



EVALUATING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH AT SMP IT LHI YOGYAKARTA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the implementation of differentiated instruction in English classes at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta using a qualitative case study approach. Data from observations, interviews, and documentation were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's framework. Findings indicated that teachers differentiated content, process, and product to address diverse student needs. However, challenges such as time constraints, resource limitations, varying student abilities, and insufficient teacher expertise hindered optimal implementation. Despite these barriers, differentiated instruction enhanced student motivation and engagement, particularly among lower-proficiency learners, while advanced students required more challenging tasks. The study recommended teacher training, collaborative planning, and supportive policies to strengthen differentiated instruction practices.

Keywords: differentiated instruction; English language teaching; content; process; product

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of 21st-century education is increasingly shaped by the need to address student diversity in the classroom. Learners differ significantly in readiness, interests, learning styles, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2001; Heacox, 2012). A standardized approach to teaching is often inadequate to meet these varied needs, particularly in skill-based subjects like English. As a core subject in Indonesia's national curriculum, English plays a vital role in preparing students for academic progression and global communication (Ellis, 2003; Harmer, 2007).

However, in practice, English classrooms across Indonesian junior high schools exhibit a wide range of student competencies. Some learners demonstrate high proficiency due to outside exposure, while others struggle due to limited access to learning resources (Gregory & Chapman, 2013; Wahyuni, 2018). This disparity underscores the urgency of implementing more inclusive teaching strategies.

Differentiated instruction has gained recognition as a responsive and inclusive approach to teaching that addresses student diversity. It involves modifying content, process, and product according to students' readiness levels, learning preferences, and interests (Tomlinson, 2017; Santrock, 2011). Rooted in constructivist learning theory, especially Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, differentiated instruction aims to optimize learning through active student participation and tailored support.

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), differentiation allows for flexible groupings, diverse instructional materials, and varied assessments. Research suggests that this approach enhances student engagement, fosters self-directed learning, and supports the development of higher-order thinking skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Subban, 2006; Rahmawati, 2020). It also promotes equity by ensuring that all students—regardless of ability level—are challenged and supported appropriately.

Despite these advantages, teachers often face challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, such as time constraints, limited professional development, and lack of teaching resources (Gregory & Chapman, 2013; Subban, 2006). Many still rely on traditional methods that emphasize uniform content delivery and standardized assessment.

SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta, an Islamic integrated junior high school, serves a diverse student population with varying levels of English proficiency and learning needs. While the school is committed to implementing differentiated instruction, its English teachers encounter multiple barriers, including insufficient training, limited instructional time, and inadequate facilities.

This study investigates how differentiated instruction is implemented in English classes at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta. It focuses on the strategies adopted by teachers, the challenges they encounter, and the impact of differentiated practices on student engagement and learning outcomes. By providing empirical insights and practical recommendations, the research aims to inform educators, school administrators, and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness and inclusiveness of English language education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to investigate the implementation of differentiated instruction in English language teaching at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta. A case study method was deemed appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within a real-life educational context (Yin, 2018). The focus was on understanding how English teachers plan and apply differentiated strategies in response to students' diverse needs.

The research was conducted at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta, an Islamic-integrated junior high school that serves a diverse student population in terms of academic ability, interest, and learning preferences. The participants in this study consisted of English teachers from Grades 7, 8, and 9 who were actively involved in classroom instruction and had attempted to implement differentiated instruction. One school principal was also interviewed to provide insights into school-level policies and support systems related to teaching practices.

Data were collected through three main techniques, namely classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Non-participatory classroom observations were conducted to examine how differentiated instruction was applied during English lessons. The observations focused on the differentiation of content, process, and product as described by Tomlinson (2001, 2017). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating English teachers and the school principal. The interviews aimed to explore teachers' understanding, experiences, challenges, and reflections regarding differentiated instruction. This format allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were also collected through document analysis. Supporting documents such as lesson



plans, student worksheets, and samples of student work were analyzed to further understand how differentiation was embedded in instructional design and assessment practices.

The instruments used included observation guides with indicators for identifying differentiated practices (in content, process, and product), interview protocols consisting of open-ended questions directed at teachers and the principal, and document review checklists used to analyze teaching materials, assessments, and student outputs.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves three stages. The stages included data reduction, where irrelevant data were filtered out to focus on the core issues, data display, where relevant information was organized into matrices and descriptive narratives to facilitate pattern recognition, and conclusion drawing and verification, where recurring themes and interpretations were reviewed for consistency and validity.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation was used by cross-validating data from observations, interviews, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Besides, member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries and interpretations to the participants to verify accuracy and meaning. Referential adequacy was achieved by using relevant literature to support interpretations and contextualize findings within broader theoretical frameworks (Tomlinson, 2017; Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

The study was conducted in three phases. The first is the preparation phase. The researchers developed a research proposal, obtained ethical approval and permission from the school, and prepared research instruments. The second phase is data collection. In this phase, the researchers observed teaching sessions, interviewed participants, and collected supporting documents. The last is analysis and reporting phase. The collected data were analyzed, and findings were compiled into a comprehensive report to inform practical recommendations for English language instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the findings of the study regarding the implementation of differentiated instruction in English language teaching at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta. The discussion is structured around three main themes, namely (1) the strategies used by teachers in differentiating content, process, and product; (2) the challenges and barriers faced in the implementation; and (3) the perceived impact on student learning engagement and outcomes.

1. Strategies for Implementing Differentiated Instruction

The findings indicate that English teachers at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta have made conscious efforts to implement differentiated instruction based on three core dimensions: content, process, and product. These are aligned with Tomlinson's (2001, 2017) model of differentiated instruction, which advocates for adapting instruction to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.

a. Differentiated Content

Teachers adjusted the level and complexity of learning materials according to students' language proficiency. For instance, beginner-level students were given simplified texts with visual aids and basic vocabulary drills, while more advanced learners received authentic texts that included higher-level vocabulary and analytical tasks. Multimedia resources such as videos, pictures, and audio recordings were also

utilized to support comprehension across proficiency levels and cater to students with visual and auditory learning preferences. This approach resonates with Ellis (2003), who emphasized the importance of providing comprehensible input and varied language exposure to support second language acquisition. Moreover, by offering materials that match the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), the teacher enhances the likelihood of engagement and progress for each student. In more details, the following are the strategies for differentiating content.

Firstly, teachers systematically adjusted the complexity and format of instructional content. Lower-proficiency students were often provided with simplified reading passages containing familiar vocabulary, supportive visuals, and guided practice sections. Teachers frequently relied on their own adaptations of national curriculum materials. Meanwhile, advanced students received authentic materials, such as articles on current events and were tasked with higher-order questions.

Secondly, beyond the textbook, teachers incorporated a variety of supporting media, including educational videos, audio dialogues for listening practice, and online vocabulary games. In an observed Grade 8 lesson on environmental issues, students accessed short video documentaries of varying linguistic demand, enabling each group to engage with content suited to their comprehension level. Visually oriented students benefited from infographics, while some lessons integrated music or digital storytelling tools to enhance engagement and language exposure.

Finally, Being an Islamic school, teachers sometimes integrated content reflective of students' identities. For instance, speaking activities involved describing figures from Islamic history or discussing values in everyday life, which resonated with learners' cultural backgrounds and encouraged participation, in line with Sari & Mubarak (2018).

These practices reflect the principle of adjusting the "entry point" to learning (Tomlinson, 2017), maximizing comprehensible input (Ellis, 2003), and ensuring all learners operate within their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

b. Differentiated Process

In terms of instructional methods, teachers applied a variety of techniques, including group discussions, role plays, language games, simulations, and project-based learning. Students were often grouped by ability to ensure peer scaffolding and equitable participation. For instance, kinesthetic learners engaged in physical dramatizations of dialogues, while visual learners created grammar charts and mind maps. These activities not only addressed different learning styles but also provided multiple entry points for accessing the curriculum. Such practices reflect Gregory and Chapman's (2013) assertion that differentiated process involves creating multiple pathways for learning that honor students' diverse ways of processing information. These strategies promote active learning and build classroom communities where all learners can contribute meaningfully. In more details, the following are the strategies.

Teachers employed a wide range of instructional strategies designed to engage different modalities and learning preferences. One typical approach included ability-based and flexible grouping. For example, during grammar practice or project work, students were sometimes grouped homogeneously (by proficiency) for scaffolded tasks. At other times, teachers formed heterogeneous groups to foster peer teaching. Another is choice in learning activities. In this case students were allowed to choose whether to join a reading circle, role-play, or vocabulary card game, based on individual preference. Additionally teachers used hands-on and kinesthetic activities. For example, one teacher



observed that some students learned irregular verbs better by creating and performing actions (e.g., “run/ran,” physically miming the action). Moreover, the teachers employed tiered tasks. Writing assignments often included differentiated prompts. Beginners wrote short, descriptive sentences; more advanced students were challenged with structured paragraphs or open-topic essays.

Scaffolding techniques was used as another strategy. Teachers provide sentence frames, model dialogues, graphic organizers, and visual cues as scaffolds for those who need high support. As confidence grows, these scaffolds are gradually withdrawn to promote independence—a process recommended by Gregory and Chapman (2013). The teachers also incorporated student interests and learning styles. Through informal surveys and classroom observation, teachers gather information on students’ hobbies and learning preferences. An example includes offering science-themed reading for students interested in technology or nature, and drama activities for students who enjoy performing. Visual learners work with mind maps, while auditory learners benefit from repeated listening exercises. Finally, differentiated pacing was also used. Some classes featured a “fast finisher” center, where students who completed core tasks can select enrichment activities—crossword puzzles, idiom challenges, or creative writing topics.

These approaches aligned with constructivist principles (Santrock, 2011), honoring learners as agents in their educational journey and creating "multiple pathways for learning" (Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

c. Differentiated Product

Teachers allowed students to demonstrate their learning through various formats. Assignments included writing essays, designing posters, recording video conversations, and delivering oral presentations. This choice empowered students to use their strengths and creativity to express what they had learned, and it allowed teachers to assess student understanding in more authentic and flexible ways. Heacox (2012) highlights the importance of differentiated product in enhancing student ownership and motivation. When learners can choose how to express their learning, they are more likely to engage deeply with the content and perform to their best abilities. The more detailed information is as follows.

In differentiating product, the teachers offered multiple assessment modalities. Students are regularly given a menu of options for demonstrating understanding: written products (essays, reports, journals), oral products (speeches, debates, video presentations), and visual/creative products (posters, storyboards, comic strips). For major assessment tasks, rubrics are developed to evaluate across different forms while maintaining core learning objectives. A teacher noted that students who feel insecure about their writing skills are often more motivated to participate when permitted to present orally or graphically.

The teachers also used authentic and project-based assessment. Project-based learning is used to encourage meaningful application of English. For a culminating activity in a unit on “Healthy Living,” groups chose to create a video, perform a skit, or produce an informational poster, all accompanied by written English descriptions. Advanced students were encouraged to add research or interviews to their projects.

Finally, teachers also conducted self-assessment and reflection. They implemented exit slips, learning logs, or self-assessment checklists where students reflected on their progress and choose future goals—a practice that supported

metacognition and self-regulation, critical elements in differentiated classrooms (Heacox, 2012).

Such differentiation in “product” increases autonomy, enables expression of diverse talents, and boosts students’ investment in learning (Tomlinson, 2017; Heacox, 2012).

2. Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Although the implementation showed promise, several challenges were identified that hindered the consistent and effective application of differentiated instruction.

a. Limited Time for Planning and Instruction

One of the most pressing concerns voiced by teachers was the lack of time to design and deliver differentiated lessons. Creating multiple versions of materials and assessments, organizing flexible groupings, and monitoring individualized learning paths required more time than was available within the constraints of the school schedule. This mirrors findings by Subban (2006), who argued that differentiated instruction is time-intensive and can be unsustainable without systemic support. The burden of administrative tasks and the rigidity of the curriculum further reduced teachers’ capacity to innovate.

Teachers unanimously cited insufficient time as the greatest hurdle, including designing activities for multiple readiness levels and preparing alternative materials increased workload substantially, and the rigid school schedule left little room for reflection, diagnosis, or adaptation. One teacher reported:

“By the time I finish planning one lesson, the next is already due. Differentiation requires more materials, more organization. I want to do more, but time is always short.”

This aligns with Subban’s (2006) and Rahmawati’s (2020) findings that sustainable differentiation cannot rely solely on individual teacher initiative

b. Wide Range of Student Abilities

Teachers also struggled to meet the needs of students whose English proficiency levels varied widely. Some students required significant scaffolding even with basic vocabulary and grammar, while others were capable of handling advanced, authentic texts. Balancing these diverse needs within a single lesson was challenging and sometimes led to uneven engagement. Tomlinson (2017) acknowledges that addressing diverse readiness levels in one classroom is a complex task that requires ongoing assessment and adaptive teaching. Without clear diagnostic data or support staff, teachers may find it difficult to tailor instruction effectively for all learners.

English proficiency at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta spans a broad continuum—from students with almost no English background to near-fluent speakers. Diagnosing and addressing these differences is a persistent struggle. The challenges include scaffolded materials sometimes failing to adequately challenge the highest performers. Also, no formal system exists for continued diagnostic assessment—teachers often rely on intuition or last year’s exam marks to group students. One advanced student reflected:

“Sometimes the work is too easy. I wish there were more chances to do debates or advanced writing.”

This resonates with Tomlinson’s (2017) argument that differentiated instruction remains most challenging when readiness spans several grade levels.



c. Limited Resources and Facilities

Access to supporting resources such as differentiated textbooks, audiovisual materials, internet access, and digital tools was also a barrier. Some teachers reported using personal devices or preparing materials manually, which was not sustainable in the long term. This aligns with Wahyuni's (2018) research in Indonesian classrooms, where infrastructural limitations were found to impede innovation in teaching practices, particularly in low- and middle-income school contexts.

Classrooms face limited access to computers and reliable internet, scarce differentiated reading materials; teachers create many themselves, which is unsustainable long-term, and over-reliance on the national textbook, which is "one-size-fits-all" and seldom offers tiers. Supporting Wahyuni (2018), Sari & Mubarak (2018) argue, under-resourced environments make authentic, ongoing differentiation difficult, and policy often lags behind practice.

d. Insufficient Professional Development

Although teachers were generally familiar with the concept of differentiated instruction, their practical knowledge and pedagogical skills varied significantly. There was a clear need for continuous professional development focused on classroom strategies, assessment design, and time management for differentiation. Gregory and Chapman (2013) emphasized that ongoing training is critical for empowering teachers to implement differentiated instruction with confidence and fidelity. Without such support, teachers may revert to traditional, one-size-fits-all practices.

Teachers voiced a desire for ongoing training specifically targeting practical strategies, time-saving tools, and assessment in a differentiated classroom. Most have attended only brief workshops that focus on theory rather than classroom realities. The principal acknowledged:

"Professional development is still sporadic and there's little follow-up or mentoring. Teachers at our school are dedicated but need more structured support."

This situation echoes findings from Gregory & Chapman (2013), who stress the need for collaborative planning and learning communities.

3. Impact on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Despite the challenges, differentiated instruction appeared to have a positive impact on student motivation, participation, and perceived learning success. Teachers reported that students were more engaged during lessons when activities aligned with their interests and learning preferences. Students responded positively to choices in assignments and reported feeling more confident when allowed to work at their own pace and in their preferred modalities. This is consistent with Harmer's (2007) claim that personalized learning experiences foster greater student ownership and emotional investment in the learning process. Observation and anecdotal data show that offering choices (in activities, materials, and assessment products) increased student enthusiasm and participation, especially among lower-performing students. Student voice:

"I like when we can choose how to do our projects. Making a video was fun and made it easier to explain my ideas in English."

Moreover, observations indicated that lower- and mid-proficiency students showed greater improvements in confidence and performance when instruction was adjusted to their levels. However, the study also noted that high-achieving students

sometimes lacked sufficient challenge and could become disengaged without more rigorous and extended learning tasks. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) suggest that to sustain deep learning, instruction must not only match students' current readiness but also push them toward higher-order thinking. This finding suggests a need for more strategic use of tiered tasks and enrichment activities, particularly for advanced learners.

The study also showed improved confidence and self-efficacy. Mid- and low-proficiency students, in particular, reported greater comfort in trying new tasks and being less afraid of making mistakes, contributing to a stronger growth mindset. Furthermore, positive changes in classroom dynamics were also revealed. Differentiation led to more collaborative, supportive relationships. Peer tutoring became more common, with stronger students helping others. Classroom management also improved as students became more invested in their own learning process.

Surprisingly, remaining gaps for advanced learners were detected. Some advanced students reported boredom and disengagement when not sufficiently challenged. Teachers acknowledged that extension and enrichment activities were the most difficult aspect to sustain and required more time and expertise. These findings confirm international research (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Tomlinson, 2017) that differentiation, when done well, can lift overall learning but that much depends on how rigorously "challenge" is built into the upper end for advanced learners.

Overall, the findings confirm that differentiated instruction can significantly enhance the inclusivity and responsiveness of English language teaching. However, its successful implementation depends on several interrelated factors, including teacher capacity, institutional support, resource availability, and time allocation. Without addressing these foundational needs, efforts to differentiate instruction may fall short of their transformative potential. Future practice should consider institutionalizing support systems—such as collaborative planning time, targeted professional development, and access to learning technologies—to enable teachers to effectively design and deliver differentiated learning experiences that benefit all students.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of differentiated instruction in English classes at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta reflects both significant progress and persistent challenges in the pursuit of inclusive, student-centered education. This study found that teachers are making intentional efforts to address the diversity of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles through the differentiation of content, process, and product. Such practices, aligned with established pedagogical frameworks (Tomlinson, 2017), have led to increased engagement, confidence, and motivation among students—particularly those with low to moderate English proficiency.

However, the journey toward fully realizing the benefits of differentiated instruction is hampered by several systemic and contextual barriers. Chief among these are insufficient planning and instructional time, the wide spectrum of student abilities within single classrooms, limited resources and technological support, and inconsistent opportunities for sustained professional development. These challenges underscore the reality that effective differentiation cannot rely solely on the efforts of individual teachers; instead, it requires a supportive school environment and enabling educational policies.

Despite these obstacles, the positive impact on student participation and ownership of learning demonstrates the potential of differentiated instruction to transform English language education. Lower-proficiency students, in particular, are better able to



access and master new material when instruction is adapted to their needs, while all learners benefit from increased autonomy and authentic assessment choices. Nonetheless, the study highlights the necessity of providing more challenging and enriching tasks for advanced students to prevent disengagement and to foster their continued growth.

To enhance the efficacy and sustainability of differentiated instruction in similar contexts, several practical steps are recommended. First, teachers need ongoing, hands-on professional development tailored to the realities of the Indonesian classroom, focusing on practical differentiation strategies, formative assessment, and efficient lesson planning. Second, collaborative planning among teachers should be institutionalized to reduce workload and promote sharing of resources and expertise. Third, increased investment in infrastructure, digital resources, and instructional materials is crucial at the school and policy levels. Finally, educational leaders and policymakers should recognize and support differentiation as a core component of quality, equitable language instruction, ensuring that school policies, schedules, and evaluation frameworks foster rather than hinder inclusive teaching.

In summary, while differentiated instruction at SMP IT LHI Yogyakarta is still evolving and faces notable challenges, its impact in promoting student engagement and addressing educational disparities is clear. By building on current successes and addressing structural constraints, differentiated instruction can play a vital role in shaping more effective, fair, and responsive English language education, not only at SMP IT LHI but across Indonesian schools facing similar complexities.

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