

An Analysis of Differentiated Learning in English Subject of Phase D in Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in the English subject of Phase D in Merdeka Curriculum. The study used a qualitative case study approach involving three English teachers as research informants. The data were collected through classroom observations and interviews to explore teachers' experiences in applying differentiated learning in the teaching and learning process. The findings revealed that teachers implemented differentiated learning through four main aspects: content, process, product, and learning environment. In content differentiation, teachers adjusted learning materials according to students' readiness and interests by using simple language and starting from basic concepts. In process differentiation, teachers applied various teaching strategies such as group discussions and the use of visual media to accommodate students' learning styles. In product differentiation, students were given different options to present their learning outcomes based on their abilities and creativity. Meanwhile, the learning environment was designed to be interactive and collaborative to support students' participation. However, teachers also faced several challenges, including students' different English proficiency levels, limited learning resources, and difficulties in meeting all students' needs simultaneously. Overall, differentiated learning helped create a more student-centered learning environment, although further support and resources are needed to optimize its implementation.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning, English Subject of Phase D, Merdeka Curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

The curriculum plays a fundamental role in shaping the direction and quality of education, as it serves as a structured plan that guides teaching and learning processes toward achieving educational goals. Creating and maintaining consistent educational programs for students is the primary objective of changes to the curriculum to enhance outcomes (Kardena, 2015). In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum reflects a significant transformation toward a more flexible, student-centered approach that emphasizes competence, character development, and contextual learning. The diverse culture backgrounds and experiences of students often create challenges for the processes of teaching and learning, particularly in the context of instructing English as a foreign language (EFL) (Kardena, 2016). This curriculum allows teachers to design learning experiences that accommodate students' diverse needs, interests, and

abilities, thereby promoting meaningful and inclusive education (Khoirurrijal et al., 2022).

Differentiated learning refers to an instructional approach in which teachers adjust content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001; Marlina, 2019). The use of varied instructional strategies is important in accommodating students with different English proficiency levels (Sastri, 2022). Differentiated learning in English classrooms can increase students' motivation and classroom participation when teachers adjust teaching strategies according to students' learning needs (Rahman, 2021). Previous studies have highlighted that differentiated learning can enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes when implemented appropriately (Gibson, 2013; Kristiani et al., 2021).

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of differentiated learning in real classroom settings still faces various challenges. Based on preliminary research conducted at one school in west Sumatera, several issues were identified. First, teachers tended to conduct limited diagnostic assessments, focusing mainly on students' learning styles without fully considering other important aspects such as readiness and learning needs. Second, teaching materials were often uniform, relying heavily on textbooks such as *English for Nusantara*, which limited opportunities to address diverse student abilities. Third, students exhibited significant differences in English proficiency, with some lacking basic knowledge due to limited exposure in previous education levels. These conditions made it difficult for teachers to ensure that all students achieved optimal understanding during the learning process.

Furthermore, teachers also encountered constraints related to limited resources and time, which affected their ability to design varied instructional strategies. Considering these issues, it is important to analyze how differentiated learning is actually implemented in English classroom, particularly at Phase D level under the Merdeka curriculum. This analysis is expected to provide a clearer understanding of instructional practices and the challenges faced by teachers in applying differentiated strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in the English subject at Phase D under the Merdeka curriculum. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' practices and experiences in real classroom contexts, as it allows researchers to explore social phenomena holistically (John W., 2013). The participants of this study were three English teachers selected through voluntary sampling, as they were actively implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted in three sessions using a checklist based on differentiated learning indicators, including content, process, product, and learning environment (Purba et al., 2021), to examine how teachers adapted instruction to students' needs. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' perspectives and the challenges they faced in implementing differentiated learning (Creswell, 2009). To ensure data validity, content validity

was applied through expert judgment, and triangulation was used by comparing observation and interview data to enhance credibility (Rachman et al., 2024). The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which includes data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, allowing for systematic interpretation of findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in the English subject of Phase D under the Merdeka curriculum. The findings were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with English teachers.

Content

The table 1 presents the results of observations covering informant activities in content differentiation.

Table 1. Informant Activities in Content Differentiation

Indicators	Informant 1						Informant 2						Informant 3					
	I		II		III		I		II		III		I		II		III	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Adjusting the complexity of the material presented based on the level of readiness and interest of students	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Adjust how the teaching material to be taught	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		

Teachers had generally implemented content differentiation by adjusting teaching materials based on students' readiness and, to some extent, their interests. Based on classroom observations, teachers simplified explanations, used familiar vocabulary, and began lessons with basic concepts before moving to more complex materials. For instance, one teacher introduced report text by first explaining definitions and structures using simple language and visual aids, ensuring that students with lower proficiency could follow the lesson. In subsequent meetings, additional materials were provided for more advanced students, indicating an effort to address varied readiness levels.

Interview data supported these observations, as teachers stated that they attempted to adapt materials according to students' abilities, although they admitted limitations in resources. One teacher explained that most materials were still taken from a single textbook, which restricted variation. This finding aligns with Tomlinson (2001), who emphasizes that effective content differentiation requires diverse materials and flexible resources. Although teachers demonstrated awareness of students' differences, the implementation was not fully optimal due to limited teaching materials and insufficient diagnostic assessment.

Process

Table 2 showed a strong commitment in developed agenda and activities according to students' understanding.

Table 2. Informant Activities in Process Differentiation

Statement	Informant I						Informant I						Informant I					
	I		II		III		I		II		III		I		II		III	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Meaningful activities that uses students' information skills.	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Differ in terms of difficulty level and how to achieve it	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓

In terms of process differentiation, the results indicated that teachers used various instructional strategies, such as group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and guided practice. Observations showed that teachers encouraged students to work collaboratively in groups, allowing them to exchange ideas and support each other's learning. Visual media, such as images and teaching modules, were also used to facilitate understanding, particularly for visual learners.

From the interviews, teachers expressed that they intentionally used different teaching methods to accommodate students' learning styles and engagement levels. However, they also acknowledged challenges in managing diverse classrooms, especially when students had significantly different levels of English proficiency. Some students required more individual guidance, while others progressed more quickly, making it difficult to balance instruction.

Product

Table 3 presented the results of observations regarding the implementation product differentiation. Focusing on designing products and determining assessment criteria in rubrics, and explaining product presentation

Table 3. Informant Activities in Product Differentiation

Statement	Informant I						Informant I						Informant I					
	I		II		III		I		II		III		I		II		III	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Designing product that learners will work on	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
Determining choices in assessment methods	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
Explaining how students can present the products they have worked on	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓

The implementation of product differentiation was evident in the way teachers provided students with options in completing assignments. Based on observations, students were allowed to present their understanding in different forms, such as written tasks, oral presentations, or group projects. This flexibility enabled students to express their learning according to their abilities and preferences.

Interview results further confirmed that teachers aimed to provide varied assessment methods to accommodate different student competencies. One teacher stated that giving students choices in tasks helped increase their confidence and creativity. However, it was also found that the variation of products was still limited, as most assignments were adapted from existing textbooks rather than designed specifically for differentiated instruction.

Learning Environment

Table 4 showed results of observation that teachers created a supportive social environment in the classroom.

Table 4. Informant Activities in Learning Environment

Statement	Informant 1						Informant 1						Informant 1						
	I		II		III		I		II		III		I		II		III		
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	
Flexible seating arrangements		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		
Establishing positive classroom environment	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓		

The findings also showed that teachers attempted to create a supportive and flexible learning environment. Classroom observations indicated that teachers used group seating arrangements to facilitate collaboration and interaction among students. The classroom atmosphere was generally positive, with teachers encouraging participation and maintaining good communication with students.

From the interviews, teachers emphasized the importance of creating a comfortable learning environment where students feel confident to express their ideas. They also mentioned efforts to build a positive classroom climate by motivating students and providing feedback. However, challenges such as large class sizes and limited facilities were identified as obstacles to fully implementing an ideal differentiated learning environment.

DISCUSSION

This study indicate that differentiated learning has been implemented in the English subject at Phase D under the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in the aspects of content, process, product, and learning environment. Overall, teachers demonstrated an understanding of the importance of addressing students' diverse needs, although the level of implementation varied across aspects. This supports

the idea that differentiated learning is a key approach in student-centered education, where instruction is adapted to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001; Marlina, 2019).

In terms of content differentiation, the findings revealed that teachers attempted to adjust the complexity of materials based on students' abilities by simplifying explanations and starting from basic concepts. This approach reflects the principle that instructional content should be accessible to all learners while still providing challenges for more advanced students (Purba et al., 2021). However, the reliance on a single textbook limited the variation of learning materials. This condition indicates that while teachers are aware of the need for differentiation, they still face practical constraints in providing diverse resources, which is essential for effective differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001).

Regarding process differentiation, teachers employed various instructional strategies such as group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and guided practice. These strategies encouraged student participation and collaboration, aligning with the student-centered nature of the Merdeka Curriculum. According to (Purba et al., 2021), process differentiation involves varying teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles and engagement levels. However, the findings also showed that teachers faced difficulties in managing classrooms with mixed ability levels, where some students required more support while others progressed more quickly. This challenge highlights the need for more structured planning and classroom management strategies in implementing differentiated learning effectively.

Furthermore, the implementation of product differentiation showed that teachers provided some flexibility in how students demonstrated their understanding. Students were allowed to complete tasks in different forms, such as written exercises or group activities. This practice is consistent with the concept that students should be given opportunities to express their learning in ways that suit their abilities and preferences (Tomlinson, 2001). Nevertheless, the variation of products was still limited, as most tasks were adapted directly from textbooks. This suggests that teachers need further support in designing more creative and varied assessment methods to fully implement product differentiation.

In terms of learning environment differentiation, the study found that teachers attempted to create a supportive and interactive classroom atmosphere. Group seating arrangements and collaborative activities were used to encourage student interaction and participation. This aligns with the view that a positive and flexible learning environment can enhance students' engagement and confidence in learning (Kristiani et al., 2021). However, factors such as large class sizes and limited facilities posed challenges, reducing the effectiveness of this implementation. These constraints indicate that environmental differentiation requires not only teacher effort but also institutional support.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, differentiated learning has been implemented in the English subject at Phase D, encompassing the aspects of content, process, product, and learning environment. Among these, content

differentiation was the most consistently applied, as teachers adjusted the complexity of materials and explanations according to students' readiness levels. Process differentiation was reflected through the use of varied instructional strategies such as group discussions, interactive activities, and guided practice. In addition, product differentiation was evident in the provision of different forms of tasks that allowed students to demonstrate their understanding in various ways. Teachers also made efforts to create a supportive and interactive learning environment that encouraged student participation and collaboration.

However, the implementation of differentiated learning has not yet been fully optimal. Several challenges were identified, including limited teaching resources, reliance on a single textbook, and insufficient use of comprehensive diagnostic assessment. In addition, the wide gap in students' English proficiency levels made it difficult to ensure that all students could fully benefit from the learning process. These constraints affected the effectiveness of differentiation, particularly in adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of all learners. As a result, some students still experienced difficulties in understanding the material, while others were not sufficiently challenged. Therefore, improving the implementation of differentiated learning requires greater attention to teacher preparedness, availability of varied learning resources, and the use of more comprehensive assessment practices. Strengthening these aspects will enable teachers to design more flexible and responsive instruction that accommodates students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. With better support and continuous development, differentiated learning can be implemented more effectively to create an inclusive and student-centered learning experience.

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