training, institutional support, and access to resources must be available. Research needs to continue to investigate context-specific uses of UDL in developing countries for continued support in various educational contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative descriptive research design is used in this study to gain insight into the perception and experience of ESL teachers regarding the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies in ESL classrooms in the University level in South Punjab, Pakistan. The selected approach is qualitative to develop in-depth, contextualized understanding of the practice and perception of UDL principles in authentic classroom settings (engagement, representation, and expression).

Participants and Sampling

The participants comprise ESL teachers of universities in selected public and private universities of South Punjab. Participants are selected using a purposive sampling technique, and they have hands-on experiences with students in ESL classrooms and with a variety of students. There are about 15-20 teachers for semi-structured interview.

Data Collection Method

Data is gathered from semi structured interviews, in which participants are able to freely voice their opinions about the implementation of UDL, classroom issues, and teaching methods. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is used to analyse the collected data.

DATA ANALYSIS

Semi structured interviews with the ESL teachers conducted at the university were audio recorded and transcribed word-for-word. The data transcribed were systematically coded and then carefully examined. Data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify meaningful patterns of data in relation to the research aims. In order to create initial codes from the interviews, they were recreated and then described or summarised into larger categories. For example: teacher beliefs about UDL, how they have put UDL into practice in their classrooms, and obstacles associated with the implementation of UDL in an ESL classroom. When exploring each of the created categories, reference was made back to the participants' original responses in the interview, in order to maintain the validity and depth of understanding found in the data collected. The analysis was not based

on data numbers but on the identification of ideas and patterns, and offered a detailed discussion of the experience and application of UDL in actual classroom settings.

Themes

The themes that were used as the basis of the items in the list of questions were as follows:

Enhanced Learner Engagement through UDL based Instruction

Improved Understanding through Multiple Means of Representation

Flexible Expression Enhances Student Confidence

Lack of Professional Training in UDL Implementation

Linguistic and Pedagogical Diversity Challenges

DISCUSSION

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed as described in the previous section to answer the research questions. Answers received from participants were systematically organized and analysed. The thematic analysis of the collected data is presented in each category of the data.

Enhanced Learner Engagement through UDL based Instruction

The majority of the teachers reported that the application of the strategies of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) contributes much to their students' engagement in ESL classes. They showed an awareness that a variety of pedagogical methods, including using multimedia, flexible learning tasks and interactive activities in the classroom, can engage students and stimulate their participation. The participants also observed that, in comparison with traditional teaching methods that are one size fits all, students who had been less engaged in learning became more engaged in lessons when they were planned in line with UDL guidelines.

A teacher described how they use multiple means of representation and expression to help students engage with the content in a more effective and confident way. Another respondent similarly noted the role of UDL in providing an inviting and stimulating learning space that makes the students feel valued and supported as learners.

One of the teachers said:

UDL makes the class more active, more student-centered, and when using videos, group discussions, and flexible assignments in my classes, even the quiet students get involved.

The results overall suggest that UDL-based instruction is important in supporting the engagement of learners. Based on this, teachers believed that giving students several chances to read, comprehend, and demonstrate the learning should lead to increased interest and engagement, which will create a more dynamic and effective learning environment.

Improved Understanding through Multiple Means of Representation

The general consensus among the teachers was that the multiple means of representation in UDL had a positive impact on the student's understanding of the concepts related to ESL. They said this was due to the variety of presentation methods, including visuals, audio and simplified texts, which assisted with the learner's understanding of complex concepts. The participants felt that this method is advantageous

in the classroom where students' learning abilities and language proficiency were different. This is a contrast to more traditional teaching methods that typically involve one way of transmitting information to students, and for which students may not be able to grasp the information.

When visual aids and examples are used to support instruction, one teacher indicated that students can better make connections and remember what they have learned in the classroom. Another teacher stated that there is less confusion and students learn at their own speed when explained in more than one manner. A teacher stated:

Whether it's via video, charts or simple language I explain on, students get what I'm saying when I explain it to them in a different way. These multiple representations make learning easier for some students, who are not able to understand through lecture alone.

Another teacher added:

Students in ESL classrooms have a variety of backgrounds and require multiple approaches. Using multiple means of presentation helps all students understand at a level they can handle at their ability.

From the responses, it can be seen that multiple means of representation improve the conceptual understanding of the students and their understanding as a whole. Teachers feel when students engage with the content in multiple ways, the students are better able to understand the content and to learn and teach in an inclusive and effective way in an ESL classroom.

Flexible Expression Enhances Student Confidence

Flexible expression is when students are offered several methods to express their understanding of the material, and not only one way like a written exam. Providing opportunities for learners to demonstrate their understanding in a presentation, visual work, discussion, or digital media allows for representation of a variety of learning styles and individual strengths. This is highly recommended in the context of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that makes it a point to provide multiple means of action and expression. Pedagogically, flexible expression minimizes anxiety and enables students to be more engaged with the learning process.

A teacher noted that

A quiet student who was not a natural speaker was especially active when allowed to present ideas orally or through creative projects rather than by a traditional written test, and had shown a greater grasp of the material.

Another teacher made note that

Students who had usually had difficult experiences with written tasks had excelled with the use of visual or digital tools, resulting in better academic achievement.

Furthermore, flexibility in expression gives learners autonomy and a sense of ownership in learning. The sense of having one's voice and preferred communication methods valued leads to increases in students' self efficacy, which in turn has a direct effect on increases in motivation and engagement. It is an inclusive approach that promotes learning as well as the development of key skills like creativity, critical thinking and communication.

To sum up, flexible expression is an important tool for building students' confidence and makes learning more inclusive and supportive for all students to achieve success at their highest potential.

Lack of Professional Training in UDL Implementation

Professional training of teachers is scarce and not structured or continuous enough to make the implementation of UDL actually possible. While teachers are in general very aware of the concept of inclusive education, most teachers have had little hands-on experience with implementing UDL strategies, which affects their ability to apply the theory into meaningful use of UDL in their classrooms. The research shows that teachers use the traditional one size fits all teaching approach, as they are not trained to develop flexible lesson plans.

One teacher said, “We know what it means to accommodate all learners, but we don't know how to adapt content many different ways.” Likewise, another teacher noted that, “UDL is confusing and time consuming without appropriate workshops or demonstrations in real classrooms.”

In spite of these obstacles, teachers always showed a clear student-centered purpose. Their major concern was to assure equitable and enriching learning for all students, regardless of their ability, background or learning style. The objective for teachers was to provide an atmosphere in which all students were encouraged to be active and confident learners.

Another teacher said,

“So we are trying to ensure that an individual is not left behind even if we don't get them every strategy.”

Another said “Students must grasp concepts in their own terms but proper guidance is required to achieve this.”

This is an indication that teachers aren't against UDL; rather, there is a lack of professional preparation. They aim for the same thing as inclusive education: to increase the engagement, understanding, and confidence of students and need to be provided systematic training and resources to achieve this.

Linguistic and Pedagogical Diversity Challenges

Despite the challenges involved in implementing strategies such as 'universal design for learning' (UDL), these strategies create new types of challenges for both students and teachers who are linguistically and/or educationally diverse. With most school classrooms having students with heterogeneous linguistic backgrounds and a wide variety of learning needs that need to be met at the same time, providing equitable access to Content and Instruction for All students may not be an option for teachers. This also means that variations in Language proficiency may impact students' levels of comprehension and that there are a variety of ways that students may prefer to learn which may require different delivery methods.

As a result, the overwhelming majority of the teachers indicated that they felt challenged simultaneously meeting both the Linguistic Diversity and the variety of Various Teaching Needs of their students, particularly when no or few teacher training and supportive materials are available to help them do this. One of the teachers stated,

"Students who speak different languages at home need additional support and it is difficult to provide this support quickly." One of the other teachers stated, "No one way of Teaching all students will meet the needs of every student and will be successful in addressing the needs of every student at any one time in the classroom."

The findings from the report show that if the nuances that exist in the multisensory and/or differentiated instruction to teach linguistically and/or educationally diverse students are not considered through the provision of appropriate interventions and supports for students who are linguistically and/or pedagogically diverse in the classroom, these two types of diversity will impact a teacher's ability to

provide effective instruction. To assist the teacher in his/her ability to provide equitable access to the content and the instruction provided to students of diverse backgrounds, effective teaching practises are flexible and will facilitate teachers' ongoing professional growth.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to investigate how university ESL teachers perceived and applied Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies in ESL classes. The data shows that UDL principles have a positive perception of teachers and they recognize the value of UDL for supporting the needs of learners and inclusive learning. UDL strategies were observed to improve students' engagement, participation and learning experiences by teachers. While their attitudes are positive, there are several problems in implementing UDL in practice. Several significant issues exist, including inadequate time to implement UDL, insufficiently trained staff, an inadequate supply of appropriate resources, and little or no institutional support. These are all barriers that hinder the implementation of UDL by teachers. Information from the literature suggests that additional support for teachers to develop their ability to successfully apply UDL principles can come from program-type and (or) higher education institution-level professional development programs. With the addition of adequate resources, training opportunities, and policy-level support, the use of inclusive teaching strategies in ESL contexts should improve dramatically. Additionally, the successful implementation of UDL in ESL classroom settings is dependent upon the manner in which teachers address practical issues surrounding UDL. Further studies could explore the capacity for UDL to be implemented on a national scale and evaluate UDL implementation processes across other educational settings to validate the findings of this research.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The small sample size and readiness n and limited scope of the study populations as ESL teachers from a specific area means that the results of this study cannot fully generalise to other university ESL teachers from different regions. The qualitative nature of this research data produced informal or subjective responses and interpretations. Additionally, both the amount of time and resources available, posed limitations on the extent of data that could be collected. Further understandings of the use of UDL strategies should include a larger sample, as well as samples across variety of institutions in future research that adopts mixed methods research approaches.

REFERENCES

- Al-Azawei, A., Serenelli, F., & Lundqvist, K. (2016). Universal design for learning (UDL): A content analysis of peer-reviewed journal papers from 2012 to 2015. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 16(3), 39–56.
- Asiri, M. J., López Contreras, J., & Al Wadei, A. (2023). Challenges in implementing universal design for learning in higher education.
- CAST. (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2. CAST.
- Coyne, M. D., Pisha, B., Dalton, B., Zeph, L. A., & Smith, N. (2012). Literacy by design: A universal design for learning approach for students with significant intellectual disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 33(3), 162–172.
- Edyburn, D. L. (2010). Would you recognize universal design for learning if you saw it? Ten propositions for new directions for the second decade of UDL. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 33(1), 33–41.
- Gunderson, L. (2013). English-only instruction and immigrant students in secondary schools: A critical examination. Routledge.

- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3), 381–391.
- Han, X., & Lei, J. (2024). Barriers to implementing inclusive teaching strategies in higher education. *Journal of Educational Change*, 25(1), 45–60.
- International Journal of Educational Research*, 118, 102–115.
- Kennedy, M. J., Thomas, C. N., Meyer, J. P., Alves, K. D., & Lloyd, J. W. (2014). Using multimedia to enhance reading comprehension among ESL learners. *Journal of Special Education Technology*, 29(2), 35–44.
- Lambert, R., Walker, A., & Zimmerman, K. (2023). Flexible instructional design in higher education: Impacts on student engagement. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(4), 567–582.
- Li, X., & Li, Y. (2024). Universal design for learning in ESL classrooms: Enhancing critical thinking and communication skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, 58(1), 123–140.
- Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST Professional Publishing.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Rao, K., Ok, M. W., & Bryant, B. R. (2014). A review of research on universal design educational models. *Remedial and Special Education*, 35(3), 153–166.
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal design for learning*. ASCD.
- Saini, M. (2024). Inclusive education practices in developing regions: A case study of South Punjab. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(2), 210–225.
- Scott, L., Temple, P., & Marshall, D. (2017). UDL strategies and student engagement in ESL classrooms. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(5), 923–930.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Zaman, M., Jawad, M., & Buriro, G. S. (2025). Understanding ESL lecturers' beliefs and teaching methodologies in the context of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Karachi. *ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences*, 4(1), 447. <https://doi.org/10.63056/ACAD.004.01.0095>