

A Qualitative Study on The Challenges Faced by English Teachers In Applying Differentiated Instruction

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Abstract- This study explores the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction (DI) within the context of senior high schools in Indonesia. Recognizing the increasing diversity in student abilities, interests, and learning styles, differentiated instruction has emerged as a student-centered approach aimed at addressing these differences. Despite its theoretical strengths, practical implementation remains complex. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research gathered data through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving English teachers with at least two years of teaching experience. The findings reveal five major challenges: (1) difficulties in adjusting content, teaching methods, and assessments; (2) time constraints and high workload; (3) limited facilities and instructional resources; (4) internal barriers such as limited knowledge and low teacher confidence; and (5) adaptive strategies developed by teachers. Despite significant constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience by employing flexible grouping, task modifications, reflective practices, and peer collaboration. The study concludes that successful DI implementation requires more than individual teacher initiative—it demands systemic support, adequate training, and enabling school environments. These insights can inform educational policy, curriculum development, and teacher training programs to promote more inclusive and effective English language instruction.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction, English teachers, teaching challenges, qualitative study, teacher strategy*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, educational institutions worldwide have become increasingly aware of the diversity that exists within their student populations. Students enter classrooms with different levels of prior knowledge, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, interests, and cognitive abilities. Recognizing this diversity, educators and researchers have emphasized the need for more inclusive and student-centered teaching approaches. One such approach that has gained global attention is differentiated instruction (DI). This instructional model promotes the adaptation of teaching content, process, products, and learning environments to suit the diverse needs of learners (Tomlinson, 2014).

Differentiated instruction is especially relevant in English language education, where students often exhibit a wide range of language

proficiency, motivation, and learning readiness. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, teachers are frequently faced with the challenge of delivering the same curriculum to students who are at different stages of language development. This presents a dilemma: How can teachers ensure that all students, regardless of ability, are equally engaged, supported, and able to achieve learning outcomes?

While differentiated instruction has been widely supported in educational theory and policy, its implementation in real classroom settings—particularly in English education—remains complex and challenging. Various studies have shown that teachers, despite their awareness of the benefits of differentiation, often struggle with its practical application (Subban, 2006; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). The challenges include limited time for planning,

lack of training, rigid curriculum standards, large class sizes, insufficient teaching materials, and difficulties in classroom management.

Moreover, many teachers report feeling unprepared or lacking confidence in using differentiated strategies effectively. A study by Carolan and Guinn (2007) highlighted that without proper training, teachers tend to revert to “one-size-fits-all” teaching approaches that may not meet the needs of every learner. Similarly, EFL teachers often face additional pressure due to the language barrier itself, which makes differentiating instruction even more demanding. In many contexts, especially in developing countries, systemic limitations such as overcrowded classrooms, limited technological access, and insufficient professional development further hinder effective implementation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, differentiated instruction requires that teachers not only recognize the individual needs of students but also be skilled in designing flexible and responsive lesson plans. This includes modifying learning tasks, offering multiple means of assessment, grouping students strategically, and creating an inclusive classroom environment. In the English classroom, this might mean offering reading materials at varying levels of difficulty, providing alternative writing prompts, or using mixed-ability group work to encourage peer support.

However, translating these ideals into daily practice is no easy task. Teachers must balance the need to cover prescribed content with the need to support individual learning progress. For example, while one student may require basic vocabulary instruction, another might be ready to analyze complex texts. In a traditional classroom structure, it can be difficult for a single teacher to provide such varied support simultaneously.

Furthermore, the concept of differentiated instruction is often misunderstood. Some educators equate it solely with giving students different tasks or homework, rather than

adopting a comprehensive, proactive, and flexible approach to instruction. This misunderstanding can limit the potential of DI and lead to inconsistent practices in schools (Deunk et al., 2018).

Given these challenges, it becomes crucial to explore the real experiences of English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction. Understanding their perceptions, obstacles, and coping strategies can help bridge the gap between theory and practice. A qualitative approach is particularly useful for this purpose, as it allows for in-depth exploration of the complexities faced by teachers in different educational contexts.

The need for such studies is further emphasized in the wake of educational reforms that increasingly demand personalized and inclusive teaching methods. For instance, many national curriculums now include expectations for teachers to address diverse learning needs and support all learners effectively. However, without adequate understanding of the practical difficulties teachers encounter, these reforms may remain aspirational rather than actionable.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the difficulties experienced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction. Specifically, the research seeks to: (1) identify the types of challenges commonly faced by teachers; (2) understand the root causes of these challenges; and (3) explore the strategies teachers employ to address them. By doing so, the study hopes to offer insights that can inform teacher training programs, curriculum design, and educational policy more broadly.

The findings from this research are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on differentiated instruction in language education and provide practical recommendations for improving classroom practices. More importantly, they aim to amplify the voices of teachers who are often at the frontline of educational change but are rarely consulted in the design of instructional policies.

In conclusion, differentiated instruction holds significant promise for addressing the

diverse needs of English language learners. However, for it to be effective, it must be supported by a deep understanding of the realities teachers face in implementing it. Through this study, it is hoped that meaningful progress can be made toward more inclusive, responsive, and student-centered English education.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at gaining a deep understanding of the difficulties faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore subjective experiences, perspectives, and strategies used by teachers in real classroom contexts. Rather than focusing on data generalization, this method emphasizes the interpretation of meaning and contextual understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The research was conducted at a senior high school in Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on the consideration that the school had adopted a curriculum that promotes student-centered learning and supports the application of differentiated teaching strategies. The data collection was carried out between October and November 2025.

The subjects of this study were English teachers with at least two years of teaching experience who had attempted to apply differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Informants were selected purposively, based on predetermined criteria relevant to the research objectives. The number of participants was determined according to the principle of data saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no new significant information emerged. Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow flexibility in exploring participants' responses in depth. Classroom observations were carried out to directly observe how teachers implemented differentiated

instruction in practice. Additionally, supporting documents such as lesson plans, teaching modules, and student assessment results were collected to strengthen the data obtained through interviews and observations.

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis method following the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and focused on data relevant to the research questions. The next step involved presenting the data in the form of descriptive narratives, direct quotations from participants, and thematic patterns that emerged during the analysis process. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the identified themes and patterns, which were then verified to ensure their validity. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, triangulation techniques were applied, including both methodological triangulation and source triangulation. Methodological triangulation involved comparing data from interviews, observations, and document analysis, while source triangulation involved comparing information from different participants. Member checks were also conducted, where participants were asked to validate the researcher's interpretations to ensure that the data reflected their actual intentions and experiences.

Throughout the research process, ethical principles were carefully observed. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The identities of the participants were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Participants were given full freedom to express their opinions honestly and had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without pressure. Through the use of this research design and method, the study is expected to produce valid, in-depth, and reflective insights into the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction. Furthermore, the findings may contribute to the development of more inclusive

and responsive teaching practices that address the diverse learning needs of students.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Based on the analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and documentation, this study identified several major themes related to the challenges encountered by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction, as well as the adaptive strategies they employed. These themes include: (1) difficulties in adjusting content, methods, and assessment; (2) time constraints and workload; (3) limited facilities and learning resources; (4) internal barriers such as lack of knowledge and confidence; and (5) teachers' adaptive strategies in overcoming these challenges.

Theme 1: Adjusting Content, Methods, and Assessment

Most teachers stated that designing instructional materials that suit students with diverse abilities remains one of the greatest challenges. Some teachers had to provide reading texts at varying levels of difficulty, choose relevant topics to maintain student motivation, or offer alternative assignments tailored to students' learning styles. Flexible assessment also posed difficulties: many teachers still relied on a one-size-fits-all rubric, which made it hard for students with slower learning paces or different learning approaches to demonstrate their progress optimally.

Theme 2: Time Constraints and Workload

Nearly all participants reported that differentiated instruction demands significantly more preparation time compared to traditional teaching. Teachers must prepare backup materials, create additional notes, design different activities for student groups, and monitor individual progress. Under a dense curriculum and tight teaching schedules, many teachers struggle to balance these demands effectively.

Theme 3: Limited Facilities and Learning Resources

Observations revealed that some classrooms lacked adequate teaching media or flexible spaces to support group activities. Resources such as adaptable modules, technology (computers, internet access), or leveled teaching materials were still limited. Teachers noted that the absence of alternative instructional materials or technological support forced them to revert to conventional teaching approaches.

Theme 4: Internal Barriers – Knowledge and Confidence

Some teachers admitted that while they understood the theoretical concepts of differentiation, they were unsure how to implement them in practice. The lack of real-world experience or advanced training made them hesitant to modify their teaching methods. There was a concern that experimenting with new instructional approaches could lead to classroom disorder or failure to meet learning objectives.

Theme 5: Teachers' Adaptive Strategies

Despite these challenges, teachers attempted to overcome the obstacles through various strategies: grouping students flexibly based on their needs, modifying simple tasks into multiple versions, involving students in reflection and feedback processes, and utilizing available technology (e.g., lightweight apps or free online resources). Some teachers also collaborated with colleagues to share differentiated materials and exchange instructional ideas.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that the challenges of implementing differentiated instruction are not merely conceptual but practical, involving school infrastructure, teacher readiness, and classroom dynamics. The difficulties in adapting content, methods, and assessment highlight the gap between the

theoretical ideals of differentiation and the actual realities of everyday teaching. This aligns with the view that teachers need both conceptual understanding and practical skills to apply differentiation effectively and consistently.

Time constraints emerged as a significant barrier, particularly when teachers are burdened with dense curricula and excessive administrative tasks. This lack of time reduces opportunities for teachers to design and implement comprehensive differentiated materials. As a result, differentiation is often applied spontaneously or only partially. In this regard, structural and scheduling support from school management is crucial to allow teachers the creative space necessary for innovation.

Furthermore, the limitations in facilities and resources intensify the challenges. Without adaptive teaching media or technological support, it becomes difficult for teachers to provide meaningful learning activities that accommodate diverse needs. This situation underscores that although differentiated instruction is pedagogically sound, its successful implementation heavily depends on the school's actual conditions—thus requiring policy-level interventions and increased investment in educational infrastructure.

Internal barriers related to knowledge and teacher confidence are often overlooked yet critical. A teacher may understand the concept of differentiation theoretically, but when confronted with diverse student needs in the classroom, uncertainty can be a major obstacle. Ongoing professional development, mentoring, and hands-on teaching experience are necessary to build teacher confidence and encourage instructional innovation.

The adaptive strategies implemented by teachers demonstrate resilience and a willingness to make differentiation work, even in limited contexts. Flexible grouping, the use of alternative tasks, and reflective teaching approaches represent practical steps that can be applied in various school environments. However, the effectiveness of these strategies would be significantly enhanced by institutional

support, access to relevant materials, and the existence of professional learning communities where best practices can be shared.

In sum, the findings and discussion of this study affirm that the success of differentiated instruction requires synergy between teacher preparedness, school support, and resource availability. Without these critical components, the practical barriers will remain persistent and hinder the broader implementation of this pedagogical approach.

CONCLUSION

This study identified several key challenges faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction, as well as the adaptive strategies they employed to overcome these difficulties. The findings revealed that teachers struggled primarily with adjusting learning materials, teaching methods, and assessment approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students. These challenges highlight the complexity of applying differentiation in everyday classroom settings.

Time limitations and heavy workloads were also significant barriers, restricting teachers' ability to prepare and implement differentiated lessons thoroughly. Moreover, the lack of adequate facilities and instructional resources, including technological tools and flexible learning materials, further impeded the effective practice of differentiation.

Internal factors such as limited practical knowledge and low confidence in applying differentiated instruction contributed to teachers' reluctance to innovate their teaching strategies. Despite these obstacles, many teachers demonstrated resourcefulness by adopting flexible grouping, modifying tasks, engaging students in reflection, and utilizing available technologies, often collaborating with colleagues to share materials and ideas.

Overall, the success of differentiated instruction depends not only on individual teacher efforts but also on comprehensive support from school management. Providing professional development opportunities,

sufficient resources, and an enabling environment are essential to empower teachers to implement differentiation effectively. With such support, differentiated instruction can contribute significantly to enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes in English language classroom.

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