

Designing for Diversity: Integrating Universal Design for Learning into EFL Reading Comprehension Instruction

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BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Unlike first-language readers, EFL learners need to maneuver the cognitive demands relating to text comprehension while simultaneously processing the linguistic requirements of an additional language. This challenge is often complicated by limited vocabulary, low syntactic knowledge, and not enough exposure to authentic English texts.

In such contexts, one-size-fits-all instructional approaches are increasingly regarded as both pedagogically deficient and exclusionary. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework that was designed for inclusive practices and grounded in neuroscience and cognitive research, offers a principled, evidence-based response to these challenges.

RESEARCH QUESTION

"How can the three core UDL principles be translated into concrete, accessible instructional strategies for EFL reading comprehension?"

Guided by findings from the 2025 systematic review

EVIDENCE BASE — SYSTEMATIC REVIEW (PRISMA)

1,110

Records identified
6 databases

944

After deduplication
166 duplicates removed

56

Full texts retrieved
Title/abstract screening

7

Studies included
Empirical, Scopus-indexed

NVivo

Data extraction
Thematic coding

A PRACTICE-ORIENTED FRAMEWORK FOR EFL TEACHERS

MAKING READING ACCESSIBLE

Principle 1 — Multiple Means of Representation

- Multimodal text presentation: audio, visuals, graphic organizers, pre-reading vocabulary maps
- Tiered text differentiation: same content at varied levels of linguistic complexity
- Text-to-speech tools & digital annotation features where technology is available
- Low-tech alternatives: read-aloud sessions, peer reading pairs, illustrated vocabulary charts

DIVERSIFYING HOW LEARNERS RESPOND

Principle 2 — Multiple Means of Action & Expression

- Differentiated tasks: oral retelling, visual mapping, written response — learner's choice
- Collaborative reading: reciprocal reading, jigsaw activities, peer annotation tasks
- Portfolio-based assessment capturing comprehension evidence across multiple modes
- Reduce gap between receptive understanding and productive written output in EFL

SUSTAINING MOTIVATION & SELF-REGULATION

Principle 3 — Multiple Means of Engagement

- Learner choice and text autonomy: a structured selection from a curated collection of texts
- Reading materials that are culturally relevant and that reflect learners' contexts and identities
- Self-monitoring tools: reading logs; comprehension checklists; reflective journals
- Feedback structures that can sustain motivation and build self-regulation.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

72%

Studies in USA

57%

Middle school settings

0%

EFL/MENA contexts

- UDL significantly improves reading comprehension for diverse learners — including those with disabilities, language barriers, and academic difficulties
- Technology-enhanced UDL environments (TTS, adaptive e-books, digital platforms) show the strongest effects on decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension
- Teacher scaffolding is indispensable: purely student-driven autonomy can dilute effectiveness (Hall et al., 2015; Nieves et al., 2024)
- UDL adapts across age groups & settings — but its EFL-specific application remains empirically unvalidated

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Resource constraints

low-tech alternatives needed for resource-limited EFL contexts

Teacher training gap

EFL-specific professional development is largely absent

Curriculum rigidity

Standardised syllabi and fixed assessment formats

Measurement fidelity

Autonomy complicates Impact attribution and fidelity tracking

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GRADUAL IMPLEMENTATION

01

Start with engagement

Introduce structured learner choice into existing tasks — text options, response format selection, self-reflection. No additional resources required.

02

Adapt, don't create

Gloss vocabulary in the textbooks, add visual supports, restructure tasks for collaboration. Audit existing materials before developing new ones.

03

Build peer learning

Co-design inclusive lessons, share adapted materials, observe practice. Peer collaboration accelerates UDL integration without formal training.

04

Low-tech first

Establish UDL practice through non-digital means before introducing technology. Avoid letting tech barriers derail the broader inclusive agenda.

CONCLUSION

UDL provides an evidence-based framework to address the challenges of inclusive EFL reading instruction. By translating its three core principles into flexible and practical strategies, UDL permits teachers to proactively respond to the variability of learners instead of retroactively accommodating their individual differences. Grounded in empirical evidence and adapted to real classroom constraints, this paper can therefore equip and enable EFL teachers to design reading instruction that does not just accommodate diversity but is genuinely built for it. The path forward necessitates both the commitment of teachers and institutional-level support, especially in non-Western and resource-constrained educational contexts where inclusive pedagogy remains underrepresented in both research and practice.

KEY REFERENCES

El Boukhrissi & Brigui (2025). *IJLLS*, 7(2), 283–313. · CAST (2018). *UDL Guidelines v2.2*. · Meyer, Rose & Gordon (2014). *UDL: Theory and Practice*. · Hall et al. (2015). *Learning Disability Quarterly*. · Daley et al. (2020). *Reading & Writing Quarterly*. · Nieves et al. (2024). *South African Journal of Education*.