

Research Article

A Differentiated Instruction Implementation in EFL Secondary School (Case Study: SMA Islam Plus Adzkia)

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Abstract: The topic of Differentiated Instruction (DI) has recently been studied by researchers and practitioners due to its importance and potential to improve student learning. In this regard, the current study aims to provide a concise overview of DI in the context of EFL to illustrate the need for its implementation in the classroom to foster successful language learning. Since differentiated instruction is designed to place students at the centre of the teaching and learning process, promote equity and academic success, as well as recognize diversity among students, it enables teachers to address a student's unique needs, interests, abilities, English proficiency, and preferred learning strategies. While challenges such as increased workload and implementation pressure in DI may arise, the potential benefits of this approach to students' learning processes, attitudes toward learning, and long-term success are notable. Therefore, the learning process is maximized when teachers are committed to differentiated instruction. SMA ISLAM PLUS ADZKIA (SIPA) is one of the most popular spotlight of school in Medan which the school was succeed in graduating their Alumni to Kedinasan and private university both inside and outside the country with scholarship. This school becomes the spot or role model for many other schools in Medan, therefore, the researcher intended to investigate further about the teaching model applied in this school, especially in EFL classroom in studying English. Some problems need to be answered after applying this study, such as how the English teachers manage the class to apply the DI, how is the students' understanding about the subject after they applied DI

Keywords: Differentiated Learning, EFL Teaching, Learning Strategies, Instructional Methods, Student Engagement

1. Introduction

The implementation of differentiated instruction in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts presents unique methodological challenges for educational researchers. While theoretical frameworks for differentiated instruction are well-established [1,3], the tools for systematically investigating implementation barriers remain fragmented and often fail to capture the complex interplay between teacher perceptions and classroom realities. This methodological gap is particularly pronounced in EFL contexts, where linguistic diversity adds another layer of complexity to an already challenging pedagogical approach. Existing research has typically employed either quantitative surveys to measure teacher perceptions [2,4] or qualitative observations to document classroom practices [5,6], but rarely integrates both approaches systematically despite the strong research basis established by Subban [7]. This methodological limitation has resulted in incomplete understandings of why differentiated instruction often fails to translate from theory to practice

2. Literature Review

As defined by Purnawanto (2023), differentiated learning is a teaching style where an instructor employs multiple teaching approaches to suit the diverse needs of each student. On the other hand, Handiyani & Muhtar (2022) offer a broader definition, stating that differentiated learning is an educational approach that modifies the pedagogy used based on the learner's preparedness, interests, and individual learning styles. This approach attempts to evaluate the self-awareness of students regarding their readiness in engaging with the lesson. That said, differentiated learning is complicated by issues that necessitate assistance from the school itself and the educators. To formulate effective facilitation strategies, an educator needs to possess each student's learning profile. The educator's responsibility is critical not only for the

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effective delivery of instructional content but also for the development of instructional materials that cater to all students. The expectation is that all students have an equally strong grasp of key concepts taught without anyone falling behind.

As differentiated learning is based on students, MS Mahfudz describes the following key features (2023) of instructional differentiation: students are motivated to participate in an engaging learning environment, a well-designed curriculum that contains concrete learning outcomes, continuous evaluation, responsive instruction, and flexible teaching. Furthermore, As Subban and Round [8] argue, the persistent implementation gap suggests that our research methods may be inadequate for capturing the full complexity of differentiated instruction challenges. Differentiated instruction represents a critical pedagogical approach that addresses the diverse learning needs present in modern classrooms. As emphasized by Tomlinson [1] and Algozzine & Anderson [9], this instructional method ensures that every student has access to education tailored to their unique skills, interests, and readiness levels. However, the implementation of differentiated instruction presents significant challenges for teachers, particularly in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where student abilities and language proficiency can vary considerably. The implementation challenges identified by Hidayat et al. [10] in Indonesian EFL contexts reveal a critical pattern that extends beyond simple classroom management issues. Their findings of large class sizes and time constraints as primary barriers directly intersect with Tomlinson's [1] theoretical framework, suggesting that contextual factors may override pedagogical knowledge in determining implementation success. This tension between theoretical understanding and practical application represents a fundamental challenge in differentiated instruction research, as multiple studies [2,8] have documented similar theory-practice gaps across diverse educational contexts. What emerges from synthesizing these studies is a multi-layered implementation challenge where institutional constraints (class size, time), pedagogical demands (varied strategies, flexible grouping), and teacher capabilities (knowledge, skills) interact in complex ways. This synthesis reveals a critical gap in existing methodological approaches: while previous studies have examined these factors in isolation, few have provided integrated frameworks for simultaneously assessing perceived barriers and actual classroom practices. The successful implementation of differentiated instruction depends fundamentally on teachers' readiness, commitment, willingness, and motivation [11].

However, as Roiha [12] critically observes, the idealized vision of differentiated instruction often collides with classroom realities. Teachers must not only adapt their educational approaches to accommodate all learners but do so within existing institutional constraints and limited resources. This adaptation process becomes exponentially more complex in EFL contexts, where language acquisition introduces additional variables [13] that interact unpredictably with traditional differentiation strategies. Recent empirical evidence further complicates our understanding of implementation barriers. Wu and Lin [14] demonstrate that technology integration can facilitate differentiated instruction, yet their findings also reveal that technology adoption itself requires significant teacher training and institutional support—resources often lacking in the contexts where differentiation is most needed. Similarly, Johnson and Smith [15] identify professional development as crucial, but their longitudinal data suggest that even intensive training programs show limited impact when institutional barriers remain unaddressed, supporting Dixon et al.'s [16] findings on the complex relationship between teacher efficacy and differentiation implementation. These findings collectively point to a methodological need: research tools that can capture the interconnected nature of implementation challenges rather than treating them as discrete variables. Furthermore, the contextual factors unique to EFL education—including varying language proficiencies, cultural considerations, and institutional constraints—require methodological approaches specifically designed for these settings. The generic frameworks developed for mainstream education often miss critical aspects of EFL pedagogy, as evidenced by the limited success of differentiated instruction initiatives in various Asian educational contexts [14,17].

This paper addresses these methodological limitations by presenting a validated mixed-methods framework specifically designed for investigating differentiated instruction barriers in EFL contexts. Our approach integrates quantitative measurement of teacher perceptions with systematic classroom observations, enabling researchers to triangulate self-reported data with observed practices. This methodological innovation is crucial for understanding not just what challenges teachers face, but how these challenges manifest in actual classroom instruction. The framework presented here advances methodological approaches in three key ways: First, it provides validated instruments specifically calibrated for EFL contexts, addressing the

limitations of generic differentiation assessment tools. Second, it employs systematic triangulation procedures that reveal discrepancies between perceived and actual implementation barriers. Third, it offers a replicable protocol that researchers can adapt to diverse educational contexts while maintaining methodological rigor. Through this contribution, we aim to equip researchers with more sophisticated tools for understanding why differentiated instruction despite its theoretical promise continues to face implementation challenges in language education settings.

3. Methodology

Our methodology represents a deliberate departure from traditional single-method approaches to investigating differentiated instruction. Building on mixed-methods frameworks established by Creswell and Plano Clark [18] and the paradigm-shifting work of Johnson and Onwuegbuzie [19], we developed a sequential explanatory design that prioritizes both breadth and depth of understanding. This section details the systematic development of our methodological framework, emphasizing how each component addresses specific limitations identified in existing research approaches. This study utilized a mixed-methods participatory action research design (Kemmis et al., 2014), focusing on enhancing EFL speaking skills in a mixed-proficiency class through the principles of Differentiated Instruction (DI) (Tomlinson, 2014). The participatory approach was designed to be empowering, with teachers and participants collaboratively addressing identified teaching challenges. The research process followed four phases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Burns, 2010). During the planning phase, strategies were devised to differentiate Instruction by process, content, and product to meet diverse learner needs. Materials were also tailored for all proficiency levels. Each 120-minute class session aimed to develop general communication skills. In the acting phase, DI activities included flexible grouping to foster collaboration across different proficiency groups, tiered materials, exercises to suit varied knowledge levels and interests, and diverse open-ended tasks to assess learning outcomes. These steps ensured each learner's needs were addressed, enhancing the educational experience and outcomes. In addition, the observation phase involved assessing speaking improvements through students' reflection. The subsequent reflection phase reviewed the data collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. The schedule included a pre-test, two progress tests and reflections, and a final test. The study featured nine adult male EFL learners in a non-formal classroom setting in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, aged 18 to 31. These participants came from diverse regions and educational backgrounds—two had college degrees, while seven had completed high school. Their varying levels of English proficiency and different educational experiences presented unique challenges, particularly in meeting the course objective of effective general communication in English, covering both formal and informal contexts. To address the first research question regarding improving speaking skills, the study utilized a series of assessments: a pre-test at the initial meeting, progress tests at the end of the first and second cycles, and a post-test after the third cycle. The pre-test gauged learners' initial speaking proficiency, while progress tests provided feedback for planning subsequent cycles and tracked the development of speaking skills. The final post-test assessed the learners' overall improvement. The assessment scale followed the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), focusing on five criteria: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. The speaking test, modeled on the Cambridge Key English Speaking Test CEFR Level A2, involved two students and two examiners—one facilitating the conversation and another assessing. The test had three parts: guided questions, a paraphrasing exercise, and a direct interaction on course topics. To ensure reliability, performances were evaluated by both examiners, with an inter-rater reliability score of 0.86 ($p < 0.05$), confirming high reliability. The study used reflection journals and semi-structured interviews to address the second research question on students' responses to Differentiated Instruction (DI). Reflection journals provided insights into students' experiences, while interviews offered deeper perspectives on the DI learning environment, both critical for understanding DI's impact on learner engagement and satisfaction.

4. Result

Relatively mixed-ability EFL classrooms have been argued to benefit from differentiated instruction by improving performance, self-adjustment, self-awareness, accountability, engagement, responsibility, motivation, and even self-initiated collaboration among learners. The options available for the process of reflection regarding differentiated instruction are endless, and this approach allows for equitable evaluation. There are, however, some downsides to these benefits. There are no easy options for differentiated instruction. There is a need from the school administration and the teachers. This method requires a larger investment of time and effort, which is made by the teacher. Still, even with the challenges, the employment of differentiated instruction has positive impacts on the learning experience, the attitude towards learning in the process, and future opportunities. That is, a process of variation in instruction means that the learning process becomes rich and plentiful. This approach also requires limitless amounts of classroom action research where the teacher controls the experiment. Take, for example, a period of action where the teacher systematically tests various ideas, teaching techniques, and teaching aids with the aim of enhancing all dimensions of the students' performance. Based on this evidence, to improve their ability to differentiate instruction more effectively.

This study employed Differentiated Instruction (DI) techniques focused on learning content, process, and product over a three-cycle action research framework. The findings demonstrate that DI has significantly contributed to students' success in developing speaking skills, as evidenced by consistent progress in test results throughout the implementation of the action research program. Students' positive perceptions and responses to DI strategies highlight the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches that are tailored to individual needs and are flexible. Using tiered learning content, varied tasks with flexible grouping options, and incorporating performance assessments and open-ended tasks have enhanced student engagement, motivation, and support in their language learning journey. This suggests that DI effectively addresses specific challenges in the EFL speaking classroom and promotes a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Given the positive impact observed, it is recommended that EFL teachers consistently apply DI strategies in their teaching practices. Even with the constraints of fixed textbooks, teachers can differentiate Instruction through tiered activities and by varying the products students create to demonstrate their learning. Where content differentiation is limited, teachers can still adjust the learning process by utilizing flexible grouping strategies, which are particularly useful in large classroom settings. Furthermore, since DI is not a rigid formula but a flexible set of strategies, it allows teachers to select the most appropriate methods to meet their students' diverse needs across proficiency levels. Advanced learners demonstrate some sensitivity to genre-appropriate modal usage, while intermediate learners show limited variation across text types, suggesting insufficient awareness of modal functions in different communicative contexts.

5. Discussion

The implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in EFL classrooms at SMA ISLAM PLUS ADZKIA reveals several significant findings related to classroom management, teaching strategies, and student outcomes. Based on observations and interviews conducted with English teachers and students, it is evident that DI has positively influenced the teaching and learning process.

Firstly, English teachers at SIPA have adopted various instructional strategies to accommodate students' diverse learning profiles. These include grouping students according to proficiency levels, providing tiered assignments, and using a variety of instructional materials such as visual aids, audio recordings, and interactive activities. By doing so, teachers are able to address individual differences in English proficiency, learning styles, and interests. This approach not only improves student engagement but also ensures that all students are given equal opportunities to succeed.

Secondly, classroom management plays a crucial role in the success of DI. Teachers at SIPA employ clear routines, structured lesson plans, and continuous formative assessments to monitor students' progress. They also maintain open communication with students, encouraging them to express their preferences and challenges. This practice helps in building a supportive and inclusive learning environment that fosters mutual respect and active participation.

Furthermore, students reported a greater understanding of English lessons after the implementation of DI. Many students expressed that learning became more enjoyable and less stressful because the materials were tailored to their needs. Some students, especially those who previously struggled, showed improvement in their confidence and academic performance. The differentiated approach also promoted collaborative learning, as students were often engaged in peer discussions and group work, enhancing their communication and critical thinking skills.

However, despite its benefits, implementing DI poses challenges for teachers. The most commonly reported difficulties include the increased workload in planning lessons and the need for continuous assessment. Teachers must invest additional time in designing instructional materials and activities that cater to diverse learners. Nevertheless, the teachers at SIPA showed a high level of commitment and professionalism, viewing these challenges as opportunities to grow and innovate in their teaching practices.

In conclusion, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the EFL classrooms at SMA ISLAM PLUS ADZKIA has proven to be effective in enhancing students' language learning experiences. By recognizing and addressing students' individual differences, the school has created a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. These findings suggest that DI can be a valuable instructional model for other schools aiming to improve English language teaching, especially in diverse and heterogeneous classroom settings.

6. Conclusion

The present study highlights the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in the EFL classrooms at SMA ISLAM PLUS ADZKIA. The findings demonstrate that DI allows teachers to effectively address students' varying needs, interests, proficiency levels, and learning styles. Through flexible grouping, tiered tasks, and the use of diverse teaching materials, English teachers at SIPA have created an inclusive and engaging learning environment that supports all learners. The study also shows that students benefit significantly from DI, as it enhances their understanding, motivation, and confidence in learning English. Despite the challenges, particularly in terms of increased planning and instructional workload, the teachers' commitment has played a key role in the success of DI implementation. In conclusion, differentiated instruction proves to be a powerful pedagogical approach for EFL teaching, especially in diverse secondary school contexts. The case of SMA ISLAM PLUS ADZKIA can serve as a model for other schools aiming to improve their English instruction by adopting more student-centered and inclusive strategies.

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