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**SMALL-GROUP METHOD FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO
ECONOMICS STUDENTS
WITH DIFFERENT KNOWLEDGE LEVELS**

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Abstract.

Aim. The aim of the article is to justify the use of the small-group method for teaching English to economics students who enter higher education with different initial levels of language proficiency, and to develop a practically applicable model of differentiated group work for English for Specific Purposes courses in economics.

Methods. The study is theoretical. It combines a problem review of recent publications on differentiated instruction, English for Specific Purposes, collaborative learning, digital differentiation, grouping by ability, and language learning in economics and business education using methods of comparison, synthesis, pedagogical modelling, and interpretive analysis.

Results. The paper demonstrates that mixed level English groups of economic students create a double challenge: students differ both in linguistic level and in their ability to study professional content, participate in discussion, use business vocabulary, and perform communicative tasks. A review of recent literature shows that differentiated



instruction, flexible grouping, blended learning, AI-supported scaffolding, and collaborative formats can improve their learning outcomes when they are pedagogically coordinated. On this basis, the article proposes a six-stage model of small-group instruction for economics students with different initial knowledge levels: diagnostic entry mapping, flexible group formation, task differentiation by output and support, role distribution inside groups, staged feedback, and cyclic regrouping. The authors argue that the small-group method is most effective when groups are heterogeneous for problem solving, and temporarily homogeneous for focused micro-support; when tasks share one professional theme and differ in linguistic load; and when each student receives a function that is cognitively meaningful and socially visible. The article also specifies principles for task design in ESP for economics, including layered terminology work, scaffolded business communication, data interpretation, mini-case discussion, and peer explanation.

Conclusions. The small-group method is a structured pedagogical environment that makes mixed-level ESP classrooms more inclusive, interactive, and professionally relevant. For economics students, it helps connect language development with business reasoning, negotiation, interpretation of data, and problem solving. The proposed model can be used in Ukrainian university English courses as a practical framework for planning lessons, assessment, and classroom interaction. At the same time, its effectiveness depends on planning, teacher supervision, and individual accountability.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, economics students, collaborative learning, higher education, small-group method.



МЕТОД МАЛИХ ГРУП У НАВЧАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ СТУДЕНТІВ-ЕКОНОМІСТІВ ІЗ РІЗНИМ ПОЧАТКОВИМ РІВНЕМ ЗНАНЬ

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Анотація.

Мета. Мета статті – обґрунтування доцільності використання методу малих груп при навчанні англійської мови студентів економічних спеціальностей з різним початковим рівнем мовної підготовки, а також розроблення практичної моделі диференційованої групової роботи на заняттях з англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням.

Методи. Дослідження поєднує огляд сучасних публікацій з питань диференційованого навчання, навчання англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням, колаборативного навчання, групування здобувачів мовної освіти – майбутніх економістів за рівнем підготовки з використанням методів порівняння, синтезу, педагогічного моделювання та інтерпретаційного аналізу.

Результати. У статті показано, що групи студентів економічних спеціальностей з різним рівнем англомовної компетентності становлять виклик для викладачів іноземної мови: студенти відрізняються не лише за рівнем мовної підготовки, а і за здатністю опановувати професійний зміст, брати участь у дискусії, використовувати ділову лексику та виконувати комунікативні завдання. Огляд сучасної літератури засвідчує, що застосування диференційованого та змішаного навчання, гнучкий розподіл студентів по підгрупам, підтримка освітньої



траєкторії за допомогою засобів штучного інтелекту та формат колаборації(співпраці) у групі можуть покращувати результати навчання за умови їх педагогічно узгодженого застосування. У статті запропоновано модель навчання в малих групах для студентів економічних спеціальностей із різним початковим рівнем знань, яка складається зі 6 стадій: вхідної діагностики, гнучкого формування груп, диференціації завдань за результатом і рівнем підтримки, розподілу ролей в групах, поетапного зворотного зв'язку і циклічного перегрупування поміж групами. Доведено, що метод малих груп є найбільш ефективним тоді, коли групи є гетерогенними при застосуванні проблемного навчання і тимчасово гомогенними для мікропідтримки викладача; коли кожен студент отримує завдання, що має когнітивну значущість. У статті також конкретизовано принципи розроблення завдань при викладанні англійської мови економічного спрямування, зокрема поетапну роботу з термінологією, ділову комунікацію, інтерпретацію даних, обговорення кейсів.

Висновки. Метод малих груп це структуроване педагогічне середовище, яке сприяє інтерактивності та релевантності змішаних за рівнем знань англійської мови студентських аудиторії. Для студентів економічних спеціальностей він сприяє поєднанню розвитку їх мовних навичок з розвитком економічного професійного мислення, ведення переговорів, інтерпретації даних. Запропонована модель може бути використана при викладанні дисципліни англійської мови за фаховим спрямуванням в українських ЗВО як практична основа для планування занять, оцінювання та організації взаємодії «студент – викладач». Водночас її ефективність залежить від ретельного планування, педагогічного супроводу та індивідуальної відповідальності студентів.

Ключові слова: англійська мова за професійним спрямуванням, студенти економічних спеціальностей, метод малих груп.



Introduction. The teaching of English to economics students in higher education takes place in groups where the initial level of knowledge can differ. In one classroom, a teacher may work with students with initial B2 English expertise, who confidently analyse graphs, participate in discussions, and write short business messages in English, while others struggle with A2 level basic grammar patterns, limited vocabulary, or the fear of speaking before the peers. Such heterogeneity is not accidental. It results from unequal school preparation, particularly low language teaching quality in rural regions of Ukraine, different access to private tutoring, students' variations in motivation, and the growing diversification of their educational trajectories. In economics programmes, the difficulty is intensified by the fact that English makes a tool for professional communication, access to international sources, and interpretation of economic information. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and its Companion Volume (CEFR) shifted attention from isolated language items to communicative action, mediation, plurilingual resources, and task performance in real contexts [1].

In practice, this means that university English teaching should not be reduced to explanation of grammar and “parroting” of vocabulary. It should create conditions in which students learn to solve communicative tasks together, negotiate meaning, interpret professional content. For economics students, such situations include describing trends, discussing markets, writing e-mails, preparing short presentations, and participating in project work.

At the same time, the presence of different initial language knowledge levels often pushes teachers toward two equally unproductive extremes. The first is levelling downward: the lesson is simplified in order not to lose weaker students, while stronger students are staying passive. The second is silent segregation: the teacher informally addresses high performers, while less prepared learners are not engaged. Both approaches weaken motivation, reduce interaction, and narrow the practical value of



English. What is needed instead is a method that allows the whole class to work on a common topic.

The small-group method offers such a possibility. It enables teachers to distribute cognitive and linguistic load, and maintain participation for students with different levels of initial language knowledge. However, small groups do not automatically solve the problem. Without diagnostic planning, suitable task design, and clear rules, group work may again reproduce inequality: stronger students dominate, weaker ones remain silent. Therefore, the pedagogical question is not whether to use small groups, but how to organise small-group learning as a real mechanism of differentiated ESP instruction for economics students with different initial knowledge levels.

Literature review. Recent research on differentiated professional English instruction provides a useful basis for analysing this problem, although the specific combination of economic English combined with mixed entry language level remains underexplored. Early works on differentiated English instruction in non-language universities already argued that foreign language teaching must account for unequal learner readiness and should vary materials, and assessment procedures [2]. This line of reasoning remains relevant.

However, studies of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes' effectiveness confirm that relevance of content and learner autonomy are decisive. Mostafavi, Mohseni and Abbasian demonstrate that the effectiveness of ESP courses depends on whether students and teachers perceive content as authentic and needs-based[3]. In the context of economics education, this is especially important because students are more likely to engage when English tasks are linked to business situations, or international communication. Shumeiko and Nypadymka, in their analysis of digital independent studies in ESP, show that digital support can strengthen autonomy, which is particularly valuable when students enter the same course with unequal motivation [4].



Independent work does not resolve classroom inequality; it must be coordinated with pedagogical structures.

Research on Business English materials also reveals why uniform tasks often fail mixed groups. Jiang's evaluation of Business English textbooks shows that even widely used materials do not always offer sufficient resources for critical thinking and communicative teaching [5]. For mixed-level economics students, textbook dependence may widen the gap between learners: stronger students can handle the task intellectually, whereas weaker students just read and translate the legend. This supports the need for teacher-designed differentiated tasks.

More recent work on digital differentiation gives direct evidence that differentiated language teaching can improve outcomes. Meşe and Mede report that digital differentiation positively affects achievement and self-regulation [6]. Holovatska likewise demonstrates the pedagogical value of blended learning for English as a foreign language, where flexibility of access, and task completion are dominant [7]. These studies suggest that mixed-level ESP groups benefit when classroom work is combined with differentiated digital tasks. For economics students, pre-class vocabulary banks, model phrases, and other templates can reduce anxiety.

Another important line of research concerns the relationship between language proficiency, prior knowledge, and academic success. Wang, Schultz and Huang show that English language proficiency and prior knowledge correlate with student success in an international programme for accountants [8]. This finding is highly relevant for economics students because it confirms that language and professional subject understanding are a single whole. In heterogeneous groups, some learners struggle both with English and economics. Consequently, effective group work must integrate linguistic scaffolding with support in professional area.

Terletska's bibliometric analysis of differentiated language teaching demonstrates the growing importance of the topic [9]. At the same time, the author notes that many current studies still address differentiated instruction at the level of



broad principles. This gap is particularly visible in ESP for economics, where teachers need frameworks for organising interaction, distributing roles, and designing layered tasks.

Studies of collaborative learning and group interaction offer further insight. Research on personality-sensitive teaching shows that participation in small groups depends on classroom climate, role distribution, and individual psychological characteristics [10]. Fatima, Rengur and Mansur also confirm that collaborative learning can increase students' active participation [11]. These findings caution against idealising group work. A small group becomes productive only if each member has a visible function.

The newest strand of literature concerns AI-enhanced instruction. Ilma and Rohmah argue that AI-related competence is becoming part of contemporary ESL teaching, and its educational value depends on teacher readiness [12]. Jmaiel and co-authors show that AI-supported self-directed work can improve ESP writing skills [13], Farooqui demonstrates the value of vocabulary work for ESP learners' understanding of collocations [16]. Wittmann, Wulf and Wieser, in a systematic review of business and economics higher education, conclude that flipped formats tend to work [18]. Although these studies are not all focused on heterogeneous proficiency groups, they collectively suggest that small-group instruction is most effective when supported by differentiated pre-task preparation, targeted language resources, and post-task reflection.

Finally, literature on grouping itself is useful for clarifying what small groups should and should not do. Johnston and colleagues critically discuss grouping by ability [15]. Franks, Merchant and Sappor show that ability grouping may reproduce inequities [16]. For mixed-level English classrooms in economics, this means that stable divisions are pedagogically risky. More promising is flexible grouping.

Previously unresolved aspects of the general problem.



Despite the growing body of studies on differentiated English teaching, several aspects remain insufficiently resolved. Many publications discuss differentiation at a general pedagogical level, not regarding professional, particularly, economic, language teaching. Research on Business English often concentrates on materials, digital tools, or assessment, while classroom interaction itself is treated as secondary. Studies on grouping frequently focus on school education, not the higher education ESP. Also, there is still limited methodological guidance on how to combine heterogeneous proficiency, and equal participation in one class without fragmenting the class.

Therefore, the unresolved part of the problem lies in the absence of a coherent pedagogical model that would allow university teachers to use small-group work.

Aim of the article. The aim of the article is to substantiate the pedagogical effectiveness of the small-group method for teaching English to economics students with different initial knowledge levels and to propose a structured model for its implementation in higher education ESP courses.

Results and discussion. In economics education, English functions as a mediating professional language. Students have to be able to comment on business situations, interpret charts, write e-mails, and engage in short negotiations. Therefore, different initial knowledge levels affect classroom performance in several interconnected dimensions. The first is linguistic: students differ in grammar knowledge, vocabulary size, fluency. The second is procedural: they differ in how quickly they can understand exercises. The third is disciplinary: some students already recognise economic concepts, whereas others are struggling with basic language notions. The fourth is social: weaker students often avoid speaking roles.

For this reason, the pedagogical task is broader than to “mix stronger and weaker students”. The teacher must create a structure in which professional communication is shared, with different routes of participation. Small-group work becomes useful because it reduces the affective pressure of whole-class speaking, and makes it possible to vary support.



There are several principles of small group work at the ESP classes. The first principle is diagnostic visibility. A teacher needs a realistic entry map of students' levels. Diagnostic information may include a short placement task, a vocabulary check focused on economics, a speaking micro-task.

The second principle is flexible grouping. Research on grouping warns against fixed ability labels [14; 15]. In the context of English for economics, at least three types of grouping are useful. Heterogeneous groups are effective for discussion, case analysis, and problem solving. Temporarily more homogeneous groups are useful for targeted mini-support. Interest-based or task-based groups are useful in project work. The key idea is rotation.

The third principle is common theme with differentiated load. All groups may work on the same economic topic, for example, inflation, but tasks should vary in language complexity, and support tools. This protects the unity of the lesson.

The fourth principle is meaningful role distribution. Typical roles may include discussion leader, vocabulary monitor, note taker, presenter, questioner. Importantly, roles should rotate. A weaker student may begin as vocabulary monitor but should gradually move toward presenting or explaining.

The last but not the least principle is visible accountability, which balances collaboration with personal responsibility.

Here, we have introduced a six-stage model of the small-group method for mixed-level economics students, which is also shown at fig. 1.

Stage 1. Diagnostic entry mapping. At the beginning of a course the teacher collects information about students' general English level.

Stage 2. Flexible group formation. Groups of three or four students are optimal. In a heterogeneous group, one stronger learner may serve as interactional catalyst. Instead, variation in strengths is preferable. At selected points, the teacher can create temporary micro-groups.

Stage 3. Differentiated task design. The teacher prepares one professional theme and several task layers. The topic is shared, but linguistic support differs. This principle can be applied to all major skill areas.

For reading, weaker groups may receive glossed terminology, while stronger groups work with authentic fragments. For speaking, weaker groups may begin with role cards, whereas stronger groups conduct mini-negotiation. For writing, weaker students may transform notes into a structured paragraph, while stronger students write a short recommendation. For listening, groups may receive differentiated pre-listening vocabulary and post-listening output tasks.

Stage 4. In-group interaction and teacher mediation.

Stage 5. Staged feedback. Feedback should occur on three levels: immediate group-level feedback; public feedback after the task, and individual consolidation.

Stage 6. Cyclic regrouping and progression. Group composition should change according to the next lesson's goal. A group that was heterogeneous for case discussion may become temporarily more homogeneous for grammar revision. The purpose of the model is to support movement toward more autonomous professional communication.

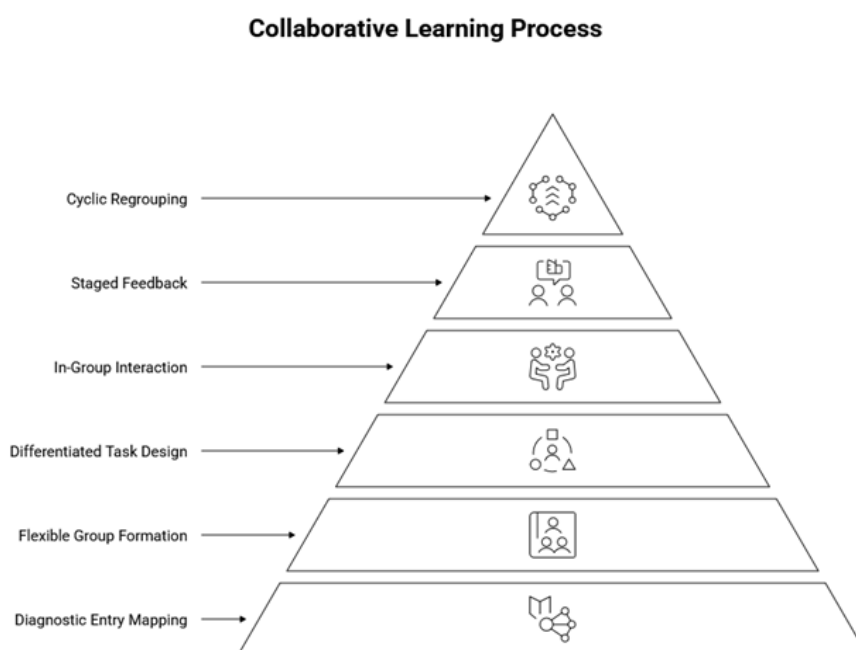


Fig.1. Collaborative learning stages.



Small-group work becomes particularly effective when tasks reflect authentic communicative logic of economics rather. One productive format is data commentary. Students receive a graph, table, or short market report and prepare a spoken or written interpretation. Differentiation can occur through the amount of data, complexity of lexical support, or degree of inference expected

A second format is the mini-case. Students read a brief business scenario, for example, a start-up entering a new market, and discuss possible responses. Weaker students may work with structured options and phrase banks; stronger students may formulate recommendations.

A third format is layered vocabulary work. In small groups, students can classify word combinations, find patterns in sample texts, and then apply them.

A fourth format is peer explanation. One student or pair explains a concept to others. This task is especially powerful in heterogeneous groups, however, it is important to mind not to reproduce the speech of the most fluent student.

A fifth format is negotiation and meeting simulation. Here, weaker students can receive support cards with useful phrases, while stronger students work with fewer prompts and greater time pressure.

Assessment is often the weakest element in students' groups with different language knowledge level. If only group performance is assessed, stronger students may answer for the whole group, thus, "covering" the less efficient students. If only individual performance is assessed, collaboration may become superficial. This states the necessity of a balanced model in assessment.

The main assessment component is diagnostic assessment at the beginning of a module. This establishes the initial point. The second component is formative observation during group work, and the third component is brief assessment collected after collaborative tasks: a short business e-mail, a vocabulary transfer exercise, or a one-minute commentary. The fourth component is self-assessment. The fifth component is periodic assessment, for example interpretation of data, oral interaction,



or short professional writing. In this context, CEFR proficiency scales are helpful because they shift evaluation to observable descriptors.

Importantly, assessment criteria should distinguish between core outcomes and expanded outcomes. Core outcomes are achievable for all learners, such as using basic trend vocabulary or participating in a dialogue. Expanded outcomes challenge stronger students, for example independent argumentation. Such layered criteria make mixed-level classrooms more equitable.

The proposed model is not without risks, which all include false heterogeneity, when one strong student performs most of the linguistic work; over-differentiation, when the class loses shared academic identity, and, significantly, excessive teacher workload. The small-group method is not easy to implement in English classes for economics students with different initial knowledge levels. Its effectiveness does not depend on the choice of method itself, it depends on the teacher's ability to manage diversity, design balanced tasks, and maintain student engagement. In real classroom conditions, several aspects may reduce the impact of this approach.

One of the main challenges is the strong heterogeneity of student groups. In many university classes, students begin the course with significantly different levels of general English, ranging from A2 to C1, academic vocabulary, speaking skills, and readiness to work with professional economic content. In such conditions, weaker students may become passive observers. As a result, group work may reproduce inequality instead of reducing it. This problem becomes especially visible in tasks that require spontaneous speaking on economic issues in English.

Another difficulty concerns the preparation of differentiated materials and the teachers' resources. The small-group method requires the teacher to create tasks with a shared professional focus but different levels of linguistic complexity, support, and expected output, which is time-consuming and methodologically demanding. A teacher must think about the topic and language goals, how to distribute roles, predict communication barriers, and provide enough scaffolding without oversimplifying the



learning process. In Ukrainian higher education, where teachers often have heavy workloads of 450-900 academic hours per year, this level of preparation may be difficult to sustain on a regular basis.

Classroom management is also a serious issue. Small-group work in mixed-level English classrooms can easily become noisy, fragmented, and difficult to supervise. The teacher must monitor several groups simultaneously, and ensure that all students are participating. In large academic groups, it is not always possible to give equal attention to every team. This may lead to uneven quality of interaction.

Student attitudes may also complicate implementation. Not all learners initially accept collaborative work method, especially if they are used to teacher-centred instruction or tend to behave introverted. Students with low proficiency may experience anxiety, embarrassment, or avoidance, while highly proficient students may perceive group work as slowing down their progress. In economics-oriented classes, some learners are more motivated by individual performance indicators than by cooperation, which means that group work must be introduced gradually.

Finally, institutional conditions may limit successful implementation. Fixed curricula, limited classroom time, large student numbers, insufficient digital support, and lack of methodological training for teachers can all reduce the practical feasibility of the small-group method. For this reason, its introduction should be realistic and flexible, supported by the universities administration as a core pedagogical policy of the institution. It is most effective when supported by careful planning, gradual adaptation, role distribution, and a balance between responsibility.

Even with these limitations, the small-group method remains one of the most promising responses to mixed entry knowledge in economics-oriented English, if it is understood as a structured differentiated system.

Conclusions. The study has shown that teaching English to economics students with different initial knowledge levels requires a pedagogical model that combines a common professional focus with differentiated participation trajectories. The analysis



of recent literature confirms that heterogeneous language groups cannot be effectively taught through uniform tasks. At the same time, the reviewed research demonstrates that differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, blended formats, and flexible grouping provide a strong theoretical basis for a more adaptive model of ESP teaching.

The article argues that the small-group method can perform this function when it is organised. Its pedagogical value lies in reducing the pressure of whole-class performance, and supporting interaction around meaningful tasks. However, these effects do not emerge automatically. They depend on diagnostic planning, flexible group formation, differentiated task design, and accountability.

As a result of the analytical synthesis, a six-stage model of small-group work was proposed: diagnostic entry mapping, flexible group formation, differentiated task design, teacher-mediated in-group interaction, staged feedback, and cyclic regrouping. The model is especially suitable for English for economics because it links language learning with mini-case discussion, negotiation, and professionally oriented writing and speaking. It also allows teachers to maintain one thematic classroom space.

Thus, the aim of the article has been achieved. The pedagogical potential of the small-group method for mixed-level economics cohorts has been substantiated. Further research should test the proposed model empirically, compare its effectiveness in different university contexts, and examine how it influences professional communicative competence over time.

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