

A case study on the implementation of differentiated instruction in ELT classroom

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Abstract

This study focused on how English teachers implement differentiated instruction (DI) in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms and the challenges they faced. Differentiated Instruction is a relevant approach because it enables educators to adapt learning content, processes, and products to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This research used a qualitative method with a case study design. The participants were one English teacher and tenth-grade students at a public senior high school in Majalengka. Data were collected through classroom observations, and interviews. The findings showed that the teacher used diagnostic assessments to categorize students as auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learners. Learning materials and activities were then adapted accordingly. However, the study also identified challenges, including limited resources, a lack of training, and difficulties managing student groups. The discussion highlights how, with proper support, DI can enhance student engagement and comprehension. In conclusion, DI is an effective and inclusive ELT strategy, but its success depends on continuous teacher development and institutional support.

Keywords: *Differentiated instruction; English Language Teaching; case study.*

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) in secondary schools often encounters complex challenges, particularly due to the diversity of students' learning styles and abilities. Such differences can significantly affect learning effectiveness when teachers apply a uniform approach (Tomlinson, 2014). In the ELT context, adaptive strategies are essential to ensure that learning materials, processes, and outcomes align with each student's needs. One relevant approach is *Differentiated Instruction* (DI), which enables teachers to adjust content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles.

Although differentiated instruction has been widely discussed in the literature, its implementation in ELT classrooms in Indonesia remains limited. Previous studies have mainly focused on teachers' attitudes towards differentiated instruction (Maruf, 2023) or its application in other subjects, such as mathematics (Kamal, 2021), without providing a detailed depiction of both the implementation and challenges of differentiated instruction

in English language learning at the secondary level. This indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed.

Based on this background, the present study formulates two specific research questions: (1) How do English teachers implement *Differentiated Instruction* in ELT classrooms? and (2) What challenges do teachers face in applying DI? The study aims to describe differentiated instruction practices in the field and to identify obstacles that arise during its implementation. The findings are expected to make a theoretical contribution by enriching the literature on differentiated instruction in the ELT context, particularly in Indonesia. Practically, the study provides insights for teachers, schools, and policymakers in designing teacher training, providing supportive facilities, and creating a more inclusive and responsive learning environment that accommodates students' individual differences.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is defined by Tomlinson (2001, 2014) as a teaching approach that adjusts content, process, product, and learning environment according to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. This approach emphasizes proactive and deliberate planning to address student diversity, enabling all learners to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), differentiated instruction is considered an effective strategy to accommodate varied language proficiency levels, learning preferences, and motivation among students (Harmer, 2007). By modifying instructional methods, teachers can create inclusive classrooms that foster both language acquisition and communicative competence.

Several studies have examined differentiated instruction implementation across different subjects and educational levels in Indonesia. For instance, Maruf (2023) investigated EFL teachers' attitudes towards differentiated instruction, highlighting how teachers' perceptions influence its application in classrooms. However, the study did not address other contributing factors such as institutional support or teacher training. Similarly, Kamal (2021) explored differentiated instruction in senior high school mathematics classes, which, while insightful, may not fully represent the unique demands of ELT settings. These gaps underscore the need for further research focusing on differentiated instruction practices in English language classrooms and the specific challenges teachers face.

The theoretical foundation of differentiated instruction is supported by constructivist learning theories, which view learners as active participants in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1972). In practical terms, differentiated instruction involves using varied instructional methods such as cooperative learning, problem-based tasks, and multimodal resources to match students' diverse needs (Chapman & King, 2016). Teachers may also use formative assessments to identify students' readiness and adjust teaching strategies accordingly (Tomlinson, 2014). These principles provide the framework for the present study, which seeks to describe how differentiated instruction is implemented in ELT classrooms and to identify the challenges encountered by teachers in this process.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of differentiated instruction in an English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom.

Respondents

The research was conducted at a public senior high school in Majalengka and involved one English teacher and tenth-grade students. The teacher was selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: having prior experience in applying differentiated instruction strategies, willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations, and working in a classroom with students of diverse learning abilities and styles.

Instruments

Data were collected through two techniques: classroom observation, and interviews. The classroom observation focused on how the teacher adapted the learning content, process, and product according to students' learning styles auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. The interviews with the teacher provided deeper insights into their understanding, motivation, and challenges in implementing differentiated instruction.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which involves familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process allowed the researcher to identify key patterns in how differentiated instruction was practiced and the contextual challenges influencing its application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Implementation of Differentiated Learning in ELT Classroom

The findings revealed that the teacher implemented differentiated instruction (DI) by initially conducting diagnostic assessments to classify students based on their learning styles auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. This classification served as the foundation for adapting lesson content, teaching strategies, and learning activities. For example, auditory learners engaged in listening to educational videos and participating in discussions, visual learners were provided with images and reading materials, while kinesthetic learners participated in hands-on activities such as role plays.

These practices align with Tomlinson's (2001, 2014) principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasize tailoring content, process, and product according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The teacher's use of real-life and contextual topics, such as bullying, Indonesian culture, and traditional foods, reflects the principle of making learning relevant and meaningful to students (Lawrence-Brown, 2004). By incorporating multiple modalities of instruction, the teacher demonstrated responsiveness to learner diversity and promoted active engagement.

However, observations indicated that the learning environment component of differentiated instruction was not fully optimized. Classroom arrangements and routines remained generic, without significant modifications to accommodate different learning needs. This suggests that while content and process differentiation were applied, the environmental aspect still required further development, in line with Tomlinson's (2014) recommendation that the learning environment should actively support diverse learners.

Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Interviews with the teacher highlighted several challenges in implementing differentiated instruction. First, grouping students according to their diagnosed learning styles was sometimes met with resistance, as some students preferred to be with friends rather than in designated learning groups. Second, certain students showed low motivation to participate in both diagnostic assessments and differentiated activities, limiting the strategy's effectiveness. Third, the teacher faced time constraints in preparing varied materials and managing different learning groups during lessons.

Additionally, the teacher pointed out the lack of institutional support, particularly in terms of professional training and provision of adequate facilities. These findings echo Mardhatillah and Suharyadi (2023) study, which identifies time limitations and insufficient training as significant barriers to differentiated instruction implementation in Indonesian classrooms. Despite these challenges, the teacher displayed a strong commitment to applying differentiated instruction as an innovative approach to enhance student engagement in English language learning.

Overall, this study reinforces previous research that differentiated instruction can increase student motivation and participation when implemented with careful planning and adaptation to learner diversity. It also contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence of differentiated instruction practices in an Indonesian senior high school ELT context, an area still underrepresented in the literature. The findings suggest that for differentiated instruction to be fully effective, teachers require ongoing training, resource support, and strategies to manage group dynamics in diverse classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in an English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom at a senior high school in Indonesia, focusing on both teaching practices and the challenges faced by the teacher. The findings indicate that differentiated instruction was applied through differentiation of content, process, and product, based on students' learning styles auditory, visual, and kinesthetic identified via diagnostic assessments. These adaptations enhanced student engagement and aligned with the principles of learner-centered instruction. However, the environmental aspect of differentiated instruction was not fully optimized, as classroom arrangements and routines remained generic.

The study also revealed several challenges, including student resistance to group arrangements, low motivation in some learners, limited time for lesson preparation, and a lack of institutional support in terms of training and facilities. These challenges highlight the need for continuous professional development and systemic support for teachers. Theoretically, the findings contribute to the literature on differentiated instruction in EFL contexts by providing empirical evidence from an Indonesian setting. Practically, the study underscores the importance of strategic planning, flexible grouping, and resource provision to ensure successful differentiated instruction implementation. Future research could explore student perspectives on differentiated instruction or investigate the long-term impact of this strategy on language proficiency.

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