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Differentiated Instructions in ESL and EFL Classrooms: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is an English teaching method that emphasizes addressing students' unique characteristics by tailoring instruction based on their interests, learning profiles, and readiness. While the concept has gained attention, a comprehensive analysis of its techniques, aspects, and impacts remains limited. This study aimed to bridge this gap by conducting content analysis on 32 articles related to DI in English classrooms. The researchers summarized, analyzed, and compared data to derive key findings. Results indicate that the study highlights DI's applicability across diverse classroom contexts and levels with diverse techniques. The reviewed articles also address the core aspects of differentiation—content, process, product, and environment—each of which involves distinct techniques, such as tiered and adjusted materials and grouping strategies. Furthermore, it identifies the positive effects of DI on students' academic performance, psychological well-being, classroom environment, and teacher practices. These findings underline the need for more holistic approaches to implementing DI and provide valuable insights for educators aiming to enhance learning outcomes through differentiated strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English language teaching has increasingly emphasized student-centered approaches to accommodate diverse learners' needs (Jacobs & Toh-Heng, 2013). Among these approaches, Differentiated Instruction (DI) stands out as a method that recognizes and values the unique characteristics of each student. DI is one of the methods of English teaching that focuses more on students. It is a pedagogy technique that gives students a variety of methods to deliver knowledge or concepts (Tomlinson, 2017). In the classroom, DI is meant to facilitate students with an interesting learning process so they can engage more in activities (Tasx & Minaz, 2024). Compen et al. (2024) underlined that the fundamental principles of Differentiated Instruction include customizing teaching approaches to students' diverse learning requirements, promoting goal-oriented practices, continuous

assessment, and building a supportive classroom environment. Furthermore, DI is viewed as a comprehensive strategy that incorporates curriculum creation, evaluation, teaching methods, and classroom management, requiring active participation from all stakeholders (Coubergs et al., 2017).

In practice, Differentiated Instruction is applied by considering students' interests, learning profiles, and readiness, with a focus on adapting four key aspects: content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017). Content is what students need to study in the classroom (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). They further stated that to improve students' understanding, content should be varied based on students' learning preferences. Learning materials should not be limited to textbooks and YouTube videos, but they can also come in other forms such as podcasts (Ardani & Agustina, 2022) and digital comic strips (Pratiwi & Palupi, 2022) which help expose students to real-life expressions. In addition, content can also be differentiated by the learning objective that the students want. Besides content, process is one of the most important aspects of Differentiated Instruction. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) define the process as how students can absorb information or knowledge. This aspect emphasizes more on how teachers can make various activities that help learners achieve their learning goals. It includes different teaching methods, different grouping, and different kinds of support. The modification of the process will also involve adding complexity and engaging students' creative thinking (Heacox, 2012).

Product is an outcome that reflects what the students learn during the class (Tomlinson, 2001). Tomlinson stated that the product has significant importance in assessing students' knowledge and how well they apply it. Therefore, teachers should provide learners with a clear design of content and process because it will impact the product. In assigning the learning outcomes, teachers should look closely at students' capabilities and their relevance. The last aspect of Differentiated Instruction is the learning environment. According to Tomlinson (2013), the learning environment is both the physical and the affective climate in the classroom. The theory emphasizes the significance of acknowledging students and their backgrounds. If we know their condition, it will certainly help teachers create a healthy learning environment that affects learners' social development and intelligence levels (Partami et al., 2019).

Despite the extensive discussion on the theoretical principles and practical applications of DI, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies that analyze how its core aspects—content, process, product, and learning environment—are specifically adapted and implemented in various classroom contexts. Moreover, limited attention has been given to examining the combined implementation and impact of these differentiated strategies on students' learning outcomes and engagement. Thus, this study is meant to review the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English language classrooms in ESL as well as EFL contexts from several articles. The results elaborate on how previous research explores the differentiation techniques based on the aspects of DI (content, process, product, and learning environment) and its effects.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review with a content analysis research design to examine the application of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in English language teaching. The data consisted of 32 articles published between 2019 and 2023. These articles were selected based on two criteria: (1) they focused on the implementation of differentiated learning in English teaching or learning contexts, and (2) they discussed DI methods used in classrooms, including aspects such as

content, process, product, and environment, as well as classroom profiles and outcomes. The data source included both experimental studies and literature reviews that met the selection criteria. For data collection, the researchers systematically gathered and reviewed the content of each article, organizing relevant information into an Excel table. The table categorized key elements, including DI classroom contexts, techniques, aspects, and effects of DI implementation. Data analysis involved grouping similar content to identify patterns and trends. The researchers then summarized the findings, compared the data across studies, and synthesized conclusions based on the compiled results, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of how DI is implemented and its impacts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Classroom Contexts
The Use of English in the Classroom

A detailed examination of the English language teaching and learning context reveals three categories of learner perspectives on English as a means of communication: English as a native language (L1), a secondary language (ESL), and a foreign language (EFL). These categories significantly influence students' starting points, their use of English, and their perceptions of its role both in school and society. Consequently, these factors impact the implementation of DI. Out of the 32 data collected, the majority of studies on DI were conducted in EFL classrooms, accounting for 28 articles. This was followed by four articles focusing on DI in ESL contexts and one article examining DI in English L1 settings. Figure 1 below illustrates these findings.
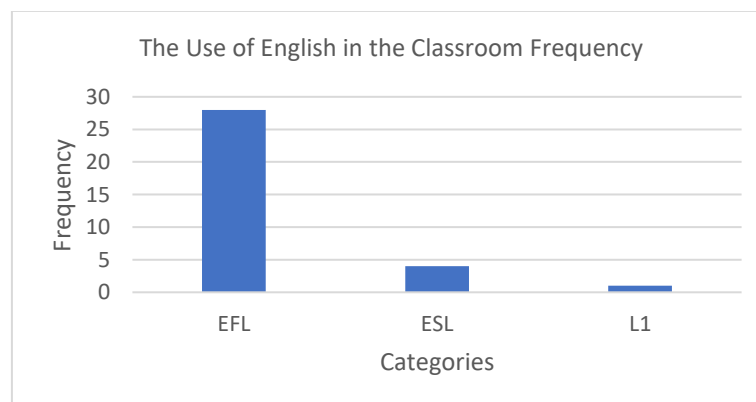

Figure 1. The Use of English in the Classroom

The predominance of DI studies in EFL classrooms can be attributed to the context of the research, which predominantly took place in non-English-speaking countries such as Indonesia, Bahrain, Greece, Taiwan, Hongkong, Belgium, Ethiopia, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Ecuador, and Ukraine. These settings often require a strong emphasis on tailored teaching methods to address the unique challenges faced by learners who encounter English primarily in academic settings. The implementation of DI in these contexts supports learners with varied proficiency levels, interests, and cultural backgrounds, enabling them to engage more effectively with the language. In contrast, the limited studies on DI in ESL and L1 contexts suggest a different set of priorities and challenges. DI in ESL settings, such as schools in Malaysia and those in international schools, focuses on accommodating a multicultural student body with diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Meanwhile, DI in L1 contexts, such as in the United States, may center on enhancing advanced linguistic competencies or addressing individual learning preferences. These distinctions highlight

the adaptability of DI to diverse linguistic and educational environments while underscoring its particular relevance in EFL classrooms where foundational language acquisition is prioritized.

Classroom Levels

The school or classroom level of learners is a significant factor in understanding the context of implementing DI. These levels highlight how effective DI can be across various educational stages. Based on the analysis of 32 research articles, DI was applied in five key educational contexts: elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, university, and mixed levels. Among these, five articles focused on elementary schools, emphasizing DI's role in building foundational skills during early education. Eight articles examined its impact on junior high school students, while seven explored its application in senior high schools. Moreover, eight studies discussed DI at the university level, and four involved mixed or non-specified levels. Figure 2 below provides a detailed illustration of these findings.
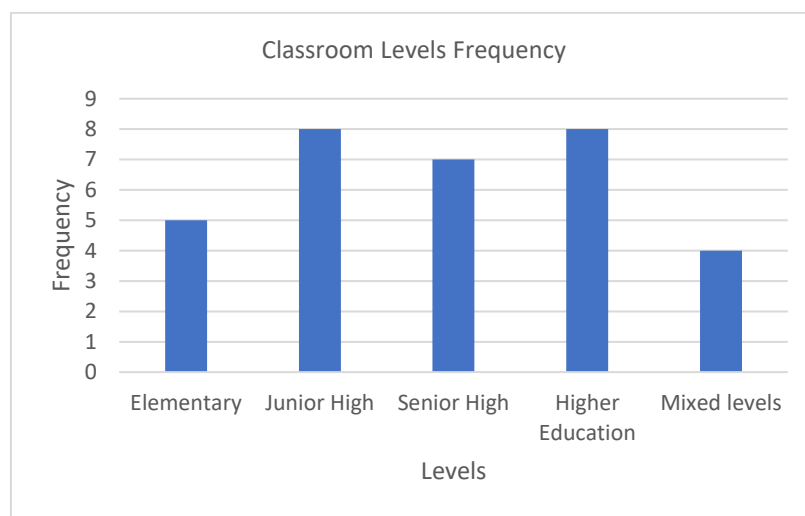
Figure 2. Classroom Levels

The data reveals that junior high school and university levels received the most attention in studies on DI, each with eight articles. This indicates that these levels may be particularly receptive to or in need of DI strategies. For junior high schools, the focus on DI could be due to the diverse developmental stages and academic transitions students experience, necessitating tailored approaches to address varying readiness levels and learning styles. At the university level, the emphasis on DI likely reflects the need to cater to students with varied academic backgrounds and specialized career goals. The findings also highlight the importance of DI in mixed or non-specified levels, suggesting that some studies aim to address broad educational challenges or contexts that transcend specific stages. However, the relatively lower number of studies at the elementary and senior high school levels may point to either a narrower scope of DI application in these contexts or differing research priorities in these educational stages.

B. Differentiation in Techniques

A thorough analysis of the selected articles revealed a variety of strategies employed to implement DI in language classrooms. Table 1 below highlights the findings, showing two approaches to content differentiation: tiered materials, reported in four articles, and adjusted materials, noted in five articles. Process differentiation emerged as another frequently varied aspect to address

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students' diverse needs. This was categorized into four main techniques: tiered instructions, the most reported strategy in seven articles; adjusted instructions, found in six articles; learning contracts and centers, mentioned in three articles; and individual activities, reported in one article. Product differentiation, serving as a medium to showcase and assess students' abilities and the impact of DI, was classified into three categories. Adjusted assignments were the most dominant, appearing in ten articles, followed by tiered assignments in five articles and individual tasks in two articles. Lastly, environment differentiation was examined, revealing three strategies aimed at creating a comfortable and active classroom environment. The most common strategy was grouping (flexible, homogeneous, and heterogeneous), discussed in 13 articles, followed by adjusted seating arrangements in five articles, and fulfilling students' needs, mentioned in one article. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of these findings.

Differentiation Aspects	List of Techniques	Number of Citation in Studies
Content	Tiered materials (by readiness)	4
	Adjusted materials (by profiles)	5
Process	Tiered instructions (by readiness)	7
	Adjusted instructions (by profiles)	6
	Learning contracts and centers	3
	Individual activities	1
Product	Tiered assignments (by readiness)	5
	Adjusted assignments (by profiles)	10
	Individual assignments	2
Environment	Flexible grouping (homogenous and heterogenous	13
	Adjusted seating	5
	Adjusted environment (by profiles)	1

Table 1: Differentiation in techniques found in the 32 articles.

The findings suggest that content and process differentiation are widely practiced, reflecting their importance in addressing students' diverse learning profiles, readiness levels, and interests. The frequent use of tiered and adjusted materials indicates a strong focus on tailoring content to accommodate varied abilities, ensuring inclusivity in learning. Similarly, the emphasis on tiered and adjusted instructions highlights teachers' efforts to scaffold learning and provide appropriate challenges based on individual student needs. The predominance of adjusted assignments in product differentiation signifies its role as an adaptable assessment tool to gauge student comprehension effectively. The use of tiered assignments further supports the differentiation philosophy by allowing students to work at their optimal levels. Additionally, the focus on grouping strategies in environment differentiation underscores the value of collaborative learning and classroom dynamics in promoting active participation and peer support. These findings collectively underscore the flexibility and versatility of DI in meeting diverse educational needs.

C. Differentiation in Each Aspect of DI
Content
The results indicate that teachers differentiate content to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills in the classroom and to provide multiple ways to access them. The data reveal that content differentiation is tailored to learners' profiles, including needs, interests, preferences, readiness levels, retention rates, and learning styles (e.g., Rumkoda, 2022; Partami et al., 2019; Kupchyk & Litvinchuk, 2020; Sun, 2023). Diverse types of content were utilized in learning sessions, such as gamification,

combinations of pictures and text (Arianto et al., 2023), charts (Partami et al., 2019), and audiovisual materials (Jawiah et al., 2023). In terms of readiness levels, the content was adapted to align with various stages of Bloom's Taxonomy—remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. For instance, Sahri et al. (2021) differentiated by assigning students with lower readiness levels simpler reading materials focused on remembering and understanding, while those with moderate readiness levels were provided materials requiring application and analysis (Tomlinson, 2017; Weselby, 2014). This approach, often referred to as tiered differentiation, exemplifies the use of tiered materials to match instructional content to students' varying readiness.

Process

Differentiation in the process is reflected in the activities students engage in to comprehend and master the materials. These processes can be tailored in various ways to accommodate learners' readiness, profiles, and interests (e.g., Argyropoulou & Zafiri, 2021; Bimantoro et al., 2021; Padmadewi & Santosa, 2022; Anggraeny & Dewi, 2023). In the context of retention rates, educators can adjust the level of support and the complexity of instructions provided. For instance, students who struggle to grasp new materials may receive more guidance and accompaniment from the teacher compared to those who can process the materials more quickly (Shareefa, 2020). Regarding complexity, educators can deliver simpler and more direct instructions to students with slower retention rates (Van Geel et al., 2018). Similarly, Halim et al. (2022) emphasized differentiation in assignments, where students with lower ability levels are given simpler tasks, while those with intermediate and advanced abilities tackle more complex assignments.

Product

Products or outputs that reflect students' mastery and comprehension of the materials covered during the learning period were also differentiated in various ways. Two prominent forms of product differentiation involve aligning outputs with students' interests and learning styles, allowing them to choose the format of their products, as demonstrated by Partami et al. (2019) and Ortega et al. (2018). For instance, in terms of content, when tasked with reporting news, students interested in sports might report on football, while those interested in K-World might focus on K-Pop (Padmadewi & Santosa, 2022). Differentiation in product demonstration was evident in the flexibility provided, enabling students to choose between creating a project, writing an essay, or delivering a presentation (Mirawati et al., 2022). Other options included producing brochures, posters, newspapers, comic strips, essays, PowerPoint slides, or oral presentations (Partami et al., 2019), as well as acting out a role play, composing a song, making a collage, preparing a speech, creating a multimedia presentation, or crafting a story (Ortega et al., 2018). Moreover, products could vary in terms of challenges, topics, and evaluation criteria (Sari et al., 2020), enabling students with higher language competence to produce outputs that match their skill levels.

Learning Environment

The learning environment, both the physical and psychological aspects of the classroom, plays a critical role in fostering a space where students feel safe and supported (Weselby, 2014). Tailored to meet students' specific needs, a conducive learning environment can be characterized by a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere (Arianto et al., 2023) and a supportive setting for students with disabilities (Sari et al., 2020) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). Additionally,

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seating arrangements and grouping strategies are crucial considerations (Ortega et al., 2018). Flexible grouping, whether heterogeneous or homogeneous, allows for dynamic student interactions (e.g. Bondie et al., 2019; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020). For example, teachers may assign students randomly to groups or deliberately mix abilities within groups, ensuring equitable participation and minimizing concerns about differential treatment (Halim et al., 2022).

D. The Effects of DI Implementation

DI has positively impacted students' English learning progress. Based on an analysis of 32 articles, DI has proven effective in enhancing various English language skills, including reading, writing, and speaking. For reading skills, DI has been shown to significantly improve students' comprehension abilities (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020), as highlighted in three studies. Similarly, DI has been linked to improvements in students' writing skills (Argyropoulou & Zafiri, 2021), as reported in three articles. Additionally, one study demonstrated DI's ability to enhance students' speaking performance (Rumkoda, 2022). Beyond specific skills, DI also improved students' English test results and overall academic performance, with seven studies, including Shareefa (2020), emphasizing these outcomes.

In addition to fostering academic-related skills, DI has also influenced students' soft skills and psychological well-being. For instance, three articles discussed how DI strengthens communication and collaboration in group work (Halim et al., 2022; Ojong, 2023). It also fosters a sense of responsibility (Saleh, 2021) and motivation among learners (Mirawati et al., 2022). Furthermore, DI has been found to boost students' confidence (Arianto et al., 2023) and psychosocial skills (Pozas et al., 2020), as noted in two articles. DI also contributes to creating a positive learning environment (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020), with two other studies highlighting its role in establishing a safe and supportive space for students (e.g., Sari et al., 2020). See the details below in Figure 3.
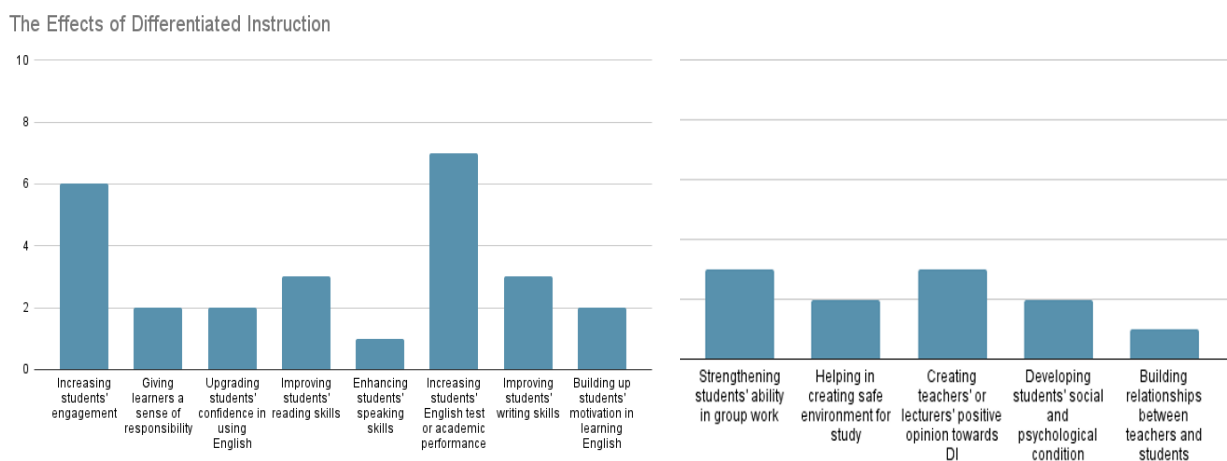

Figure 3. The Effects of Differentiated Instruction

On the other hand, DI also brings significant benefits to teachers, influencing their professional development and classroom practices (e.g. Suprayogi et al., 2017). Three articles (e.g., Melese, 2019) indicate that DI positively shapes teachers' perspectives on teaching methodologies and strategies. By implementing DI, teachers become more familiar with their students' diverse needs, fostering a deeper understanding of individual differences and equipping them with the tools to address those differences effectively. This process not only enhances their instructional ability but also boosts their confidence in managing heterogeneous classrooms. Teachers often report feeling more capable and motivated when they see the tangible impact of DI on their students' learning outcomes and engagement.

Furthermore, one study (Mirawati et al., 2022) highlighted DI's role in fostering stronger teacher-student relationships. The personalized nature of DI encourages teachers to interact more closely with their students, allowing them to understand each learner's strengths, challenges, and interests. This closer interaction helps to build trust and rapport, creating a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Such relationships are vital in promoting a positive classroom culture, where students feel valued and supported, and teachers feel a greater sense of fulfillment in their roles.

The overall findings above align with Tomlinson's (2017) Differentiated Instruction (DI) theory, which emphasizes tailoring teaching methods to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles to boost both academic and socio-emotional outcomes. The results also pointed out that DI applies to various levels of language competence because it adjusts the learning inputs, activities, and outputs to the students' profiles. This is also supported by Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which highlights the importance of collaborative learning and social interactions in fostering cognitive development, evident in DI's positive impact on group communication and student motivation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of 32 articles (2019–2023) to explore the techniques, implementation, and impacts of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in English language classrooms, with a focus on its widespread application in diverse EFL settings. DI is applied across various educational levels, from primary school to university, showcasing its adaptability and effectiveness in diverse academic environments. Content, process, product, and learning environment became the aspects under consideration when planning a lesson, highlighting the flexibility of DI in addressing diverse learner needs through varied materials, instructional methods, final assessments, and the creation of inclusive, supportive classroom environments. The impact of DI on students is multifaceted, enhancing reading, writing, and speaking skills, as well as improving English test scores and overall academic performance. Beyond academic achievements, DI also positively influences students' soft skills and psychosocial well-being, fostering improved communication in group work, a sense of responsibility, motivation, and increased confidence. Teachers also benefit from DI implementation, with shifts in their attitudes towards this teaching approach. The overall findings suggest that educators incorporate DI strategies more widely across various educational levels and contexts, as its benefits extend beyond academic skills to include improved psychosocial development. Additionally, with limitations arising, future research could explore the long-term impact of DI on both student outcomes and teacher perceptions in diverse classroom environments.

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