

The Practice and Challenges of Differentiated Instruction Implementation: A Case Study at SMP Islam de Green Camp

Praktik dan Tantangan Penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi: Studi Kasus di SMP Islam de Green Camp

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Abstract: *This study explores the strategies employed by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp, Tanjungpinang, for implementing Differentiated Instruction in alignment with the Kurikulum Merdeka in English classes, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. A descriptive qualitative approach was used, incorporating observations, interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. The participants included three English teachers, six inclusive students, and fifty-two regular students. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the implementation of Differentiated Instruction at this school is still developing, with content differentiation requiring further enhancement compared to other aspects of differentiation. Teachers are actively adapting teaching strategies, assessments, and classroom environments to meet diverse student needs. Key challenges include varying learning needs, students' negative attitudes towards English, and limited vocabulary and memorization skills. Despite these obstacles, teachers remain committed to advancing the practice of Differentiated Instruction through professional development, collaboration, and innovative teaching methods. In conclusion, while the implementation of Differentiated Instruction at SMP Islam De Green Camp is progressing, ongoing efforts in professional development and resource allocation are crucial to fully realizing its potential to support diverse student needs within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework.*

Keywords: *Differentiated Elements, Student Diversity, Differentiated Instruction Practices, Teacher Challenges, Kurikulum Merdeka*

Abstrak: *Penelitian ini mengkaji strategi guru bahasa Inggris dalam menerapkan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi pada mata pelajaran bahasa Inggris sesuai Kurikulum Merdeka di SMP Islam De Green Camp, Tanjungpinang, beserta tantangan yang mereka hadapi. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif, yang melibatkan observasi, wawancara, kuesioner, dan dokumentasi. Subjek penelitian adalah tiga guru bahasa Inggris, enam siswa inklusif, dan lima puluh dua siswa reguler. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis menggunakan model Miles dan Huberman, yang melibatkan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan.*

Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi di sekolah ini masih berkembang, dengan diferensiasi konten yang memerlukan pengembangan lebih lanjut dibandingkan dengan elemen diferensiasi lainnya. Para guru secara aktif menyesuaikan strategi pengajaran, penilaian, dan lingkungan kelas untuk memenuhi berbagai kebutuhan siswa. Tantangannya meliputi kebutuhan belajar yang beragam, sikap negatif terhadap bahasa Inggris, dan keterbatasan kosakata dan keterampilan menghafal. Terlepas dari tantangan ini, para guru berkomitmen untuk meningkatkan penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi melalui pengembangan profesional, kolaborasi, dan strategi pengajaran yang inovatif. Kesimpulannya, meskipun pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi di SMP Islam De Green Camp sedang terus berkembang, upaya berkelanjutan dalam pengembangan profesional dan alokasi sumber daya sangat penting untuk sepenuhnya mewujudkan potensinya dalam mendukung beragam kebutuhan siswa di bawah kerangka Kurikulum Merdeka.

Kata kunci: Elemen Berdiferensiasi, Keberagaman Siswa, Praktik Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi, Tantangan Guru, Kurikulum Merdeka.

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in the learning process, particularly in junior high schools (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023). In Indonesia, the curriculum has undergone continuous evolution to keep pace with changing times and the increasing demands of education. In response to these evolving needs, the “Kurikulum Merdeka” was introduced and has been in effect since 2021 (Wahyudin et al., 2024). The development of the Kurikulum Merdeka was driven by the need to address critical educational challenges. A few years ago, Indonesia faced the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the widespread shift to online learning across all schools. This transition caused a significant decline in the quality of education, adversely affecting both educators and students (Sammi & Amir, 2023). As a result, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology introduced the Kurikulum Merdeka, with a strong emphasis on student-centred learning. One of the most effective approaches to student-centred learning is Differentiated Instruction (Nurjanah & Syamsudin, 2023).

The Indonesian national education system law mandates curriculum diversification across all educational levels to accommodate regional contexts and the diverse needs of students. This diversification is aligned with the principles of Differentiated Instruction, which aims to tailor education to the unique profiles and readiness levels of individual students (Blegur & Hardiansyah, 2024).

In comparison to the previous 2013 Curriculum (K-13), it was observed that teachers often grouped students without considering their individual learning needs. As a result, students with lower preparedness were placed alongside more advanced peers, leading to issues related to self-esteem and creativity (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023). The Kurikulum Merdeka, through its adoption of Differentiated Instruction, seeks to address these issues by accommodating students’ diverse learning profiles and needs, thereby improving the overall quality of education (Sofiah & Hikmawati, 2023). This approach also provides essential support for learners with special needs through inclusive education, ensuring that their specific requirements are met (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023).

However, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction has often been misunderstood. Some reports suggest that Differentiated Instruction is mistakenly perceived as individualized instruction, which is more suitable for special schools rather than regular or inclusive schools (Moosa & Shareefa, 2019). It is crucial to distinguish between these two concepts. Individualized instruction involves specific interventions and services for students, whereas Differentiated Instruction focuses on assessing students' readiness, interests, learning profiles, and learning environments to tailor the instructional approach accordingly (Shareefa, Zin, Abdullah, & Jawawi, 2019). In essence, Differentiated Instruction aims to cater to each student's unique learning style, potential, and needs (M. Marlina, Kusumastuti, & Ediyanto, 2023).

According to Hasanah, Suyatno, Maryani, Badar, Fitria, & Patmasari (2022), Differentiated Instruction remains relatively new in Indonesia. Marlina et al. (2023) observed that several schools have yet to effectively implement this approach. One contributing factor is the prevailing mindset that the curriculum should be uniformly achieved by all students. Many teachers continue to believe that students should master the same material in the same way and at the same time. This outdated "one-size-fits-all" mentality has led teachers to avoid preparing differentiated lesson materials, thereby forcing students to learn in ways that may not align with their interests or learning strengths.

The rationale for Differentiated Instruction, as highlighted by Goddard, Goddard, & Kim (2015), arises from concerns that the traditional uniform approach neglects the diverse learning needs of students. Not all students excel in the same subjects, and their motivation levels vary depending on the content. Despite this, the traditional approach persists, expecting students to engage with the same material in

the same manner and at the same pace. This reinforces the need for a more flexible approach that accommodates the varying learning preferences and abilities of students.

Based on the Distribution Map of the Implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (IKM) released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, in 2024, 33 junior high schools in Tanjungpinang City, Kepulauan Riau Province, implemented the Kurikulum Merdeka (Kemendikbudristek, 2024). Of these, only SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang accepted both regular and special needs students. Consequently, the potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the principles of Differentiated Instruction, as discussed earlier, may have occurred at this school. A preliminary interview with an English teacher at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang revealed a misunderstanding in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction under the Kurikulum Merdeka: "For certain students whose learning may not align with others, perhaps those who could be termed slow learners, the form of assessment is differentiated" (TR, personal communication, June 11, 2024). This comment suggests that the teacher is applying a differentiated element specifically for students facing difficulties, which aligns more with individualized instruction than with the broader principles of Differentiated Instruction.

Although SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang serves as a Sekolah Penggerak, this status does not guarantee immunity from potential errors in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction within the Kurikulum Merdeka. There appears to be a bias in the application of Differentiated Instruction for regular students versus students with special needs (PDBK), particularly in the English subject. Therefore, this research is crucial for providing deeper insights into the challenges and misconceptions surrounding the

implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the Kurikulum Merdeka. It ultimately aims to contribute to a more effective and inclusive understanding of teaching practices.

The Elements of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction is an educational approach that involves the modification of teaching methods, strategies, materials, and techniques to provide tailored learning experiences that meet the individual needs of students or small groups. This approach focuses on four key elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. Differentiation is guided by students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017), which are explored in greater detail in the subsequent section. The following sections provide an in-depth analysis of each of these elements.

Differentiation by Content

The first element of Differentiated Instruction is content, which refers to the subject matter taught and the manner in which students acquire knowledge and understanding (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). Content differentiation involves the material that students engage with, including competencies in core academic areas, learning objectives, and expectations (Marlina, 2023). As noted by Tomlinson (as cited in Magableh & Abdullah, 2020), differentiating content provides students with multiple avenues to interact with facts, concepts, principles, attitudes, and skills. Teachers adjust the complexity of the content to align with students' readiness and interests, ensuring that all students grasp the same concepts, albeit through different methods. For instance, teachers may present identical content but vary the activities or complexity levels to accommodate students' diverse learning needs.

Differentiation by Process

The second element, process, pertains to how students engage with and learn the content, as well as how teachers deliver it (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). Process differentiation encompasses the activities designed to help students understand key concepts and principles, tailored to their individual learning profiles and preferences (Ginja & Chen, 2020). Fatimah, Fitriani, & Priyono (2024) emphasize that the process should be seamlessly integrated with the content. Differentiation in the process often involves flexible grouping, where students are organized according to their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This approach enables students to develop a deep understanding of the content through instructional methods that are specifically designed to meet their needs.

Differentiation by Product

The third element, product, refers to the output students produce to demonstrate their understanding. Differentiation by product allows students to express their learning in diverse ways, offering them choices or the opportunity to propose their own assignments, subject to teacher approval (Ginja & Chen, 2020). This element highlights the importance of providing students with different opportunities to showcase their learning, based on their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. By offering a variety of product formats, teachers ensure that all students can demonstrate their mastery in ways that align with their strengths and preferences.

Differentiation by Learning Environment

The final element of Differentiated Instruction is the learning environment, which includes the physical and emotional atmosphere of the classroom, as well as the classroom's organization, rules, seating arrangements, lighting, and procedures. Differentiating the

learning environment addresses the varied needs of students. For example, some students may require the freedom to move around, while others may prefer a quieter, more focused setting. Additionally, teachers can enrich the learning experience by utilizing different locations both inside and outside the classroom, depending on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). This flexibility creates a dynamic and supportive learning environment that fosters student engagement and motivation.

Students' Diversity

Differentiated learning has emerged as a recognised and effective strategy for addressing the diverse needs of students, with a focus on their readiness, interests, and distinct learning profiles. As highlighted by Rijal, Aswarliansyah, & Waluyo (2024), Differentiated Instruction adapts to these various factors in order to enhance educational outcomes. According to Magableh and Abdullah (2020), this approach is fundamentally based on the understanding and responsiveness to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. For educators to implement Differentiated Instruction effectively, it is imperative to first acknowledge the diversity within their student body before initiating the learning process. This can be achieved through various methods, such as personality assessments, initial observations to gauge students' readiness, or through other assessments designed to uncover individual interests and learning profiles.

Readiness

Readiness pertains to students' current levels of knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward learning. It is shaped by their previous learning experiences and may differ significantly among students, even within the same classroom. Readiness involves understanding what students already know and determining what

they are prepared to learn next. Consequently, teachers must assess and adjust their instructional methods accordingly. Tomlinson (2017) asserts that every student possesses the potential for growth, and readiness plays a pivotal role in this process. Teachers can address differences in readiness by employing tiered activities, which provide varying levels of difficulty on the same concept to meet the diverse abilities of students.

Interests

Interests serve as potent motivators in the learning process. When students engage with topics that resonate with them, they are more likely to dedicate time and effort to their studies. Tomlinson (2017) observes that aligning lessons with students' interests helps sustain engagement, which in turn can lead to improved behaviour and academic performance. Teachers can identify students' interests by inquiring about their hobbies, favourite subjects, and preferred activities. This information can then be used to design lessons and activities that resonate with students' passions, thereby enhancing their motivation to learn (Purba, Purnamasari, Soetantyo, Suwarna, & Susanti,, 2021). Furthermore, schools that have access to guidance counsellors or psychologists can utilise psychological assessments to gain deeper insights into students' interests and talents, thus providing clearer direction for personalised learning.

Learning Profiles

Learning profiles refer to the preferred modalities through which students learn most effectively. These preferences can be influenced by various factors, including sensory modalities, social interactions, and cognitive styles (Tomlinson, 2017). For instance, some students may learn more effectively through auditory means, while others might prefer visual aids or kinaesthetic activities that involve physical movement.

Additionally, students may have varying preferences for working independently, in pairs, or in larger groups (Purba et al., 2021). By recognising these preferences, teachers can design activities that align with students' optimal learning profiles. These activities may include journal writing, oral presentations, projects, role-plays, and hands-on experiments, thereby ensuring that all students have the opportunity to engage with the material in a way that best suits their learning style.

In summary, recognising and addressing the diversity of students in terms of readiness, interests, and learning profiles is essential for effective teaching. Differentiated Instruction, by tailoring educational experiences to meet these diverse needs, creates a more inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students can thrive.

Based on the discussion above, the research problems were formulated as follows: 1) How are the differentiated elements being implemented by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang to accommodate the diverse needs of students? 2) What challenges do English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang encounter in implementing Differentiated Instruction?

The objectives of this study are as follows: 1) To examine how the differentiated elements are being implemented by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang to accommodate the diverse needs of students. 2) To identify the challenges faced by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang in implementing Differentiated Instruction.

METHODS

Research Design

This study examined the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the English subject at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang. It investigated the practices of English teachers

in applying differentiated elements and the challenges they faced. Additionally, the study described the overall learning experiences at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, focusing on how Differentiated Instruction was utilised to meet the diverse needs of the students. The research highlighted the social context of student diversity and explored how Differentiated Instruction addressed this diversity.

According to Colorafi and Evans (2016) and Sandelowski (2000), a study that provides a detailed account of research findings and fosters consensus among researchers, participants, and knowledge users is classified as qualitative descriptive research. The aim of this study was to understand teachers' experiences, encompassing their behaviours, perceptions, interests, motivations, and actions regarding the implementation of Differentiated Instruction, using descriptive language. This aligns with the two core goals of qualitative research identified by Atkinson (2017): to gather descriptive data or allow participants to share insights on phenomena, processes, perspectives, or life views that are not yet fully understood.

Research Setting

The research was conducted at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, located at Jalan Taman Siswa, No.1, Batu IX, Tanjungpinang Timur Subdistrict, Tanjungpinang City, Kepulauan Riau Province. The school employed three English teachers who implemented Differentiated Instruction for six inclusive students and fifty-two regular students. This institution was selected due to its status as one of the Sekolah Penggerak in Tanjungpinang, which adheres to the Merdeka Curriculum and integrates a Differentiated Instruction approach across all subjects offered to students.

Research Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher assumes multiple roles, including planning, collecting, analysing, interpreting, and reporting data (Moleong, 2006). The researcher functions as the primary instrument of the study, determining the research focus, selecting informants, collecting data, assessing its quality, and deriving conclusions from the findings (Suardi, 2017). In this study, the researcher developed observation sheets, interview guidelines, and documentation tools to facilitate classroom observations, interviews with three English teachers, and the collection of relevant documentation. The researcher then analysed and validated the data.

In addition to serving as the primary instrument, the researcher utilised several supporting tools to ensure the collection of accurate and reliable data (Suardi, 2017). These supporting instruments are crucial in both qualitative and quantitative research to maintain the authenticity of the data. In this study, the supporting tools included: (1) an observation sheet, (2) an interview guideline, (3) a questionnaire, (4) an audio recorder, and (5) a mobile phone camera.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments used in this study, the following steps, as outlined by Campion, Palmer, & Campion, (1998) were taken:

Validity Testing:

The validity of the interview questions was ensured through content validation, conducted via expert review. Educational experts and peers with experience in teaching English and Differentiated Instruction reviewed the interview questions, ensuring their alignment with the research objectives. A pilot interview was also conducted with participants who resembled the actual informants. This pilot test allowed for refinement of the questions, ensuring they were clear and elicited meaningful responses

regarding the implementation of Differentiated Instruction.

Reliability Testing:

In qualitative research, reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of the data. To enhance reliability, the researcher maintained an audit trail documenting the development and modification of the interview questions. Additionally, interview data were cross-validated through triangulation, where findings from interviews were compared with data from classroom observations and questionnaires. This approach ensured consistency across multiple data sources.

By employing these strategies, the study ensured that the interview questions were valid, reliable, and capable of capturing accurate data regarding teachers' strategies for Differentiated Instruction. These measures also contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the research findings (Campion et al., 1998).

Data and Data Resources

This research utilised qualitative data, primarily collected in the form of words or images rather than numerical values. The data consisted of observation reports, interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and documentation gathered during the data collection process at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang. The primary data sources included three English teachers from the school, who provided oral responses to the researcher's questions in accordance with the interview guidelines. Supporting data sources comprised responses from six inclusive students and fifty-two regular students to the questionnaires, as well as relevant documents, such as lesson plans, teaching modules, and descriptions of the classroom environment recorded on the observation sheets.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure the validity of the data collected, appropriate data collection methods were employed. These included observation, interviews, questionnaires, and documentation. Observation was conducted prior to the interviews to ensure the authenticity of the data, undistorted by the interview questions. The questionnaire was distributed to six inclusive students and fifty-two regular students after the interviews with the three English teachers had been completed, as the questions in the questionnaire were derived from the teachers' responses during the interviews. This strategy was employed to verify the consistency between the teachers' responses and the students' actual experiences with Differentiated Instruction in English at SMP Islam De Green Camp. Documentation was conducted simultaneously with observation to corroborate the information recorded on the observation sheets.

Data Analysis Techniques

This study utilised the Miles and Huberman model for data analysis, comprising three key activities after data collection: data reduction, data display/presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process can be outlined as follows:

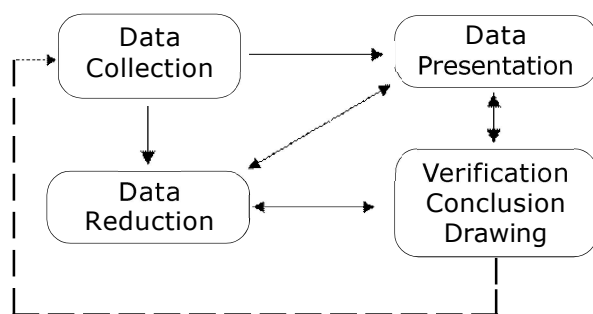


Figure 1 Data Analysis Model

The research process was iterative and interconnected, encompassing phases before entering the field, during fieldwork, and concluding with the final stages of analysis. The steps in the process are as follows:

Data Collection

The data collection phase involved multiple methods, including classroom observations, interviews with three English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, distribution of questionnaires to students, and the gathering of documentation. The documentation captured various aspects of the classroom environment, teachers' activities in implementing Differentiated Instruction, and key materials such as lesson plans (ATP), teaching modules (Modul Ajar), students' assignments, test papers, and report cards.

Data Reduction

Following data collection, the data underwent a reduction process. During this stage, the researcher systematically recorded and summarised the data, focusing on the key aspects relevant to the research objectives. Irrelevant information was filtered out, facilitating a clearer focus that guided the subsequent stages of data display and analysis.

Data Display

Once the data had been reduced, the information was organised and presented in concise descriptions, structured into sections that aligned with the research objectives. The data display consisted of four distinct sections, which aided in the clarity of analysis and interpretation. This stage laid the groundwork for drawing conclusions.

Conclusion Drawing

As Rijali (2018) noted, conclusions are considered credible when they are based on valid and consistent data. In this study, the conclusions were derived from the data collected at the research site, presented in narrative form. The findings detailed the English teachers' perceptions, the challenges they faced, their strategies for overcoming these challenges, and their implementation of

differentiated instructional elements in the English subject at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang.

Data Validity Checking

Data validity pertains to the degree to which the research findings are trustworthy and accurate. According to Lincoln and Guba Wijaya, (2018), data validity in qualitative research is characterised by its realism, complexity, and dynamic nature, meaning that it evolves and does not remain static. Validity in this study was enhanced through triangulation, a technique that integrates various types of data and sources. Sugiyono (2015) describes data triangulation as a method that draws upon multiple data sources and methods.

Wijaya (2018) further explains that data triangulation involves verifying data from multiple sources, using different methods, and/or across different time points. This includes source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation. In this study, the validity of the data was examined through source triangulation. The researcher compared data from observation reports, interview transcripts, and documentation to ensure consistency and reliability. This approach allowed for an assessment of the trustworthiness and accuracy of the findings by cross-referencing the information from interviews with that of the classroom observations and documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Differentiated Instruction Implementation in English Subject

According to Tomlinson (2017), the implementation of Differentiated Instruction encompasses four primary elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. These elements should be tailored to address students' diverse needs, considering their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Based

on the interview findings, the English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp have incorporated these differentiated elements to varying extents, with some limitations in addressing the full spectrum of student diversity. The specifics are as follows:

Content Differentiation

The interviews indicated that content differentiation has not yet been implemented by the English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp. Teaching materials and modules were standardized, using the same ATP (Alur Tujuan Pembelajaran) and identical teaching modules for all students, irrespective of their diverse learning needs. One English teacher explained:

"For the implementation of differentiated elements, we are progressing step by step. For example, regarding content, we have not yet differentiated for students. Everything remains the same, using the same ATP and teaching modules. The difference lies in the teacher's delivery strategies and the exercises given in the classroom" (TR, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

A review of documentation further confirmed the absence of content-specific differentiation.

Process Differentiation

The teachers demonstrated differentiation in instructional processes, adjusting the depth and complexity of content to meet students' varying needs. Students with special needs focused on foundational vocabulary and grammar, while regular students engaged with more complex expressions and dialogues. Teachers provided various levels of support, including detailed explanations, peer teaching, and diverse instructional strategies, such as group work and individualized instruction.

A teacher elaborated:

"Yes, we have begun differentiating the process for students. Sometimes they are

grouped according to their learning diversity, or we provide individual support. Differentiation is focused on readiness levels – basic, intermediate, or advanced – depending on the material” (MS, personal communication, June 13, 2024).

Observation reports corroborated this, noting distinct methods of content delivery for regular and PDBK (students with special needs). Furthermore, 86.2% of students responded in the questionnaire that instruction was adapted to their abilities, and 93.1% affirmed that additional support was provided to those encountering difficulties.

Product Differentiation

Interviews suggested that assessments were adapted to students’ readiness levels, with regular students receiving more challenging questions across three difficulty levels (easy, moderate, hard), whereas students with special needs received simplified questions with vocabulary support. A teacher explained,

“Regarding tests and exercises, for regular students, we use questions at three levels: approximately 20% difficult, 30% easy, and 50% moderate. There are at least 10 difficult questions in the set” (MS, personal communication, June 13, 2024).

Another teacher added,

“For students with special needs, all questions are at a basic level, and we provide a vocabulary pocket with related terms to assist them” (N, personal communication, June 14, 2024).

These findings were supported by questionnaire responses, with 79.31% of students noting that exam questions varied by ability level, such as with vocabulary aids and different question types. However, 82.75% of students agreed that exams were only divided into two levels: one for those with strong understanding and another for those still mastering the basics. This partial differentiation suggests that product

differentiation has yet to fully address the diversity of students as prescribed by Purba et al. (2021) and Tomlinson (2017), which advocates differentiation based on readiness, interest, and learning profiles.

Learning Environment Differentiation

Observations revealed that while formal ability grouping was not implemented, the English teachers fostered an inclusive classroom environment. Questionnaire data indicated that 77.58% of students felt they were not separated into specific groups but remained integrated within the same classroom, regardless of differences. The teachers used flexible seating arrangements, promoted interactions between students with special needs and regular students, and organized students into strategic groups during activities to provide appropriate support. Additionally, the school offered a “proactive time” session for students to form groups based on shared interests, though this was not yet tailored to specific subjects.

Overall, the English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang exhibit a strong commitment to Differentiated Instruction, utilizing various strategies to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Although the degree of differentiation varies and remains an ongoing effort, the school is actively working to enhance the teachers’ expertise in implementing this approach effectively.

Tailoring to Students’ Diversity

Based on interviews with English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, teachers are aware of the Differentiated Instruction approach, which involves adapting teaching based on students’ readiness, interests, and learning profiles. However, due to resource limitations and the challenge of managing diverse needs simultaneously, students are not formally grouped by interests

or learning profiles in English classes. One teacher stated,

"We, the teachers at De Green Camp, are already aware of Differentiated Instruction and have even studied it prior to its implementation in the Kurikulum Merdeka. However, implementing it fully remains a challenge due to limited human resources and the unpreparedness of the current teaching staff. Differentiated Instruction requires teachers to be equipped with multiple teaching methods, strategies, and broad knowledge to adapt to student diversity" (TR, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

Despite these challenges, teachers actively identify and understand students' differences to inform their differentiated instruction strategies. Teaching methods and assessments are adapted based on students' readiness levels, which are determined by their background knowledge and comprehension of the material. The English teachers indicated that diagnostic assessments are conducted at the beginning of each semester to evaluate students' baseline knowledge and skills, enabling them to gauge readiness and identify areas needing additional support. Teachers closely observe students in class to understand their interests and learning profiles, noting interactions with material, peers, and instructors to gain insight into students' preferred learning styles. Homeroom teachers play a crucial role in identifying students with special needs and informing subject teachers, facilitating tailored instruction. This approach is supported by questionnaire responses, with 94.82% of students agreeing that during the first week of each semester, learning activities are intentionally light and relaxed, allowing teachers to observe students' needs and readiness levels.

Although formal grouping was not practised, the information gathered through these methods informed the implementation of differentiated

instruction. Teaching methods and assessments were adjusted to accommodate diverse needs, including varying levels of scaffolding, activity types, and assessment formats tailored to different learning styles and readiness levels. While students were not explicitly categorized by these differences, the teachers' awareness of individual needs enabled a more inclusive and supportive learning environment in which all students could thrive.

Challenges

The English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang encountered several challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction, which impacted the learning process. These challenges can be categorized as follows:

Student-Related Challenges

Teachers reported that despite efforts to tailor teaching methods and assessments to students' levels of understanding, several issues persisted. Students displayed negative attitudes towards English, often expressing reluctance and a lack of motivation to learn the language from scratch due to the absence of foundational instruction in primary school. Additionally, students struggled with limited vocabulary and memorization skills, as well as low interest and engagement, which hindered efforts to address individual needs and cultivate a motivating learning environment. One teacher explained,

"When I investigated why some students lacked enthusiasm or seemed uninterested in English lessons, I found it was because they perceived the material as overly challenging and lacked any foundation. This is different from other subjects, where they generally had basics from primary school. Moreover, the challenge in implementing Differentiated Instruction lies in students' weak vocabulary memorization, which requires considerable preparation time

before we can proceed with the material effectively” (N, personal communication, June 14, 2024).

Teacher-Related Challenges

Teachers cited time constraints as a significant obstacle. Preparing various techniques, methods, and materials tailored to diverse needs proved challenging, particularly as teachers also assumed roles as homeroom teachers and took on additional duties. This workload limited their capacity to fully implement Differentiated Instruction. One teacher noted,

“Due to the lack of human resources, teachers here, including English teachers, take on multiple roles—class teachers, headmaster responsibilities, and teaching both secondary and high school levels. This heavy workload leaves little time to prepare differentiated materials for diverse students. Currently, we can only manage to differentiate in terms of classroom strategies and exercises; for content, we still use the same materials for all students due to these challenges” (TR, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

These challenges resulted in several impacts on the learning process. Disparities in learning outcomes emerged, with some students excelling while others struggled, leading to achievement gaps. Additionally, teachers experienced an increased workload due to the need to prepare diverse teaching methods and assessments for varying student needs. Assessing students with different requirements also became complex, necessitating the development of multiple assessment types and grading criteria.

Regarding limitations, teachers acknowledged that the school had provided advanced facilities to support their efforts in meeting students’ needs. A teacher stated,

“The school itself does not impose limitations; facilities, focus group

discussions, and tools are all provided. However, the issue remains the same—insufficient teaching staff and the need for improved skills among current teachers to address the full spectrum of student diversity” (MS, personal communication, June 13, 2024).

However, the limited number of English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp impacted the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction. Despite these obstacles, teachers actively sought professional development opportunities, collaborated with colleagues, and explored innovative teaching strategies. They also focused on developing more effective assessment methods to accurately gauge student progress and identify areas requiring additional support.

Discussion

Implementation of Differentiated Elements

The implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the English program at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang demonstrated a multifaceted approach, partly in alignment with the principles of Differentiated Instruction. Differentiation was evident in the adaptation of instructional processes, assessment products, and the learning environment based on students’ varying levels of readiness, while content differentiation is still in development. Classroom observations provided insights into these practices. The details of each differentiated element, excluding content, are described below:

Process Differentiation

Teachers reported adjusting their instructional approaches to support diverse levels of student understanding. This included varying the amount and type of support provided, such as giving in-depth explanations to students needing extra clarification and encouraging peer-assisted

learning, where more proficient students helped those who required additional guidance. Teachers also used a variety of instructional strategies, including group work and individualized learning, to accommodate different learning preferences. This approach aligns with key principles of Differentiated Instruction, emphasizing creativity, varied activities, authentic learning contexts, and attention to students' prior experiences (Purba et al., 2021).

Product Differentiation

Product differentiation was implemented by modifying assessments to suit students' readiness levels. For regular students, more complex questions were included, with variation in question types and difficulty levels, while students with special needs received simplified questions with additional support, such as vocabulary aids. The assessment design for regular students included:

1. Multiple-choice Questions (1–20): 20 moderately challenging questions requiring the selection of the most accurate answer based on images or descriptions.
2. Checklist Questions (21–30): 10 straightforward questions where students marked correct information according to given details.
3. True or False Questions (31–35): 5 basic questions asking students to determine whether statements were accurate.
4. Short Answer Questions (36–45): 10 complex questions requiring sentence completion and the application of grammar rules.
5. Essay Questions (46–50): 5 challenging questions requiring detailed responses that demonstrated a deeper understanding of the material.

In contrast, assessments for students with special needs featured consistently easier questions, reduced to a total of 20, and included

vocabulary assistance on the last page. These modifications in question complexity and number align with the sociological foundations of Differentiated Instruction, emphasizing the need for assessments that cater to individual student needs rather than a standard approach (Ki Hajar Dewantara, 1940; Yunazwardi, 2018, as cited in Purba et al., 2021).

Learning Environment Differentiation

While formal grouping based on readiness, interests, or learning profiles was not employed, English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp created a learning environment that promoted inclusivity and support. Flexible seating arrangements were allowed, interaction between students with and without special needs was encouraged, and teachers carefully assigned groups during activities to ensure appropriate support levels. Although this approach has yet to be fully realized, efforts were made to differentiate the learning environment. This strategy is in line with Siam and Al-Natour's (2016) advocacy for reorganizing classroom structures and adopting varied instructional approaches to offer students different ways to access information. Additionally, the school allocated proactive time sessions for students to form groups based on interests, enhancing personalization. This aligns with Differentiated Instruction's core principle of creating a flexible and supportive environment (Tomlinson, 2017).

In conclusion, the differentiated elements implemented at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang reflect a commitment to addressing students' diverse needs. This approach aligns with Purba et al.'s (2021) perspective that Differentiated Instruction involves adapting content, processes, products, and learning environments to support varied student needs. While content differentiation remains in development, the school has made meaningful progress in adapting instructional

processes, assessment products, and learning environments, demonstrating a holistic approach that aligns with both Differentiated Instruction principles and the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka to create an inclusive and effective learning experience.

Challenges in Differentiated Instruction Implementation

The implementation of Differentiated Instruction in the English program at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang faced numerous challenges that influenced the learning process. Tomlinson (2017) notes that issues related to student diversity, if unaddressed, can negatively impact learning outcomes. The challenges encountered can be categorized into student-related, teacher-related, and school-related factors.

Student-Related Challenges

Diverse Learning Needs: Students came from various educational backgrounds and had different levels of English proficiency, making it challenging to address individual learning requirements. This situation is consistent with Moosa and Shareefa's (2019) findings, which highlight the challenges teachers face in meeting diverse needs within mixed-ability classrooms.

Negative Attitudes Toward English: Some students perceived English as a difficult subject, leading to lower motivation and engagement levels. This challenge is common in English language learning, as student attitudes significantly impact academic outcomes (Zidan & Qamariah, 2023).

Limited Vocabulary and Memorization Skills: Many students, particularly those with limited prior exposure to English, struggled with vocabulary acquisition and memorization, slowing their progress. This issue is especially prevalent in Indonesia, where English is often a secondary language (Anggraena et al., 2022).

Lack of Interest and Engagement: A subset of students displayed a lack of interest in learning English, which created additional obstacles for teachers trying to foster an engaging learning environment. This reinforces the importance of Differentiated Instruction that accommodates students' interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017).

Teacher-Related Challenges

Limited Time and Resources: Teachers encountered time constraints due to the significant planning required for Differentiated Instruction and had limited access to specialized resources, such as adaptive learning software and a broader range of instructional materials. Lavania and Nor (2020) identified these constraints as primary barriers to effectively implementing Differentiated Instruction.

Balancing Diverse Needs: Managing the diverse needs of all students within a single classroom proved overwhelming for teachers, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development and support to enhance the effective implementation of Differentiated Instruction (Ginja & Chen, 2020).

School-Related Limitations

Limited Human Resources: A shortage of English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang hindered the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction, underscoring the necessity of sufficient staffing to support differentiated teaching strategies (Suprayogi, Valcke, & Godwin, 2017).

These challenges impacted the learning process, leading to inconsistent learning outcomes, limited student engagement and motivation, increased teacher workload, and challenges in assessment. Consequently, the educational system often struggled to fully reflect the principles of Differentiated Instruction despite student diversity (Purba et

al., 2021). Nevertheless, teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang actively sought to address these challenges by participating in professional development, collaborating with colleagues, and exploring innovative instructional strategies. They also developed improved assessment methods to accurately measure student progress and identify areas for additional support. This approach underscored the necessity for educators to adapt alongside their students, designing engaging and tailored learning experiences that resonate with each student's preferred learning profile (Zens, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study indicates that the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English classes at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang aligns closely with the principles of the Kurikulum Merdeka, with particular strengths in adapting instructional processes and assessments to address diverse student needs. However, challenges remain in fully differentiating content and optimizing the learning environment, largely due to the broad diversity of students, negative attitudes towards learning English, and limited time and resources. Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to refining their Differentiated Instruction practices through professional development, collaboration, and enhanced assessment methods. For Differentiated Instruction to reach its full potential in English classes at SMP Islam De Green Camp, further support in the form of professional resources and development is essential.

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Recommendations

Prioritise Professional Development: The school should prioritise ongoing professional development programs centered on Differentiated Instruction strategies. These programs can equip teachers with essential skills to effectively differentiate content, processes, and assessments, enabling them to cater to a wide range of student needs.

Encourage Collaboration: Establishing collaborative networks among teachers can promote the sharing of effective teaching strategies and resources. Regular workshops or meetings would facilitate discussions on common challenges and foster innovative approaches to overcoming them.

Improve Resource Allocation: The school should ensure that sufficient resources, including teaching materials and support staff, are available to support Differentiated Instruction. Investment in technology and instructional tools can further assist teachers in creating engaging and flexible learning experiences.

Focus on Student Engagement: Developing strategies to address students' negative attitudes toward English—such as incorporating culturally relevant materials and interactive learning activities—can improve student motivation and engagement.

By implementing these recommendations, SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang can enhance its approach to Differentiated Instruction, thereby improving both student engagement and educational outcomes.

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