

Differentiated Instruction Based on Lesson Study to Improve Critical Thinking and Collaborative Skills in EFL Class

Rizkariani Sulaiman¹

Umar Mansyur²

Hilal Surahmatullah³

Elena Tikhonova⁴

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

⁴HSE University, Moscow, Russia; RUDN University, Moscow, Russia

¹rizka.sulaiman@umi.ac.id

²umar.mansyur@umi.ac.id

³rickytake44@gmail.com

⁴elena@rudn.co.id

Abstract

This classroom action research aimed to investigate how differentiated Instruction using Lesson Study enhances students' critical thinking and teamwork skills in learning English. The study took place in class 8.2 at UPT SPF SMP Negeri 23 Makassar, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 school year, involving 37 eighth-grade students. Two cycles of Lesson Study-based action research (Plan-Do-See and Re-Plan-Do-See) were carried out, focusing on teaching the simple past tense, recount texts, and modals expressing ability or inability. Instruction was tailored based on students' readiness, interests, and learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetics). Data collection included rubrics for critical thinking and collaboration, classroom observations, and field notes. Quantitative results showed consistent growth in students' critical thinking. The average score increased from 2.3 (Sufficient) before the intervention to 2.8 (Good) after Cycle I and to 3.3 (Very Good) after Cycle II (scale 1–4). The percentage of students meeting the mastery criterion (score ≥ 3.0) rose from 13.5% to 54.1% and then to 81.1%. Collaboration skills also improved, with the average score rising from 2.5 (Sufficient) to 3.0 (Good) and 3.4 (Very Good), with a shift from most students in the Sufficient category to most in the Good–Very Good categories. Qualitative data revealed changes from one-student-dominant group work and brief, unsupported answers to more shared participation, clearer roles, reasoned arguments, and reflective group discussions. These findings suggest that differentiated instruction within a Lesson Study cycle effectively promotes critical thinking and collaboration in junior high school EFL classes and aligns with the goals of the Kurikulum Merdeka and 21st-century skills.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction; lesson study; critical thinking; collaborative skills; EFL*

Introduction

Recent curriculum reforms in Indonesia, including the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, emphasize the development of 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; Sucipto et al., 2024; Widyastuti & Wiyannah, 2025). English as a foreign language (EFL) is expected not only to build linguistic knowledge but also to serve as a vehicle for higher-order thinking and social interaction (Brown & Lee, 2015; Oktoma et al., 2025). At the same time, global frameworks highlight that students need to master critical thinking and collaborative problem solving to succeed in the 21st century (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; Dillenbourg et al., 2020).

However, classroom practices in many junior high schools remain predominantly teacher-centred, focusing on explanation, drill, and individual written exercises. Such practices often provide limited opportunities for students to analyse, evaluate, argue, and work collaboratively, and they tend to reduce student engagement (Hasdina et al., 2024; Sulaiman & Ramadhana, 2022). Studies in Indonesian schools also reveal that students continue to encounter difficulties in learning English, including limited vocabulary, low confidence, and challenges in comprehending texts (Yasa et al., 2023).

Preliminary observations in class 8.2 of SMP Negeri 23 Makassar revealed similar conditions. English lessons were largely dominated by teacher explanation followed by textbook exercises. Students' participation tended to be low; only a few students responded to questions, while many others were passive and waited for the teacher's direction. Students also showed limited vocabulary, low confidence to speak English, and difficulty maintaining focus during extended explanations. Group work, when used, often resulted in one or two students doing most of the work while others remained passive followers.

Diagnostic assessment using critical thinking and collaboration rubrics confirmed that most students were at a "Sufficient" level in both areas. Students could usually answer factual questions about texts but struggled to explain their reasoning, evaluate information, or propose alternative solutions. In group tasks, participation and role distribution were uneven, and reflection on group processes was minimal.

Differentiated instruction offers a way to respond to such diversity by adapting content, process, and product to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Hasanah et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Research in Indonesian and international contexts indicates that differentiated instruction can improve learning outcomes and participation when it is systematically planned and implemented (Diananseri & Yaslina, 2024; Fowen & Negara, 2024; Kupchyk & Litvinchuk, 2020; Nurwidiawati et al., 2024;; Rochmawati & Asri, 2014). In the context of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, differentiated instruction is regarded as a key strategy for respecting learner diversity and supporting the goals of *Merdeka Belajar* (Oktoma et al., 2025; Widyastuti & Wiyannah, 2025).

At the same time, Lesson Study provides a collaborative framework for teachers to design, observe, and refine teaching practices based on evidence of students' learning processes (Lewis et al., 2022; Mertler, 2021). Studies in various settings show that Lesson Study can enhance teachers' pedagogical competence, promote collaborative inquiry, and improve student learning (Aimah et al., 2023; Jarvis & Balcazar, 2020; Ping et al., 2020; Setyawan et al., 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2023). Recent work also highlights that Lesson Study is effective for optimizing differentiated instruction and strengthening collaboration and communication in classrooms (Ikanengsih & Rostikawati, 2024; Sulaiman & Mansyur, 2024; Upa et al., 2024).

This study aimed to implement differentiated instruction based on Lesson Study in an eighth-grade EFL classroom and to examine its effectiveness in improving students' critical thinking and collaborative skills. The research addressed the following questions:

1. How is differentiated instruction based on Lesson Study planned and implemented in class 8.2 of SMP Negeri 23 Makassar?
2. How does this model improve students' critical thinking skills?
3. How does it improve students' collaborative skills?

Method

Research Design

This study employed classroom action research (CAR) with a Lesson Study based cycle. Two cycles were implemented: Cycle I (Plan–Do–See) and Cycle II (Re-Plan–Re-Do–Re-See). In each cycle, the research team collaboratively planned a research lesson, implemented it as an open class, observed students' learning processes, and reflected on the results to revise the subsequent cycle.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at UPT SPF SMP Negeri 23 Makassar, a public junior high school in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The school has begun to align its teaching practices with the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, emphasizing the development of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*.

The participants were 37 students (18 boys and 19 girls) of class 8.2 in the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The class was described as active and fond of games and group work but relatively lower in learning motivation compared to parallel classes. Students' English proficiency and socio-cultural backgrounds were heterogeneous. English is a compulsory subject taught three times a week (3 × 40 minutes per meeting). The lessons in this study focused on regular and irregular verbs, recount text, and modals of ability/inability (can, can't, could, couldn't).

Lesson Study Team

The Lesson Study team consisted of the lead researcher, co researchers, the English teacher of class 8.2 as the model teacher, and several university students as observers. The lead researcher coordinated the overall design and analysis; co-researchers assisted in instrument development and materials; the model teacher implemented the lessons; and observers documented students' behaviours and interactions during open classes.

Procedures

The research began with a preliminary study that involved classroom observation to identify existing teaching practices and students' learning behaviours. In addition, a diagnostic assessment of critical thinking and collaborative skills was carried out using analytic rubrics, and a learning style and readiness survey was administered to identify students' visual, auditory, and kinesthetics preferences as well as their initial mastery of simple past tense and modals.

Cycle I followed the Plan–Do–See sequence. In the planning stage, the team designed differentiated lesson plans for two meetings on regular and irregular verbs and recount text, grouped students heterogeneously based on readiness and learning styles, and prepared differentiated materials such as lists of verbs with varying levels of complexity, simplified and more complex texts, and varied group tasks. The team also agreed on specific observation foci, namely students' critical questioning, argumentation, participation, role distribution, and group reflection. In the Do stage, the open classes were conducted in two meetings. The first meeting focused on classifying regular and irregular verbs and using them in the simple past tense through games (verb race), flashcards, drilling, and sentence-building tasks. The second meeting targeted the analysis and composition of short recount texts, supported by differentiated aids such as key vocabulary and text frames. In the See stage, the team analysed observation data and students' work, identified strengths such as higher engagement and emerging arguments,

as well as weaknesses such as unclear instructions, unstructured group roles, and limited higher-order questions, and then formulated revisions for Cycle II.



Figure 1. Student is using differentiated verb cards as scaffolding while working on a simple past tense task

Cycle II implemented a refined Re-Plan–Re-Do–Re-See cycle. During the Re-Plan stage, the researchers improved the differentiated tasks for teaching the simple past tense in personal experiences and modals expressing ability or inability. They introduced explicit group roles through role cards (leader, recorder, presenter, and timekeeper) and developed question-stem sheets to scaffold critical thinking, including prompts such as “Why do you think...?”, “What will happen if...?”, and “Do you agree? Why or why not?”. In the Re-Do stage, two further open classes were conducted. In the first meeting, students practised the simple past tense in the context of personal experiences using video clips, mind maps, and story-chain activities. In the second meeting, they engaged in role plays and problem situations that required appropriate use of can, can’t, could, and couldn’t, supported by reasons.



Figure 2. Students in groups collaborating on differentiated EFL tasks during a Lesson Study open class

Finally, in the Re-See stage, the team compared observation results between the two cycles, evaluated the improvements in critical thinking and collaboration, and concluded that no further cycle was necessary because the key indicators of success had been achieved.

Instruments and Data Collection

Several instruments were used to collect data in this study. A critical thinking rubric was developed to assess five aspects: identification of problems or important information, analysis of arguments, evaluation of information, drawing conclusions, and proposing creative solutions. Each aspect was rated on a 1–4 scale, with 1 indicating Poor performance and 4 indicating Very Good performance. A collaboration rubric was also employed to evaluate students' idea contribution, role fulfilment, listening skills, joint decision-making, and responsibility for group tasks, likewise scored on a 1–4 scale. In addition to these rubrics, observation sheets and field notes were used by observers to record students' behaviours related to critical thinking such as the types of questions they asked, the quality of their reasons, and the depth of their reflections as well as collaborative behaviours, including participation, role balance, peer support, and feedback. Furthermore, documentation in the form of students' written products (verb lists, sentences, recount texts, posters, and dialogues) and their reflective comments was collected as supporting data to triangulate the findings.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the rubrics were analysed descriptively to obtain mean scores and category distributions (Poor, Sufficient, Good, Very Good) for each stage: pre-action, Cycle I, Cycle II. The proportion of students achieving mastery (scores ≥ 3.0) was calculated for critical thinking and collaboration. Qualitative data from observations, field notes, and student work were analysed thematically to identify patterns of change in critical thinking and collaborative behaviours across cycles.

Results

Initial Profile of Critical Thinking and Collaborative Skills

Diagnostic assessment before the intervention showed that most students' critical thinking skills were at a Sufficient level. The mean scores for all five aspects (problem identification, argument analysis, information evaluation, conclusion drawing, and creative solutions) ranged from 2.3 to 2.4 on a 1–4 scale, with only 5 out of 37 students (13.5%) categorized as Good and the remaining 32 students (86.5%) as Sufficient. Students tended to answer factual questions but rarely provided logical reasons or examples, and they struggled to compare alternatives or propose creative solutions. Collaborative skills also started at a Sufficient level, with mean scores between 2.4 and 2.5 across the five aspects (active participation, communication, cooperation, problem solving, group reflection). Ten students (27.0%) were categorized as Good, while 27 students (73.0%) remained in the Sufficient category. Group discussions were often dominated by one or two confident students, whereas other members were passive and contributed little to decision-making or reflection. These findings justified the need for an intervention that simultaneously targeted critical thinking and collaboration through differentiated instruction and structured group work.

Implementation of Differentiated Instruction Based on Lesson Study

In Cycle I, differentiated instruction was implemented mainly through variation in content and process according to students' readiness and learning styles. High-readiness groups worked with more complex lists of irregular verbs and longer recount texts, while low-readiness groups received simpler texts with glossaries and guided practice. Visual learners used flashcards, tables, and slides; auditory learners engaged in listening and drilling activities; kinesthetics learners participated in games such as verb race and sentence assembly. However, group roles were not yet clearly structured, resulting in continued dominance by some students.

Observation results in Cycle I indicated increased engagement, especially during games and group tasks, but questions from students remained mostly factual, and reflections were still descriptive ("The task was difficult," "The time was not enough"). Role distribution was unclear, and some students still tended to copy rather than actively contribute.

In Cycle II, the design was refined. Differentiation of content and process was maintained and sharpened, but structural supports were added: explicit group roles through role cards and critical question stems. Tasks were redesigned so that they required contributions from all group members (one student writing, another reading, another providing examples, another managing time). As a result, participation became more evenly distributed, and teacher and observers noted more frequent student-generated questions such as "Why do we use went here?" and "Which modal is better in this situation?"

Improvement in Critical Thinking Skills

The mean score of students' critical thinking skills increased from 2.3 (Sufficient) at the pre-action stage to 2.8 (Good) at the end of Cycle I and 3.3 (Very Good) at the end of Cycle II. The proportion of students achieving mastery (scores ≥ 3.0) rose from 5 students (13.5%) at pre-action to 20 students (54.1%) in Cycle I and 30 students (81.1%) in Cycle II.

Table 1. Students' Critical Thinking Scores Across Cycles (n = 37)

Stage	Mean Score (1-4)	Category	Students ≥ 3.0 (Mastery)	Percentage (%)
Pre-action	2.3	Sufficient	5	13.5
Cycle I	2.8	Good	20	54.1
Cycle II	3.3	Very Good	30	81.1

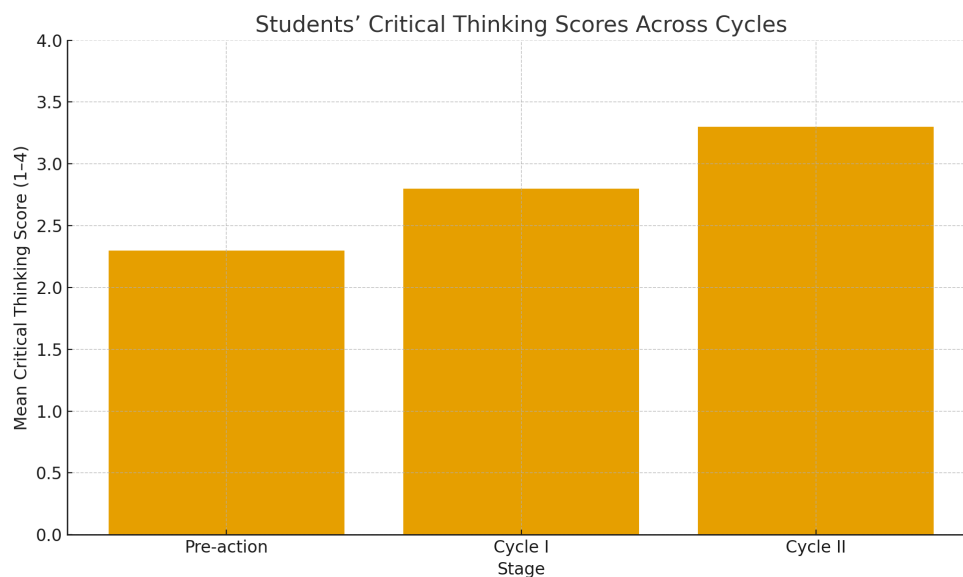


Figure 3. Students' mean critical thinking scores across cycles (n = 37)

Qualitatively, during Cycle I students began to give simple reasons such as “This is verb 2 because it has -ed” or “It is a recount because it tells past events.” In Cycle II, their arguments became more elaborate and evidence based:

“I think we should use went because the story is about yesterday. If we use go, it is present, not past.”

“He could swim when he was a child because he had a pool at home, but now he can't because he is sick.”

Students also moved from very general conclusions (“It is about holiday”) to more complete and coherent summaries that included the sequence of events and the writer’s feelings. This indicates improvement in information identification, reasoning, evaluation, and conclusion drawing.

Improvement in Collaborative Skills

The mean collaboration score rose from 2.5 (Sufficient) at pre-action to 3.0 (Good) at the end of Cycle I and 3.4 (Very Good) at the end of Cycle II. Category distributions also shifted: initially, none of the students reached the Very Good category; by Cycle II, more than a quarter did, and the proportion of students remaining in the Sufficient category decreased sharply.

Table 2. Students' Collaborative Skills Across Cycles (n = 37)

Stage	Mean Score (1-4)	Sufficient (%)	Good (%)	Very Good (%)
Pre-action	2.5	73.0	27.0	0.0
Cycle I	3.0	40.5	51.4	8.1
Cycle II	3.4	18.9	54.1	27.0

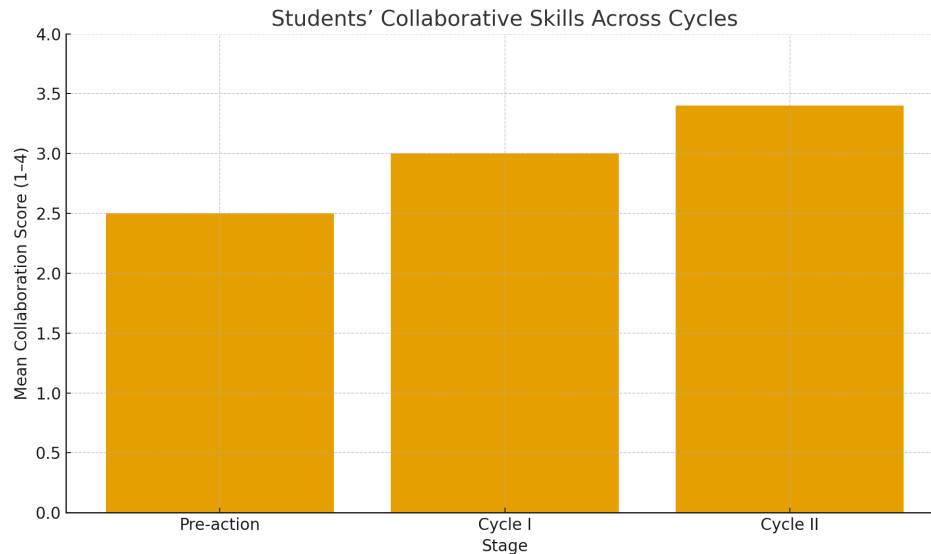


Figure 4. Students' mean collaborative skills scores across cycles (n = 37)

In Cycle II, group work changed from being dominated by one “smart” student to more balanced participation. With role cards, each member had a clear responsibility. Students reminded each other about tasks and time, invited quieter peers to give ideas, and negotiated decisions together. Reflective comments such as “Now everyone has to work because each has a role” and “If one friend does not finish, the group is late” show increased awareness of shared responsibility.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that differentiated instruction based on Lesson Study effectively enhanced both critical thinking and collaborative skills among eighth-grade EFL students. The consistent rise in mean scores and the shift in category distributions suggest that the intervention positively changed not only what students could do but also how they engaged in learning processes. These results are in line with studies showing that differentiated instruction can increase students' engagement and learning outcomes when it is systematically designed and implemented (Diananseri & Yaslina, 2024; Fowen & Negara, 2024; Hasanah et al., 2022; Kupchyk & Litvinchuk, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, the results support the view that critical thinking involves purposeful, self-regulated judgement that requires interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference based on evidence and competencies that are central to 21st-century learning frameworks (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019). When students moved from short, unsupported answers to using expressions like “I think...because...”, asking “why/how” questions, and constructing coherent conclusions, they were engaging in the core processes of critical thinking rather than merely recalling information. This is consistent with earlier work in EFL pedagogy, which emphasizes interactive, meaningful language use as a vehicle for higher-order thinking (Brown & Lee, 2015; Rochmawati & Asri, 2014).

Differentiated instruction contributed to this change by matching the level of challenge to students' readiness and learning profiles. High readiness students were pushed to handle more complex texts and cases, encouraging deeper analysis and evaluation, while low-readiness students received scaffolds (simplified texts, vocabulary lists, frames) that allowed them to participate meaningfully in identification, explanation,

and basic reasoning (Hasanah et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Thus, all students operated within their zones of proximal development while being challenged to think beyond recall, which is in line with studies that highlight the benefits of tiered tasks and flexible grouping (Diananseri & Yaslina, 2024; Nurwidiawati et al., 2024).

The improvement observed in this study also supports policy-oriented discussions that position differentiated instruction as a key strategy for implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Merdeka Belajar* in English classrooms (Oktoma et al., 2025; Sucipto et al., 2024; Widyastuti & Wiyanah, 2025). In particular, the shift from teacher-centred explanation and uniform tasks toward more varied, student centred activities aligns with efforts to address persistent learning difficulties in English, such as those identified in senior high school contexts (Yasa et al., 2023).

Lesson Study functioned as the engine for continuous improvement. Through collaborative planning, observation, and reflection, the teaching team identified that Cycle I still lacked clear group structures and systematic scaffolding for questioning. These weaknesses were addressed in Cycle II by introducing role cards and question stem sheets, which directly influenced the quality of collaboration and critical thinking. This confirms that Lesson Study is not only a tool for refining content delivery but also a powerful mechanism for embedding higher-order thinking and social skills into classroom practice (Aimah et al., 2023; Jarvis & Balcazar, 2020; Lewis et al., 2022; Ping et al., 2020; Setyawan et al., 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2023; Upa et al., 2024). The design of this study, which combines iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection, is consistent with the conception of action research as systematic teacher inquiry (Mertler, 2021; Zawacki Richter et al., 2020).

In terms of collaboration, the shift from “group work as formality” to “functional collaboration” was apparent. Simply putting students into groups in Cycle I did not guarantee equitable participation or shared decision-making. It was the combination of structured roles, interdependent tasks, and reflective discussions in Cycle II that fostered a sense of collective responsibility and mutual support. This pattern is consistent with research that highlights the importance of explicit role structures and shared accountability in developing collaboration skills (Dillenbourg et al., 2020; Ikanengsih & Rostikawati, 2024; Setyowati et al., 2024). The improvement in collaborative behaviours also echoes findings from Lesson Study based interventions that sought to strengthen students’ communication and teamwork in different subject areas (Ikanengsih & Rostikawati, 2024; Setyawan et al., 2023).

The results resonate with studies on student engagement in English courses, which show that interactive, game-based, and collaborative activities rather than lecture dominated lessons, tend to increase students’ motivation and participation (Hasdina et al., 2024; Sulaiman & Ramadhana, 2022). By integrating differentiated tasks, games, and structured group work within Lesson Study cycles, this research responded to the challenge of low participation and uneven contribution observed at the beginning of the study. The model also aligns with previous Indonesian work that explicitly integrates Lesson Study with differentiated instruction to improve student learning outcomes (Sulaiman & Mansyur, 2024; Upa et al., 2024).

Overall, the integration of differentiated instruction and Lesson Study aligned well with the aims of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Merdeka Belajar*, which call for student-centred learning that respects individual differences and cultivates critical, collaborative learners (Oktoma et al., 2025; Sucipto et al., 2024; Widyastuti & Wiyanah, 2025). The present study contributes to this body of work by showing that when teachers

systematically design, test, and refine such approaches in real classrooms, substantial gains can be achieved even within the constraints of regular school settings.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation and effectiveness of differentiated instruction based on Lesson Study in an eighth grade EFL class at SMP Negeri 23 Makassar.

1. Planning and Implementation

Differentiated instruction was planned using diagnostic data on students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. These profiles informed variations in content (text complexity and verb lists), process (activities tailored to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners), and product (texts, dialogues, posters, mind maps). The Lesson Study cycles enabled the research team to iteratively refine lesson plans, group structures, and scaffolds. The model proved operational and adaptable in the classroom context.

2. Improvement in Critical Thinking

Students' critical thinking skills improved significantly. The mean score increased from 2.3 (Sufficient) to 3.3 (Very Good), and the proportion of students meeting the mastery criterion rose from 13.5% to 81.1%. Behaviourally, students progressed from giving brief, unreasoned answers to providing arguments, asking why/how questions, comparing linguistic choices, and drawing conclusions based on textual evidence.

3. Improvement in Collaborative Skills

Collaborative skills also showed clear gains. The mean collaboration score rose from 2.5 (Sufficient) to 3.4 (Very Good), with a strong shift toward the Good to Very Good categories. Group work evolved from being dominated by one student to a more balanced pattern of participation with clear roles, mutual responsibility, and constructive feedback among members.

Overall, differentiated instruction based on Lesson Study was effective in improving both critical thinking and collaborative skills in the EFL classroom studied. The model is therefore considered relevant for supporting the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* and for strengthening 21st-century competencies in junior high school English

Implications

In theoretical implications, the findings reinforce the conceptual link between differentiated instruction, Lesson Study, and the development of critical thinking and collaboration. They show that differentiation should be grounded in real student data and that continuous, collaborative reflection is essential for aligning teaching practices with higher-order learning goals. In Practical Implications, English teachers can adopt this model by: Conducting simple diagnostic assessments of readiness, interests, and learning styles; Designing tiered tasks and materials aligned with these profiles; Using Lesson Study (even on a small scale) to plan, observe, and refine lessons with colleagues; Employing role cards, question stems, and interdependent group tasks to structure critical and collaborative work. School leaders and teacher education programs can support such initiatives by providing time, space, and training for Lesson Study and differentiated planning, and by integrating these competencies into microteaching and practicum activities.

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