



Unpacking Differentiated Instruction in Indonesian EFL Classrooms: Implementation Realities and Pedagogical Barriers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in a 12th-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at SMAN 1 Ungaran, Central Java, Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with one EFL teacher and twelve students. Findings indicate that DI was applied across four key dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment, based on Tomlinson's framework. Strategies such as tiered materials, flexible grouping, varied assignments, and supportive classroom settings enhanced student engagement and motivation. Nevertheless, several challenges impeded effective implementation, including time constraints, limited access to levelled learning resources, large class sizes, and a lack of formal professional development. In addition, inconsistencies in DI application and insufficient communication of its purpose created student confusion and perceptions of unfairness. The study concludes that while DI has strong potential to foster inclusive and responsive EFL instruction, its effectiveness depends on systemic support, teacher capacity-building, and transparent classroom communication. Practical implications highlight the importance of sustained institutional support and targeted pedagogical training to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students.

KEYWORDS

differentiated instruction; EFL; inclusive education; case study; student engagement

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji penerapan *Differentiated Instruction* (DI) dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) pada kelas XII di SMAN 1 Ungaran, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan seorang guru EFL dan dua belas siswa.

KATA KUNCI

instruksi terdiferensiasi; EFL; pendidikan inklusif; studi kasus; keterlibatan siswa

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa DI diterapkan pada empat dimensi utama: konten, proses, produk, dan lingkungan belajar, berdasarkan kerangka yang dikembangkan oleh Tomlinson. Strategi seperti materi bertingkat, pengelompokan fleksibel, variasi tugas, serta suasana kelas yang suportif mampu meningkatkan keterlibatan dan motivasi siswa. Namun demikian, terdapat beberapa kendala yang menghambat implementasi DI secara efektif, antara lain keterbatasan waktu, akses yang minim terhadap sumber belajar bertingkat, ukuran kelas yang besar, serta kurangnya pelatihan profesional formal. Selain itu, ketidakselarasan dalam penerapan DI dan komunikasi yang kurang memadai mengenai tujuannya menimbulkan kebingungan siswa serta persepsi ketidakadilan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa DI memiliki potensi besar dalam menciptakan pembelajaran EFL yang inklusif dan responsif, tetapi keberhasilannya sangat bergantung pada dukungan sistemik, peningkatan kapasitas guru, dan komunikasi kelas yang transparan. Implikasi praktis penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya dukungan institusional yang berkelanjutan serta pelatihan pedagogis yang terarah untuk menjamin pengalaman belajar yang setara bagi seluruh siswa.

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INTRODUCTION

Global shifts in educational paradigms increasingly underscore the need to respond pedagogically to student diversity, not only as a matter of equity but also as a strategic imperative for maximizing learning potential. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where learners vary widely in linguistic competence, cognitive development, sociocultural backgrounds, and affective dispositions, the pedagogical challenge becomes even more pronounced. Traditional transmissive and monolithic instructional approaches often marginalize students who fall outside the median, leading to disengagement, inequitable access to learning, and ultimately, underachievement (Tomlinson, 2014; Carolan & Guinn, 2007).

Differentiated instruction (DI), as theorized by Tomlinson (2001; 2014), emerges as a critical response to this pedagogical crisis. Rather than prescribing uniform methods, DI calls for flexible and responsive instructional design that adjusts four interconnected elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. Grounded in constructivist learning theory, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, DI emphasizes that learning is optimized when tasks are appropriately challenging and aligned with students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Importantly, DI is not synonymous with individualization; instead, it involves strategic grouping, tiering, scaffolding, and choice, all designed to cultivate engagement and achievement across ability levels (Hall, 2013; Subban, 2006).

In EFL classrooms, DI is particularly valuable due to the high degree of heterogeneity. Empirical studies in international contexts have documented DI's positive effects on language

acquisition, learner motivation, and autonomy (Baecher, 2011; Çelik & Kılıç, 2020). Suwastini et al. (2021), for instance, found that Balinese secondary school students exposed to differentiated tasks demonstrated increased lexical retention and communicative competence. Similarly, case studies in Korea and Turkey report that DI improves both cognitive and affective engagement, particularly among lower-proficiency learners. These findings align with research in inclusive education more broadly, which positions DI as a non-negotiable in mixed-ability classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Yet, despite growing theoretical and empirical support, the implementation of DI remains deeply contested and uneven, particularly in Global South contexts. Structural limitations, such as overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching resources, rigid assessment regimes, and inadequate professional development, pose significant barriers to DI enactment (Gheysens et al., 2020; Pham, 2021). Furthermore, there is a persistent disconnect between policy-level advocacy and ground-level instructional practice. In Indonesia, for example, the Merdeka Curriculum promotes differentiated and student-centered learning, but recent studies (e.g., Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017; Mulyawati et al., 2022) indicate that teachers either lack a deep understanding of DI principles or feel overwhelmed by its practical demands.

Existing literature on DI in Indonesia tends to be broad, descriptive, and often survey-based. While informative, such studies do not sufficiently illuminate the micro-level dynamics of DI in EFL classrooms. Key questions remain about how teachers interpret and operationalize DI principles, how students experience and respond to differentiated tasks, and how contextual constraints shape instructional choices. Notably, student voices are conspicuously underrepresented in this discourse, leaving a gap in understanding how DI affects learners' sense of engagement, fairness, and efficacy. Furthermore, there is limited research that investigates DI within a single classroom context, where depth, nuance, and complexity can be captured more effectively than in large-scale quantitative designs.

This study seeks to fill that critical empirical and conceptual gap by conducting an in-depth qualitative case study of differentiated instruction as enacted in a 12th-grade EFL classroom at SMAN 1 Ungaran, a public senior high school in Central Java, Indonesia. Specifically, this study explores (1) how an EFL teacher implements DI in a real instructional setting, (2) what specific strategies are employed to address learner diversity, (3) what institutional and pedagogical challenges arise, and (4) how students perceive the effectiveness and fairness of DI as part of their learning experience.

By integrating multiple data sources, including classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with both the teacher and students, this research offers a granular understanding of differentiated instruction in a real-world EFL classroom. Theoretically, it enriches the existing literature by situating DI within the Indonesian sociocultural and policy context. Practically, it provides evidence-based insights that can inform teacher training, curriculum development, and education policy aimed at promoting equitable and responsive EFL instruction. Ultimately, this study contributes to the global dialogue on inclusive pedagogy by highlighting both the transformative potential and the practical complexities of implementing differentiated instruction in under-resourced educational settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to enable an intensive, in-depth exploration of the practices and challenges of differentiated instruction (DI) in a real-world educational context. The case study approach was chosen for its strength in examining both the "what" and the "how" of a phenomenon within a naturalistic setting (Gerring, 2004; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). Specifically, it allowed the researcher to investigate DI as implemented in a senior high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in Indonesia, revealing not only instructional strategies but also the lived experiences of both teacher and students (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lucas et al., 2018). SMAN 1 Ungaran, a public high school in Central Java, was selected as the site of inquiry due to its diverse student population and its documented efforts to implement DI in classroom practice. This context offered a valuable opportunity to observe how DI unfolds within a setting characterized by varying levels of student readiness, interest, and learning profiles.

Participants in this study consisted of one EFL teacher and twelve 12th-grade students from the selected school. The teacher was purposefully chosen for their experience in inclusive education and familiarity with DI practices. Meanwhile, the twelve student participants were selected using purposive sampling to capture a range of academic abilities, learning styles, and engagement levels. These students were particularly well-suited for the study as they had experienced both the older curriculum (in grade 10) and the newer curriculum (in grade 12), enabling them to reflect comparatively on their learning experiences. Their position as final-year students also allowed for more critical and mature perspectives on instructional strategies encountered throughout their schooling. The combination of teacher and student participants provided a multidimensional view of DI implementation, contributing to the depth and richness of the data collected.

Data collection relied on two primary qualitative methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. This triangulation of data sources was intended to strengthen the credibility and depth of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Classroom observations were conducted during regular teaching sessions to document instructional practices as they naturally occurred. A structured observation checklist was developed based on Tomlinson's DI framework (2001, 2014), which emphasizes four core elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. Supplementary guidance was drawn from Heacox (2012), Gregory and Chapman (2013), and Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Indicators included the use of varied instructional materials and tasks, the application of flexible grouping strategies, the implementation of tiered activities, opportunities for student choice, and the presence of teacher feedback and scaffolding. Observations were designed to be non-intrusive, ensuring the natural flow of classroom interaction. The data from these observations were carefully documented and later analyzed in conjunction with interview data to identify patterns, inconsistencies, and key instructional dynamics.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the teacher and the twelve student participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions of differentiated instruction. The teacher interview explored areas such as lesson planning, instructional strategies, encountered challenges, and perceptions of student engagement. Student interviews focused on their learning preferences, interactions with DI strategies, and their sense of instructional fairness and inclusiveness. The interview protocols were informed by relevant

literature (Tomlinson, 2014; Subban, 2006; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018) and featured open-ended questions to encourage elaboration and authentic reflection. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated when necessary to preserve contextual meaning and linguistic accuracy.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a well-established qualitative method for identifying and interpreting patterns across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical process followed six systematic steps: familiarization with the data through repeated reading; initial coding of meaningful units; theme development through the clustering of codes; review of themes to ensure internal consistency and relevance to the research questions; clear definition and naming of themes; and finally, synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative supported by verbatim quotes and observation notes. To strengthen analytical credibility, the coding process and resulting themes were reviewed by a second coder. While manual coding was sufficient for the scope of this study, NVivo software may be considered for future research involving larger datasets.

FINDINGS

Strategies of Differentiated Instruction Implementation

The empirical findings of this study confirm that Differentiated Instruction (DI) was implemented across four dimensions—content, process, product, and learning environment—following Tomlinson’s (2001, 2014) DI framework. Teachers consistently modified instruction to address differences in student readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This indicates that the teacher did not rely on a one-size-fits-all model, but rather engaged in deliberate instructional planning to meet the diverse needs of students. Such practices reflect a responsive and student-centered pedagogy, in which the curriculum is adjusted to maximize learning opportunities for every learner. The differentiation was evident not only in the types of materials and tasks assigned but also in how students were grouped, assessed, and supported within the classroom environment.

Table 1. Summary of Differentiated Instruction Strategies Observed

DI Component	Strategies Implemented	Evidence Source
Content	Tiered reading texts, bilingual glossaries, multimedia tools	Classroom Observation; Teacher Interview
Process	Flexible grouping, tiered tasks, guided discussions	Observation Checklist; Teacher Interview
Product	Posters, videos, oral presentations, reflective journals	Student Interview; Artifact Collection
Learning Environment	Flexible seating, clear task guidelines, supportive teacher presence	Observation Notes

Table 1 provides a synthesis of the differentiated instruction strategies observed during the classroom sessions and as reported in the interviews. Each component; content, process, product, and learning environment that was addressed by the teacher through specific instructional adjustments. These strategies demonstrate intentional planning and adaptation to accommodate students’ varied readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. The data were

triangulated from multiple sources including classroom observations, teacher interviews, student interviews, and artifact analysis, ensuring a comprehensive and credible representation of instructional practice.

For instance, in terms of content, students were given reading materials of varying complexity supported by bilingual glossaries and visual media to scaffold comprehension. The process dimension was evident through the use of flexible grouping and differentiated tasks, enabling students to work collaboratively or individually based on their needs. For product, learners were allowed to choose how to demonstrate their understanding, whether through oral presentations, videos, or written reflections. Lastly, the learning environment was purposefully structured to support differentiation through flexible seating and a clear, supportive classroom climate.

Student Engagement and Perceived Benefits

Most students responded positively to DI strategies. Students appreciated having options in learning activities and assessment formats. For instance:

“Saya suka waktu disuruh bikin video buat tugas. Lebih semangat karena bisa ekspresikan ide saya sendiri.” (Student 4)

“Kalau belajar dalam kelompok, saya merasa lebih berani nanya dan diskusi, nggak malu.” (Student 8)

Table 2. Student Preferences and Perceived Benefits

Learning Style	Preferred Task Type	Reported Benefit
Visual	Infographics, diagrams	<i>"Lebih gampang mengingat isi materi."</i>
Auditory	Discussions, recordings	<i>"Dengar ulang penjelasan bisa bantu pahami."</i>
Kinesthetic	Role-play, project tasks	<i>"Belajar jadi aktif dan nggak ngantuk."</i>

These responses illustrate the positive impact of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on student engagement and motivation. The opportunity to choose task types that align with their learning preferences empowered students to take more ownership of their learning. For example, students who preferred visual input found that using infographics or diagrams helped them retain information more effectively, while auditory learners benefited from group discussions and listening to recorded explanations. Kinesthetic learners were especially engaged during hands-on activities like role-playing or collaborative projects.

Table 2 below categorizes these preferences and the benefits students reported, offering further evidence that DI practices support varied learning modalities and foster greater participation.

Moreover, these findings suggest that when instructional strategies are aligned with students' preferred learning styles, they do not only enhance comprehension but also build learners' confidence and autonomy. This supports Gardner's (1993) *Multiple Intelligences* theory, which advocates for recognizing diverse learner strengths. In parallel, the active student participation seen in DI tasks reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, where learners engage in tasks slightly above their current competence with appropriate scaffolding.

Challenges Encountered by the Teacher

Despite a strong conceptual understanding of Differentiated Instruction (DI), the teacher in this study encountered multiple challenges that hindered its effective implementation in the classroom. One of the most pressing issues was time constraints. The teacher admitted spending hours adapting materials to accommodate diverse student needs but often still felt ineffective in fully engaging all learners. This finding resonates with Subban (2006), who emphasized that the demand for extensive preparation time remains a significant barrier to DI, especially for teachers juggling multiple class sections and large student numbers. Designing differentiated tasks that are aligned with individual learning profiles requires careful planning—something that is difficult to achieve consistently without institutional support or collaboration among peers.

In addition to time limitations, the lack of appropriate resources also emerged as a considerable obstacle. The teacher struggled to find leveled reading materials for the same topic, forcing her to manually adapt existing texts. This challenge echoes the concern raised by Baecher (2011), who pointed out that the scarcity of differentiated materials—whether in the form of leveled texts, visual aids, or multimedia—can restrict teachers' ability to implement content differentiation effectively. The burden of manually creating or modifying resources not only consumes time but also affects the sustainability of DI practices in the long run.

The issue was further compounded by large class sizes, which made it difficult for the teacher to monitor student progress and provide individualized feedback. With over thirty students in a single class, the logistical complexity of conducting formative assessments, organizing flexible grouping, and tailoring instruction increased significantly. Carolan and Guinn (2007) warn that large classes tend to dilute the effectiveness of DI, as teachers are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of instructional and managerial tasks, reducing opportunities for personalized learning.

Another major barrier was the lack of formal professional training in DI. The teacher candidly shared that most of her knowledge on differentiation was self-taught through independent reading rather than through official workshops or mentoring. This lack of structured professional development is critical, as it can lead to uncertainty in applying DI strategies effectively. Gheysens et al. (2020) argue that without institutional efforts to equip teachers with DI-specific competencies—such as analyzing student readiness, designing differentiated assessments, and managing diverse tasks—many educators may rely on trial and error, potentially limiting the pedagogical impact of DI.

Lastly, student attitudes and perceptions posed a subtle but important challenge. Several students expressed confusion and perceived unfairness regarding differentiated tasks. For instance, one student commented, “Kadang gurunya kasih tugas beda-beda, tapi minggu depannya semua dikasih sama. Bikin bingung” (Student 2), while another said, “Teman saya dapat tugas presentasi, saya cuma disuruh buat tulisan. Kadang ngerasa nggak adil” (Student 6). These concerns illustrate a communication gap between the teacher's instructional intentions and the students' understanding. Although tasks were differentiated to match learner needs, the absence of clear explanations led some students to interpret the variations as arbitrary or inequitable. This supports the findings of Ismajli & Imami-Morina (2018), who stress that student buy-in is essential for the success of DI. Without consistent and transparent

communication about the rationale behind differentiated tasks, students may become disengaged or even resistant to the approach.

Variability and Consistency of DI Implementation

Although differentiation was implemented in many lessons, its application was inconsistent. Some students perceived this as unfair or confusing, supporting the findings of Ismajli & Imami-Morina (2018), who argue that student understanding of DI is essential for successful implementation. Inconsistencies in assigning differentiated tasks from week to week created confusion among students, as they were not always aware of the criteria used to assign tasks. This inconsistency diminished the potential benefits of DI and led to a sense of inequity.

The data indicate that while the teacher had a clear intention to apply differentiation, limited time and lack of clear communication strategies may have contributed to irregular patterns in implementation. For example, certain weeks featured tiered tasks and flexible grouping, while in others, the same task was given to the entire class without explanation. This lack of predictability not only caused uncertainty but also led some students to question the fairness of the approach.

“Kalau minggu ini beda-beda tugasnya, minggu depan malah sama semua. Saya jadi bingung kapan harus lebih kerja keras.” (Student Interview)

Such confusion underscores the importance of transparency and consistency in instructional decision-making. It is not sufficient for differentiation to occur in planning alone; its rationale must also be explicitly shared with students, ensuring they understand that instructional choices are made to support their learning—not to unfairly favor one group over another.

Therefore, beyond planning and executing differentiated activities, teachers must prioritize transparent communication. Explaining the “why” behind differentiated assignments and involving students in goal-setting processes can help bridge the gap between intention and perception. Establishing classroom norms around differentiation—such as through syllabi, class contracts, or reflective discussions—can normalize variability in tasks and help students see these as part of a fair and responsive learning process.

Overall, the findings confirm that DI is being implemented across multiple instructional dimensions at SMAN 1 Ungaran. Students generally perceive these strategies as engaging and beneficial. However, the overall impact is still limited by systemic and professional constraints such as time, resources, and uneven implementation.

DISCUSSION

The Nature and Extent of DI Practices in the EFL Context

The findings of this study illustrate that Differentiated Instruction is not merely an abstract theory but a practical approach that can be applied with considerable effect in Indonesian EFL classrooms. The implementation of DI at SMAN 1 Ungaran demonstrated the teacher’s attempt to meet the varied learning needs of students through different dimensions of content, process, product, and environment, which are aligned with the framework established by Tomlinson (2001, 2014). Tiered texts, flexible grouping, multiple output formats, and modifications to the physical and social learning environment are clear indicators of a

responsive and student-centered pedagogy. The teacher also engaged in ongoing self-reflection, carefully evaluating which strategies worked effectively and which needed adjustment. This reflective practice not only guided her in refining classroom instruction but also highlighted the importance of continuous professional growth. She expressed the need for more structured opportunities to enhance her expertise in DI, such as participating in teacher workshops, joining professional learning communities (PLCs), and collaborating with colleagues to share resources and co-develop lesson plans.

Importantly, this study found that DI was not implemented in isolation or as a one-time intervention but rather integrated into routine classroom practices. The teacher's use of pre-assessment data and continuous feedback loops demonstrates a level of pedagogical maturity in employing DI principles. Moreover, student responses indicate that they recognized and appreciated these efforts, which contributed to greater engagement and ownership of learning. This supports the claim that DI can enhance classroom inclusivity and contribute to more equitable educational outcomes.

Systemic and Pedagogical Barriers to DI Implementation

Despite the promising practices, the implementation of DI faced several obstacles that reflect broader systemic issues within Indonesian education. Chief among these were time constraints, limited access to leveled resources, large class sizes, and a lack of formal training. To address these challenges, institutional support is essential, for instance by providing resource-sharing platforms, encouraging collaborative lesson planning, and strengthening professional learning communities that allow teachers to exchange strategies and co-develop differentiated materials. These barriers are not unique to this study but resonate with findings from Subban (2006), Gheysens et al. (2020), and Baecher (2011), who emphasize the need for structural reform to support the sustainable application of DI.

Time was the most consistently cited challenge. Differentiation demands thoughtful preparation, ongoing assessment, and individualized feedback—all of which are time-intensive. Without administrative support or reduced teaching loads, even the most dedicated teachers may find it difficult to maintain high-quality DI practices. Similarly, the shortage of leveled EFL materials in Bahasa Indonesia and English complicates content adaptation. Teachers often rely on self-made or modified resources, which may compromise instructional quality.

Large class sizes further hinder differentiated grouping and individual monitoring. Managing over thirty students while implementing multiple instructional strategies reduces the feasibility of truly individualized learning. Finally, the lack of systematic professional development on DI meant that the teacher relied largely on self-initiated learning. This points to a gap between policy rhetoric on inclusive education and the practical realities of teacher preparation.

The Role of Transparency and Student Understanding

One of the more nuanced findings of this study relates to the inconsistency and perceived unfairness in how DI was applied. While students generally appreciated differentiated tasks, their comments revealed a lack of clarity regarding why and how these tasks were assigned. This aligns with Ismajli & Imami-Morina (2018) and Valiandes & Neophytou (2018), who argue that student understanding and acceptance of DI are critical to its success.

If differentiation is not transparently explained, students may perceive unequal tasks as favoritism or punishment, rather than support. This misunderstanding can erode trust and diminish the motivational benefits of DI. Thus, the effectiveness of DI hinges not only on how instruction is differentiated but also on how those differences are communicated to students. Teachers must invest time in explaining the rationale behind assignments and in creating an inclusive environment where variation is normalized and celebrated.

This aspect of transparency also ties back to formative assessment. When students understand that tasks are designed based on their readiness and progress, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with the material. Therefore, building a classroom culture of openness and mutual respect is vital to sustaining effective differentiation practices.

Alignment with Research Objectives and Broader Implications

This study successfully addressed all four research questions by documenting the specific DI strategies employed, assessing their impact on student engagement, identifying obstacles to implementation, and exploring student perceptions. Beyond achieving its immediate research goals, the study also offers broader implications for EFL pedagogy in Indonesia.

First, it demonstrates that even in resource-constrained contexts, meaningful differentiation is possible when teachers are committed and reflective. Second, it underscores the importance of systemic support—from training to materials and policy—to move DI from isolated practice to institutional norm. Third, it emphasizes the role of student voice in evaluating pedagogical effectiveness. Listening to students can provide actionable insights for improving instructional design.

In summary, while the road to fully realizing DI in Indonesian schools may be long, this study affirms that with the right combination of teacher agency, institutional backing, and student involvement, differentiated instruction can transform EFL classrooms into more inclusive and effective learning spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive overview of the practices and challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in an EFL classroom at SMAN 1 Ungaran. Through a combination of classroom observations and interviews with both teacher and students, the research captured the multidimensional realities of how DI is enacted within the Indonesian secondary school context.

The findings reveal that DI is not only theoretically acknowledged by the teacher but also actively practiced across four core dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment. The use of tiered tasks, flexible grouping, and varied assessment formats reflects the teacher's efforts to accommodate diverse needs, preferences, and abilities. Through self-reflection, the teacher evaluated the effectiveness of these strategies by observing students' responses, assessing the quality of their outputs, and noting areas where adjustments were needed. This reflective process enabled her to refine her instructional approaches and become more responsive to classroom realities. At the same time, it underscored the importance of professional development, as the teacher expressed the need for further growth through participation in workshops, involvement in professional learning communities (PLCs), and

collaboration with colleagues to exchange experiences and co-develop differentiated lesson plans. Students reported increased engagement, motivation, and a stronger sense of ownership when given opportunities to learn in ways that matched their individual learning styles.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights several barriers that limit the full potential of DI. Time constraints, the absence of ready-to-use teaching materials, large class sizes, and limited professional training emerged as significant challenges. Moreover, inconsistent implementation without clear communication of the rationale can reduce students' trust and hinder the realization of fairness, which is central to the philosophy of DI.

The findings further underscore the importance of teacher self-reflection in DI implementation. Such reflection can serve as a foundation for continuous professional growth and collaborative support through professional learning communities. Formative assessment practices were also found to play a crucial role in supporting differentiation, particularly in aligning instruction with individual learner needs.

At the policy level, DI holds great potential as a pedagogical approach in Indonesian EFL classrooms, particularly in advancing the goals of the Merdeka Belajar initiative. However, to achieve meaningful impact, systemic reforms and capacity building are essential. Teachers need sustained professional development, access to adaptive resources, and administrative support to effectively plan and sustain differentiated practices. Institutional strategies such as professional learning communities, resource-sharing platforms, and improved learning facilities can help reduce structural barriers.

Cultural factors also influence the perception and practice of DI. In the Indonesian context, where collectivist values and tendencies toward homogenized instruction prevail, inclusive communication strategies are necessary so that students perceive differentiation as fair and supportive rather than unequal.

This study has several limitations, including its focus on a single school and a relatively small number of participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. However, these limitations also open avenues for future research that expands the scope, employs diverse methodological approaches, and investigates DI in different educational contexts.

In conclusion, this study affirms that differentiated instruction is not only feasible but also brings tangible benefits to EFL learning in Indonesia. The success of DI implementation depends not only on individual teacher efforts but also on systemic support within the broader education system. Strengthening teacher capacity through sustained training, fostering a culture of collaboration among educators, and ensuring consistent policy support are essential steps. These collective efforts will ultimately ensure that equitable, inclusive, and responsive learning becomes a reality in Indonesian classrooms. Future DI implementation will succeed only if teachers' reflective practices are supported by systemic reforms and collaborative networks that empower sustainable change.

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