

EXPLORING ENGLISH TEACHER CHALLENGES IN APPLYING DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING AT A SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

EKSPLORASI TANTANGAN GURU BAHASA INGGRIS DALAM MENERAPKAN PEMBELAJARAN BERDIFERENSIASI DI SEKOLAH MENENGAH ATAS

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of Differentiated Learning is a teaching approach that requires teachers to accommodate the diversity of students' abilities, interests, and readiness. However, many teachers still face difficulties during the implementation, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language in senior high schools. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by English teachers in applying Differentiated Learning in the teaching and learning process. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design, conducted at a senior high school in Jombang, with an English teacher who has implemented the Differentiated Learning method as the participant. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and the researcher used interview guidelines and field notes for the instruments. The analysis process involved stages of coding, theme grouping, and data interpretation, with data validity maintained through member checking. The findings revealed four main challenges faced by English teachers, namely challenges in addressing the diversity of students' English proficiency levels, challenges of motivation and low student participation, challenges of time constraints and teacher workload, as well as challenges in maintaining fairness in assessing and identifying students' actual abilities. The study concludes that although differentiated instruction is relevant for addressing student diversity, its implementation demands teacher preparedness, institutional support, and practical, context-based strategies. This study suggests that teachers should implement differentiation gradually, schools should offer structural support, and future research should expand the context and study participants.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning, English Teacher, Challenges, Case Study*

ABSTRAK

Penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi merupakan salah satu pendekatan pengajaran yang bertujuan untuk mengakomodasi keragaman kemampuan, minat, dan kesiapan belajar siswa. Namun masih banyak guru menghadapi tantangan ketika menerapkan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, terutama dalam konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing di sekolah menengah atas. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini dilakukan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh guru Bahasa Inggris dalam menerapkan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi dalam proses belajar mengajar. Pendekatan yang digunakan pada penelitian ini adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilakukan di salah satu sekolah menengah atas di Jombang, dengan subjek seorang guru bahasa Inggris yang telah menerapkan metode Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah wawancara semi- struktural dan observasi kelas, sedangkan untuk instrumen, peneliti menggunakan pedoman wawancara dan catatan lapangan. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahap pengkodean, pengelompokan tema, dan interpretasi data, dengan validitas data dijaga melalui verifikasi anggota. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa guru bahasa Inggris menghadapi empat tantangan utama, yaitu tantangan dalam menangani keragaman tingkat kemahiran bahasa Inggris siswa, tantangan motivasi dan partisipasi siswa yang rendah, tantangan keterbatasan waktu dan beban kerja guru, serta tantangan dalam menjaga keadilan dalam menilai dan mengidentifikasi kemampuan aktual siswa. Kesimpulan studi ini menekankan bahwa meskipun Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi relevan untuk mengakomodasi keragaman siswa, implementasinya memerlukan kesiapan guru, dukungan institusional, serta strategi yang realistis dan kontekstual. Studi ini menyarankan agar guru menerapkan diferensiasi secara

bertahap, sekolah memberikan dukungan struktural, dan penelitian masa depan memperluas konteks dan peserta studi.

Kata Kunci: Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi, Guru Bahasa Inggris, Tantangan, Studi Kasus

1. INTRODUCTION

English plays a very important role in global communication, education, and professional development. This demonstrates that English plays a crucial role in all aspects, both in education and business. Learning English in this era is very important. In Indonesia, English is one of the foreign languages that must be studied at every level of education, meaning it is not used as a daily language in society. In an environment that lacks support for English, teachers must create meaningful opportunities to use English in the classroom. The methods or pedagogical aspects greatly influence success in teaching English as a foreign language in the teaching and learning process (Abdallah, 2024). This indicates that teachers need to choose appropriate teaching methods in order to make the learning process more effective.

Teaching English at the Senior High School level in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia requires special attention to the challenges that arise because English is not widely used outside the classroom environment. High school students exhibit diverse learning characteristics, including differences in readiness, interest, and learning styles. Research shows that EFL senior high school teachers often face a variety of obstacles in carrying out an effective learning process, including limited opportunities for students to practice English in real contexts, low levels of student engagement, and difficulty in motivating students to actively communicate in their target language. Therefore, teaching approaches that recognize and respond to student diversity are essential to ensure that all students can achieve meaningful learning outcomes.

Differentiated Learning is a teaching method that adapts to the needs and student learning styles (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). In the opinion of Tomlinson (2017), Differentiated Learning is a teaching method that aims to meet the needs of students both individually, small groups and overall students. Differentiated Learning teachers must be familiar with the application of curriculum and student characteristics (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). Harmini & Effend (2018) mentioned that the application of Differentiated Learning will make students get a learning experience that helps them more easily accept the content provided, especially for students who have a low ability to receive lessons. Through differentiation, teachers can provide various ways for students to access learning materials, participate in learning activities, and demonstrate their understanding. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, this approach is particularly important because students have varying levels of language exposure, vocabulary mastery, and communication skills.

(Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) revealed that learning the English language using Differentiated Learning shows significant results in reducing diversity disparities in the classroom. This is in accordance with the application of the principle of Merdeka curriculum learning on the Decree of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Number 262/M/2022 is "learning is designed by considering the current stage of development and level of achievement of students, according to learning needs, and reflecting the characteristics and development of diverse students so that learning becomes meaningful and fun".

Differentiated Learning can be applied in several aspects, namely content, process, and product (Levy, 2008). The first thing to consider in Differentiated Learning is the content. Content is what the teacher will teach students and how teachers adjust the content, so that it can be easily understood by all students (Levy, 2008). Sebihi (2016) states that all students are entitled to the same learning content, by adjusting the content using several instructional

processes. This way will make all students learn the same material but in various ways. The second thing to consider is the process. Process is how the teacher delivers content, including activities that engage the students in learning and helps them to understand the content (Sebihi, 2016).

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has a strategic position in the Indonesian education system, given the role of English as an important international language in the fields of academia, economics, and global communication (Aziza, 2020). However, English has become a foreign language in Indonesia, the usage is very rare, and students only rely on classroom learning. To face the situation, teachers need to create meaningful and contextual learning situations so that students have the opportunity to actively use English. As Abdallah (2024) suggested, the teaching methods used by teachers greatly influence the attainment of EFL learning, as the right methods can help overcome the limitations of English exposure outside the classroom and increase the effectiveness of the learning process.

Research related to the challenges faced by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in managing classroom learning, especially at the senior high school level, shows that most of these challenges include low student motivation, limited learning time, lack of opportunities to practice English, and low student involvement in communication activities. In addition, noisy classrooms, heterogeneous student abilities, and a lack of technological support and professional training for teachers further complicate efforts to create interactive and effective learning. Therefore, teachers are required to use learning strategies that can be adapted to the characteristics and needs of diverse students (Songbatumis, 2017).

Within this paradigm, Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences provides a theoretical background for the realization that there are different intelligence types among people such as linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence. Such differences affect the way students learn information, interact with content, and display their knowledge (Setiyadi, 2020). Thus, the same way of teaching cannot be used anymore for all the students. The key to success in this case lies in the use of Differentiated Learning as a method of instruction (Setiyadi, 2020).

Differentiated Instruction is considered a pedagogical practice in which learning processes are tailored according to the requirements, interests, and aptitudes of students. Within this model, teachers should not only teach their students using one form but should also create an experience for their students that allows for variation. This is possible by using a different mode to present the content to students, different forms of activities and assessments for learners, and therefore help students learn better because they would be doing it according to their potential and interest.

Studies have shown that there are various obstacles that teachers of English as a foreign language at the senior high school level often face that hinder the learning process. These include lack of practicality on how students can use English in real life, low levels of engagement and difficulties in motivating students to communicate actively in the language. In a study conducted by Rochmah et al. (2025), some of the other barriers to teaching English speaking skills at Indonesian senior high schools were mentioned as well.

Prior studies suggest that differentiated learning can improve the performance, motivation, and independence of students in their English language classes (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Sapan & Mede, 2022). However, some of them point out that teachers face certain obstacles while using this teaching strategy, such as lack of time, overload, lack of training, and difficulty in controlling diverse classes (Ningtyas & Lestari, 2024; Shareefa, 2021). The previous research has primarily focused on the application of differentiated learning in elementary or junior high school, neglecting high school context.

The objective of this research is to explore the problems that the English teachers experience in applying differentiated learning in Indonesian senior high schools. Through

revealing the problem that teachers encounter when they teach in the classroom situation, it is hoped that the research will provide information that may help in the better application of differentiated learning. The results of this research are expected to improve the teaching process and help teachers deal with students' diversity.

2. METHODS

The current study adopts the qualitative paradigm through a case study research design to thoroughly examine the difficulties faced by an English language teacher during the implementation of differentiated learning. Qualitative research is used because it allows researchers to study participants' experiences in the context where they happen. This research was carried out at a high school located in Jombang, East Java, in the odd semester of 2025/2026 academic year. The subject was an English teacher who taught 10th graders and had experience in applying differentiated learning in his class. A purposeful sampling method was used to choose the subject because he actively applied differentiation in terms of content, process, and product, which made him a pertinent choice for the research.

The data collection process involved both semi-structured interviews and classroom observation. The semi-structured interviews were intended to explore teachers' experiences, perspectives, and difficulties associated with the topics of differentiated learning such as its content, methods of learning, and assessment. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and later transcribed. In addition, classroom observations were conducted during four learning sessions to observe how Differentiated Learning was applied in actual learning and teaching activities.

To ensure the validity of the data, it is important to do some validity strategies. There are four criteria of trustworthiness, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Denzin K. Norman & Lincoln S. Yvonna, 2017). Among the four criteria of trustworthiness, credibility and confirmability are the most emphasized aspects in this study. In this study, credibility is demonstrated through member checking, where the researcher cross-checks the research results by sharing the findings from interviews and field notes with the participants to confirm the accuracy of the data found and confirmability was achieved by maintaining researcher neutrality and by supporting the findings with direct quotations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that teachers face four main challenges in implementing Differentiated Learning:

3.1. Challenges in Differentiated Content

Differentiated Learning in terms of content requires teachers to adapt the material to the readiness, needs, and abilities of students. However, in practice, teachers face the main challenge of the wide range of English language abilities among students in a single class. Some students already have fairly good abilities, while others still have difficulty understanding the basic material. Teachers try to overcome this by providing the same material, assignments, and assessments, but with different treatments and approaches, such as providing simpler explanations and special assistance to low-ability students. Nevertheless, a dilemma remains because material that is appropriate for high-ability students is often too difficult for low-ability students, while simplified material has the potential to make high-ability students feel underchallenged.

In addition, grouping students also poses a challenge in content differentiation. Students tend to choose groups based on their closeness as friends, which can lead to ability imbalances within groups. The problem is overcome by use of heterogeneous grouping, where high-ability learners help those who are low-ability learners to participate in the learning process. According to observations, the differences in English language proficiency show themselves in the speed and independence in completing tasks among students. There are fast

learners who complete their tasks quickly, while others take more time and still have problems with them. The above mentioned observation confirms the statement that one type of material is not enough to cover the needs of all students. In general, the main problem of differentiated materials is that they should be fair and suitable for different learners. To overcome this, teachers apply flexibility in delivering material, provide additional time, and seek appropriate resources and strategies so that all students can be involved and achieve learning objectives.

3.2. Challenges in Differentiated Process

Differentiated Learning in terms of process relates to how learning activities are carried out and how students are involved in learning activities. Teachers have implemented strategies such as progressive quizzes ranging from easy to difficult levels to map students' abilities and identify those who need additional help. This strategy helps teachers tailor their support to students' needs, especially for students with low abilities. The biggest problem faced when implementing differentiated instruction relates to the lack of motivation on the part of students to participate in learning. Such a lack of motivation results in poor performance during activities and unwillingness to participate in the learning process. In addition, differences in motivation result in unequal distribution of activity in the classroom setting.

Another problem found was lack of participation from the learners. It has been observed that some learners have shown signs of inattentiveness towards the teacher, have problems in answering the questions, and rely on their classmates to get their work done. This shows lack of engagement in the learning process. It impacts the quality of student engagement in learning. In addition to student factors, classroom conditions also affect the success of Differentiated Learning. Large classes, noisy students, and differences in ability levels make it difficult for teachers to manage learning activities effectively. To maintain a conducive classroom atmosphere, teachers give additional tasks to students who finish quickly so that they do not disturb other students. Overall, the main challenges in the differentiated process are low student motivation and participation, which are exacerbated by uncontrolled classroom conditions and ability heterogeneity. To overcome this, teachers implement heterogeneous grouping so that high-ability students can help weaker students and encourage the involvement of all students in the learning process.

3.3. Challenges in Differentiated Product

In Differentiated Learning in terms of products, teachers give the same final product instructions to all students with the aim that all students achieve the same competency standards. However, for students with low abilities, teachers give simpler additional tasks as a form of remedial teaching so that they can still meet the set graduation standards. Although the process and level of difficulty are different, the learning objectives remain the same for all students. The main challenge in differentiated products is maintaining fairness and accuracy in assessment. Teachers find it difficult to identify students' true abilities because the results of assignments or tests often do not reflect their actual competence. This is due to various factors, such as cheating, luck, and differences in learning environments and family support.

Students who are subjected to an enabling learning environment often display more confidence and involvement, while students without proper guidance have issues like language anxiety and low participation rates. Such issues affect learning performance and subjectivity is introduced into the assessment process. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary for educators to not only look at the end result but the whole process of education, such as student involvement and performance. Moreover, educators must make use of technology, which will include anti-cheating elements and observe the classroom environment as well.

3.4. Challenges in General

The factors recognized in this study to be major external influences in implementing the concept of differentiated learning apart from the internal difficulties in content, process, and product include time, workload of the teacher, and the learning environment of the students. With regard to temporal limitations and workload, teachers struggle with the pressure to maintain strict teaching timetables, administrative work, and assessment that requires time commitment. However, due to the variations in students' learning pace, more time needs to be provided to some students. However, due to limited classroom time and teacher exhaustion from extended teaching time, differentiation is challenging.

Another thing that affects the success of the application of differentiated learning is the student's learning environment. The environment, family background, and exposure to the English language of different students lead to significant ability gaps between students. With a lack of support, students who come from less supportive environments tend to have low self-confidence and language anxiety. This discourages them from actively participating in the learning process. These conditions have become one of the challenges faced by teachers in implementing differentiated learning, which requires student involvement in the learning process. It is harder for educators to promote the involvement and growth of students without an enabling environment. Hence, institutional support plays an important role in the successful adoption of differentiated learning. This means that teachers should be provided with continuous training and guidance in order to understand and use differentiation effectively. All in all, the success of differentiated learning is not just related to classroom teaching approach but also depends on external factors such as teacher load, students' environment, and institutional support within the school.

Based on the result of this study, the following conclusions can be made as differentiated learning in high school English language teaching faces a range of challenging issues, which are interconnected and include both content, process, product, and external issues. The reasons for these issues are not only related to classroom practice itself but also to students' affective states and school structure. In terms of differentiated content, differences in the level of English language proficiency, rates of learning, and students' readiness are considered to be important challenges for teachers in assessing the right level of difficulty for the group. These results are consistent with Tomlinson's Theory of Learning Readiness and Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, suggesting differences in the levels of student skills. It should also be noted that the outcomes of the research presented above match those obtained by Ningtyas & Lestari (2024) that teachers find it difficult to adapt material for heterogeneous classes, especially in EFL context.

In terms of differentiated processes, the problems of low motivation and involvement of the learners are among the key barriers in implementing differentiated instruction. The insufficient use of English outside the classroom, as well as high levels of language anxiety, make learners lack confidence and passive participants in the learning process. The mentioned research results correspond with the conceptual model suggested by Setiyadi (2020), and research conducted by Sapan & Mede (2022), which emphasize that student motivation and engagement are key factors in the success of Differentiated Learning. In the field of differentiated products, the major difficulties lie in the equity and accuracy of the assessment process. Differences in home environment, family support, and even the possibility of cheating might lead to the failure of assessment results to measure the actual skills of students. These results confirm the study conducted by Zerai et al. (2023) which states that the learning environment significantly affects the validity of assessment outcomes in the case of differentiated learning.

Furthermore, there are common challenges in the form of time pressures and a heavy teacher's workload. The demands of the administration, along with many teaching hours, hinder the teachers from developing and implementing differentiated learning effectively. This corresponds with the ideas presented by Tomlinson (2017), Gibbs (2023), and Shareefa (2021),

who state that Differentiated Learning requires sufficient time, planning, and structural support. Overall, from the findings of the research, it becomes clear that the problems involved in the implementation of differentiated learning are connected within a variety of domains. Despite the fact that the teachers understand and are committed to differentiated learning, there are limitations on the part of the system as well as the context of learning of the students which are significant barriers.

4. CONCLUSION

From the findings of the research, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated learning in English language teaching in secondary schools still faces a variety of complicated challenges, which arise both from inside and outside the classroom. In terms of content, differences in English language proficiency, learning readiness, and learning speed among students make it difficult for teachers to determine a level of material difficulty that is fair for all students. In terms of process, the lack of motivation and participation, due to their limited experience with the English language, limits the success of differentiated learning. Meanwhile, in terms of product, variations in terms of background of family, environment, and use of peers as sources of help make it hard for the teacher to fairly evaluate the capabilities of the learner.

Additionally, time limitations and the heavy load of work, including administration work, limits teachers' ability to develop and apply differentiated learning effectively. In general, this study reveals the fact that the issues related to implementation of differentiated learning in EFL classes are interrelated between the content, process, and product aspects, and are influenced by the conditions of the students' learning environment and teachers' workload. Although Differentiated Learning is a relevant and inclusive approach to accommodate student diversity, its success is highly dependent on adequate support in terms of time, teacher workload, and the students' learning environment. Without such support, the implementation of Differentiated Learning risks being ineffective.

This study has provided an overview of the challenges in implementing Differentiated Learning, there are certain weaknesses in the implementation of this study that need to be considered. This research only involved one English teacher who was the subject of the study. Although this allows researchers to obtain relevant data related to the challenges faced by teachers in applying Differentiated Learning, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all teachers or school contexts. Also, the limited nature of observations carried out by a single teacher limited the emergence of new findings, as the teacher taught several classes at the same level using relatively similar materials, methods, and learning patterns. This made it difficult for researchers to uncover new findings during the observation process, due to the relatively similar observation patterns. Furthermore, the limited time available for conducting classroom observations also hampered this research. The observations were conducted over a limited number of sessions, preventing researchers from observing the entire classroom. This limited the researchers' ability to identify more diverse learning strategies.

This study provides insight that by recognizing the challenges in implementing Differentiated Learning, English teachers can choose more flexible and realistic teaching methods and strategies that are appropriate to classroom conditions. Teachers are advised to continuously improve their pedagogical skills, use simple differentiation strategies, and create a safe learning environment to increase student motivation and participation in class. Furthermore, school support also plays a crucial role in the implementation of Differentiated Learning, particularly regarding teachers' administrative workload and training related to Differentiated Learning. Future research is recommended to expand the participant pool to include more diverse contexts.

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