

Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Learning in English Classes: Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated learning and explores students' perceptions toward this approach in class XI at SMAN 5 Tana Toraja. Using a qualitative method, data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews with English teachers. The findings reveal that while differentiated strategies, such as group learning, multimedia, and task variations, improve student engagement and comfort, several barriers persist. These include time constraints, large class sizes, and diverse student abilities. Nonetheless, both teachers and students acknowledged the benefits of adapting teaching styles to meet students' varied needs. The study recommends continuous innovation and teacher support to enhance Differentiated learning in English language classrooms.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning, English Language Teaching, Student Engagement, Teaching Strategies, Teacher Perception*

Introduction

Despite their frequent interchangeability, teaching and learning are two different but connected educational processes. Learning is an internal, dynamic process that creates relatively permanent changes in behavior and understanding by allowing people to acquire new information, abilities, attitudes, or values (Gottschalk et al, 2023). This process, which has social, emotional, and cognitive components, is brought about by methodical study, experiential engagement, and social interaction. On the other hand, teaching entails the deliberate efforts of teachers to promote learning through organized techniques and supportive surroundings (Malang, 2023; Dapa, 2020). Knowledge of pedagogical techniques and learning theories is essential for effective teaching methods, which encourage creativity and critical thinking. Therefore, even though teaching and learning are interdependent, they have different functions in fostering worthwhile educational experiences.

Each student's distinct learning profile is largely shaped by a complex interaction of cognitive abilities, learning preferences, past knowledge, intrinsic motivation, and sociocultural elements when they first enter the classroom (Putri et al, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This complex aspect of learning reflects both the larger educational context in which students are situated as well as their unique personal traits. These individual differences have a substantial impact on how students perceive, process, and retain information, which in turn affects their overall academic performance and level of engagement with the learning process (Merriam et al, 2013). The idea of Differentiated learning has become a crucial pedagogical approach to meet the various learning needs of students as a result of these realizations. To accommodate the different ways that students learn, this approach entails purposefully customizing teaching strategies, content delivery, and assessment techniques (Merrill, 2012;

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Ahmad et al, 2023). The concept of Differentiated learning acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all method of instruction is insufficient to address the demands of a diverse classroom. Rather, it encourages a more individualized educational experience that aims to optimize each student's potential by matching teaching strategies to their unique learning preferences. Additionally, Differentiated learning promotes an inclusive learning environment that not only accommodates a variety of learning styles but also improves academic equity by recognizing and addressing the various ways in which students interact with and understand the curriculum. In today's multicultural classrooms, where students bring a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints to their education, this pedagogical approach is especially important. Teachers can successfully lower learning obstacles and guarantee that every student has fair access to educational opportunities and resources by putting differentiated strategies into practice.

By motivating teachers to embrace more adaptable and creative teaching methods, differentiated learning is a crucial tactic for advancing equity and raising student engagement, making learning experiences more significant and successful (Oktoma et al, 2023; Tomlinson et al, 2023). Particularly in diverse educational settings, this pedagogical approach has been linked to increased classroom inclusivity and better academic results (Deunk et al., 2015). A more dynamic learning environment is created when teachers use differentiated instruction, as they frequently report improvements in classroom management and long-term student motivation (Mardhatillah et al, 2023; Sofiana et al, 2023). By attending to students' diverse needs, Differentiated learning not only promotes personal development but also creates a cooperative environment that supports group learning. Differentiated learning is becoming more and more important in multicultural and inclusive educational settings like SMAN 5 Tana Toraja. Due to the diverse linguistic, academic, and sociocultural backgrounds of the student body, it is imperative that flexible teaching strategies be implemented in order to effectively accommodate a range of learning profiles (Ismail et al, 2019). As educators work to establish a fair learning environment where all students can succeed, this diversity offers both opportunities and challenges. However, a number of important obstacles frequently stand in the way of the effective application of differentiated instruction. Teachers' ability to adapt their teaching strategies to the different needs of their students may be hampered by a lack of resources, which could include insufficient teaching materials and technological assistance (Tobin et al, 2014).

Furthermore, the differentiation process can be complicated by large class sizes, which makes it challenging for teachers to give each student the individualized attention and support they need. These difficulties are made worse by a lack of professional development in differentiated teaching techniques. Many teachers might not have the abilities and know-how to apply differentiated approaches successfully, which could result in a one-size-fits-all teaching model that ignores each student's particular needs (Putri et al, 2023). Therefore, creating an inclusive learning environment that supports every student's success requires addressing these barriers through focused professional development and resource allocation. Schools like SMAN 5 Tana Toraja can only fully benefit from Differentiated learning in raising student engagement and academic achievement by overcoming these obstacles.

The ultimate objective of this research is to provide useful information that can guide more inclusive and flexible teaching strategies in the classroom. The study intends to add to the current conversation on educational equity and inclusivity by addressing the difficulties faced by educators and highlighting successful tactics. Furthermore, the results will impact educational policy by offering evidence-based suggestions to aid in the creation of regulations meant to achieve fair student outcomes in a variety of educational contexts (UNESCO, 2017; OECD, 2020).

In a larger sense, this study emphasizes how crucial it is to create an educational setting that honors and celebrates diversity while attending to the individual needs of every student. This study aims to improve teaching practices and advance fair educational opportunities for all students at SMAN 5 Tana Toraja by examining both the pedagogical approaches and the systemic issues that arise during the implementation of differentiated instruction. The study's ultimate goal is to equip teachers with the skills and information they need to design inclusive classrooms that respect student diversity and promote worthwhile learning opportunities.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how differentiated learning is used in English classes at SMAN 5 Tana Toraja. It is becoming more widely acknowledged that creating equitable learning environments in multicultural contexts requires the use of differentiated instruction, a pedagogical strategy that aims to adapt teaching strategies to the various needs of students. The study will look at how teachers use instructional strategies and how they are modified to fit different student profiles, learning styles, and academic skill levels. This study will examine the major challenges that teachers face when implementing Differentiated learning in addition to evaluating instructional strategies. These difficulties include time restraints that make it difficult to organize and carry out customized lessons, curriculum rigidity that might prevent teachers from using flexible teaching strategies, and restricted access to necessary resources like instructional materials and technical assistance. It is essential to comprehend these obstacles in order to pinpoint areas that might require assistance and intervention in order to improve the efficacy of differentiated instruction. Additionally, the study will explore how students view the Differentiated learning used in their English classes. Students' opinions about these teaching strategies will be gathered in order to provide important information about their efficacy and influence on learning objectives. Student feedback can shed light on the ways that Differentiated learning affects motivation, engagement, and academic performance, making this part of the study crucial.

Method

This section presents findings from classroom observations and teacher interviews conducted with an English teacher at SMA Negeri 5 Tana Toraja, specifically in three Grade XI classes: XI P2, XI P4, and XI P8. The researcher conducted non-participatory classroom observations, meaning the researcher was present during lessons but did not engage in the learning activities (Creswell et al, 2016). For the interview component, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher to gain deeper insight into classroom practices and pedagogical strategies (Tisdell et al, 2023). During the observed lessons, the teacher began by conducting a brief review of previously taught material. This served as a formative assessment strategy to activate prior knowledge and assess students' readiness for new content—a practice endorsed for promoting learning progression (Siddiqui et al, 2017). The teacher then clearly explained the day's learning objectives, a step aligned with best practices in instructional design to improve student focus and motivation (Ismajli et al, 2018; Dapa, 2020). To facilitate student understanding, the teacher implemented group-based learning tasks. Students were divided into small groups to collaboratively complete assignments, fostering peer interaction and collective problem-solving (Mukhibat, 2023; Gillies, 2016). The teacher also provided explicit instructions before task execution, ensuring all students understood the expectations—an approach proven to enhance task clarity and performance (Heningjakti et al, 2023).

As an instructional aid, the teacher incorporated multimedia, such as learning videos, to explain abstract concepts. The use of audiovisual media in language teaching has been shown

to improve learner engagement and comprehension, particularly when dealing with complex or unfamiliar content (Mayer, 2022; Aloraini, 2012). Throughout the lesson, the teacher circulated among the groups, offering personalized guidance and responding to students' questions with patience and clarity. This aligns with concept of scaffolding, where the teacher supports learners within their zone of proximal development (Tamam et al, 2023). In language learning sessions, students were trained to translate text titles and explore synonym usage to enrich vocabulary. Such activities enhance lexical range and support comprehension, a critical aspect of second language acquisition (Wulandari et al, 2023).

When students showed confusion regarding task instructions or content, the teacher provided further explanation, often rephrasing for clarity. Additionally, students were encouraged to ask questions—promoting a learner-centered environment in which active participation and inquiry are valued (Anggraeny et al, 2023; Azimah et al, 2023). The teacher continuously monitored student discussions, offering feedback and correction when necessary. Corrective feedback is essential for guiding learners toward accuracy and deeper understanding in language learning (Widayanti et al, 2023). Despite the interactive and supportive classroom environment, one notable challenge was the constraint of time. The 2x45-minute lesson duration was insufficient to fully address all planned materials. Consequently, unfinished topics and assignments were postponed to the next session, a common adaptive strategy to prevent rushed learning and promote conceptual depth (Hasanah et al, 2022; Brookfield, 2017).

Results

The demographic data collected from the 6 participating lecturers revealed diverse teaching backgrounds and practices. These participants came from English Education Study Program of UKI Toraja. In terms of teaching experience, most respondents had between 10 to 15 years of teaching English. All respondents reported integrating local cultural values into their English teaching materials. The most commonly used were traditional stories, followed by proverbs, traditional arts (like music, dance, and crafts), local festivals, and some historical figures or events. These elements help make lessons more relevant and support cultural preservation. Lecturers viewed this cultural integration positively. Most (83.3%) agreed it made materials more engaging and relatable, increasing student interest and participation. The same percentage strongly agreed it helps preserve local traditions through language learning.

Cognitive benefits were also noted. About 66.7% believed comparing local and foreign cultures promotes critical thinking. Half (50%) said familiar cultural examples help explain English concepts more clearly. Social and emotional benefits were highlighted too. Half of the lecturers strongly agreed that cultural integration creates an inclusive classroom environment. Also, 66.7% said it contributes to students' character development. Based on the demographic data and responses of the six participating lecturers from the English Education Study Program of UKI Toraja, it is evident that the integration of local cultural values into English language teaching is both a strategic and meaningful pedagogical choice. The lecturers' substantial teaching experience (10–15 years) provides a strong foundation for the thoughtful incorporation of traditional stories, proverbs, arts, and historical contexts into their curriculum. Their unanimous adoption of cultural content reflects not only a commitment to preserving local heritage but also a recognition of its pedagogical potential. The overwhelmingly positive perception where 83.3% found it increased engagement and helped preserve traditions supports the argument that culturally relevant teaching materials foster student interest, enhance participation, and reinforce identity. Moreover, the reported cognitive benefits, such as promoting critical thinking through cross-cultural comparison, and the social-emotional

advantages, including inclusivity and character development, align with research emphasizing the value of culturally responsive teaching. Thus, the lecturers' practices and perspectives illustrate that integrating local culture into English instruction is not merely an act of preservation but a pedagogically sound approach that bridges language learning with meaningful, context-rich content.

Discussion

Together with the results of the current study, Tomlinson's research clearly emphasizes how crucial it is to use differentiated learning strategies in order to successfully address the wide range of student characteristics in the modern classroom. Differentiation, according to, is a comprehensive pedagogical approach that considers students' individual learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels. It is not just an instructional technique (Tomlinson et al, 2023). By modifying processes, content, and final products, this approach seeks to satisfy the diverse needs of students and promote an inclusive learning environment that celebrates and acknowledges individuality. By offering empirical evidence that shows how adapting teaching strategies to students' unique learning styles greatly improves their comprehension and retention of the material, the current study supports Tomlinson's claims. The results specifically show that students are better prepared to interact with the curriculum in a meaningful way when teachers use differentiated strategies, such as a variety of instructional materials, flexible groupings, and a range of assessment techniques. In addition to facilitating deeper understanding, this alignment between instructional design and student needs encourages higher academic achievement across a range of learner populations (Mirawati et al, 2022).

The findings of this study and body of work both highlight how crucial it is to create a welcoming and engaging learning environment (Tomlinson et al, 2023). The importance of developing a classroom environment that is sensitive to the unique needs of each learner is further highlighted, who contends that this type of setting is crucial for encouraging student motivation and engagement (Hasanah et al, 2022). This viewpoint is supported by the current study, which shows that environments that emphasize responsiveness and interactivity greatly enhance learning comfort. A supportive learning environment encourages students to take chances and actively engage in their educational journeys, whether through organized group collaboration, independent work catered to individual interests, or inclusive class-wide activities. Furthermore, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of social interaction in the learning process. According to the research, peer-to-peer interactions during collaborative learning activities help students develop critical social skills in addition to improving their academic comprehension. The holistic character of learning is emphasized by the interaction between academic and social dimensions, which also emphasizes the need for differentiated instruction to meet students' cognitive and affective needs in the classroom.

Furthermore, both studies support creativity and adaptability in instructional design, highlighting the need for teachers to take a dynamic stance that is sensitive to the changing needs of their pupils. According to differentiation is an essential part of the classroom culture that teachers develop over time, not just a collection of tactics (Tomlinson et al, 2023). All students feel more engaged and like they belong in an environment where different learning needs are recognized and actively met thanks to the long-term integration of differentiated practices. This viewpoint is supported by recent research, which emphasizes the urgent need for creative and flexible teaching methods, especially when it comes to English language acquisition. When students come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds in an increasingly globalized world, it is critical to be able to adapt instruction to meet their needs.

This is consistent with research by which showed that introducing differentiated learning strategies in elementary school, particularly by modifying teaching strategies to fit the interests and learning styles of the students, greatly enhanced academic performance (Karim et al, 2023). According to the research, these customized approaches resulted in more meaningful learning experiences and increased student engagement. In a similar vein, the current study supports these conclusions by demonstrating that modifying teaching strategies to each student's unique learning preferences is essential for improving understanding and memory. In diverse classrooms, where students' backgrounds, interests, and prior knowledge can differ greatly, this emphasis on adaptability is especially pertinent.

Teachers can design more engaging learning experiences that speak to each learner by acknowledging and addressing these differences. Additionally, by clarifying the significance of creating a positive social environment that supports differentiated instruction, this study broadens the conversation. According to the results, offering a variety of learning formats including small group projects, customized assignments, and inclusive class discussions significantly improves student comfort and fosters academic achievement. In addition to accommodating a range of learning styles, these diverse formats promote cooperation and peer interaction, two qualities that are critical to creating a supportive classroom environment. In order to create an educational environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions, taking intellectual risks, and actively engaging with the material, it is imperative that social support and instructional flexibility work together (Creswell et al, 2016). The foundation for lifelong learning and personal development can be laid by educators who prioritize both adaptive instructional strategies and a supportive social environment. This will effectively increase student motivation and achievement. The application of focused interventions created to address the various needs of students further highlights the importance of differentiated learning, which is consistent with the findings of (Diananseri et al, 2023). Used a single-subject research design in his study at SDN 17 Jawa Gadut Padang to investigate how differentiated strategies affect students who struggle with learning.

According to the investigation's findings, using specialized teaching strategies improved students' concentration and involvement in the learning process substantially. This emphasizes how important differentiation is in meeting the particular difficulties encountered by students who might not otherwise succeed in a conventional learning environment. By showing how a responsive classroom setting combined with individualized teaching strategies that suit students' social and cognitive preferences can result in noticeably better English language learning outcomes, the current study supports and expands on these findings. This method highlights how crucial it is to establish a learning environment that can be adjusted to meet each student's unique needs in order to encourage their active engagement and commitment to the educational process. Teachers can use strategies that improve comprehension and create a stronger bond with the material they are teaching by taking into account the varied backgrounds, interests, and learning styles of their students. Additionally, the evidence collected from the works, and the current study all points to the same conclusion: learning diversity must be acknowledged and addressed in order to maximize educational success through effective differentiation (Wahyuni, 2023).

This compilation of research supports the idea that, in today's more diverse classrooms, a one-size-fits-all approach to education is inadequate. Rather, it promotes a paradigm shift in teaching methods that value individual differences and foster inclusive learning environments. This body of research has significant implications, indicating that teachers need to be dedicated to creating an inclusive classroom culture that celebrates diversity in addition to having a range

of differentiated strategies. By fostering such an atmosphere, teachers can improve motivation, engagement, and eventually academic performance by establishing circumstances that support learning for all students. To sum up, the combined knowledge discovered from the research as well as the current study emphasizes how important it is for teachers to accept differentiation as a fundamental component of good instruction. Teachers can maximize educational outcomes and guarantee that every student has an equal chance to thrive in their academic endeavors by recognizing and meeting the diverse needs of their students (Riyanita et al, 2023).

Conclusion

Through the alignment of instructional practices with individual learning styles and abilities, differentiated learning in the English classroom has the potential to greatly increase student engagement. This method acknowledges that each student has a unique cognitive profile, requiring customized teaching methods to promote the best possible learning results. However, there are numerous obstacles that teachers frequently face that prevent differentiated instruction from being implemented successfully. These difficulties include managing large class sizes, the limitations imposed by scarce resources, and the intricacies of lesson planning. Project-based learning, for example, can give students the chance to delve deeply into the curriculum while exploring their interests. Additionally, individualized learning experiences made possible by technology integration in the classroom help teachers effectively meet the needs of students with a variety of learning styles. Although there is a general appreciation for individualized teaching methods, students still face difficulties, especially when it comes to speaking confidence, grammar, and listening skills. These challenges highlight the need for continuous assistance and focused interventions to close particular learning gaps. Therefore, the success of differentiated learning depends not only on using a variety of teaching techniques but also on having strong teacher support, communicating effectively, and creating a collaborative learning environment.

To evaluate the long-term effects of differentiated instruction on student engagement and academic performance, further study should concentrate on longitudinal studies. The best practices for diverse classroom environments may be found through comparative evaluations of different approaches, such as project-based learning and technology integration. Furthermore, investigating how students view individualized instruction would reveal their preferences and difficulties, especially with regard to speaking and grammar. Last but not least, studies on efficient resource distribution and large-class classroom management may provide useful answers for improving differentiated learning settings.

Acknowledgment

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