

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING ON THE EMANCIPATED CURRICULUM: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores English teachers' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning within Indonesia's Emancipated Curriculum through qualitative interview-based research. Through semi-structured interviews with English teachers, the study investigated how teachers perceive and implement differentiation strategies in their teaching practice. The findings revealed that teachers approach differentiation through four key aspects: content differentiation, utilizing digital tools and culturally relevant materials to engage diverse learners; process differentiation, implementing flexible grouping strategies and technology integration to accommodate various learning styles; product differentiation, employing varied assessment approaches with tailored rubrics for different student outputs; and environment differentiation, focusing on emotional readiness and inclusive practices. The interview data highlighted both positive experiences and significant challenges, including time-management constraints, content-adaptation difficulties, and assessment-standardization issues. These insights contribute to understanding the practical implementation of differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework, emphasizing the need for enhanced professional development, institutional support, and systematic approaches to overcome implementation challenges while maintaining educational quality and inclusivity. This study aimed to examine how English teachers perceived and implemented differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework. Accordingly, this study sought to answer the following research question: How did English teachers perceive differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum?

Keywords: differentiated learning; emancipated curriculum; English teaching; teacher perspectives

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji perspektif guru bahasa Inggris tentang implementasi pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dalam Kurikulum Merdeka melalui penelitian kualitatif berbasis wawancara. Melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan dua orang guru bahasa Inggris, penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana guru memandang dan menerapkan strategi diferensiasi dalam praktik pengajaran mereka. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa guru menerapkan diferensiasi melalui empat aspek utama: diferensiasi konten dengan memanfaatkan alat digital dan materi yang relevan secara budaya untuk melibatkan pembelajar yang beragam; diferensiasi proses melalui penerapan strategi pengelompokan yang fleksibel dan integrasi teknologi untuk mengakomodasi berbagai gaya belajar; diferensiasi produk melalui pendekatan penilaian yang bervariasi dengan rubrik yang disesuaikan untuk output siswa yang berbeda; dan diferensiasi lingkungan yang berfokus pada kesiapan emosional dan praktik inklusif. Data wawancara menyoroti pengalaman positif dan tantangan signifikan, termasuk kendala manajemen waktu, kesulitan adaptasi konten, dan masalah standarisasi penilaian. Wawasan ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman implementasi praktis pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dalam kerangka Kurikulum Merdeka, menekankan perlunya peningkatan pengembangan profesional, dukungan institusional, dan pendekatan sistematis untuk mengatasi tantangan implementasi sambil mempertahankan kualitas dan inklusivitas pendidikan. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji bagaimana guru bahasa Inggris memandang dan menerapkan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dalam kerangka Kurikulum Merdeka. Sejalan dengan tujuan tersebut, penelitian ini berupaya menjawab pertanyaan penelitian berikut: Bagaimana guru bahasa Inggris memandang pembelajaran berdiferensiasi dalam Kurikulum Merdeka?

Kata Kunci: kurikulum merdeka; pembelajaran berdiferensiasi; pengajaran bahasa Inggris; perspektif guru

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of Indonesia's Emancipated Curriculum (Merdeka Belajar) represents a significant shift in the country's educational landscape, emphasizing student-centered learning and educational autonomy. Within this framework, differentiated learning has emerged as a crucial pedagogical approach, particularly in English language education. This teaching strategy, grounded in Carol Ann Tomlinson's framework, emphasizes the customization of content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate students' varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). The theoretical underpinnings of differentiated learning draw from several established frameworks, including Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, which suggests that students possess different types of intelligences, necessitating diverse instructional approaches (Susanti et al., 2024).

The implementation of the emancipated curriculum involves significant changes in teaching methodologies and school management practices. Schools are required to provide teachers with the autonomy to design and adapt lesson plans that reflect the interests and abilities of their students, thereby promoting a more personalized learning experience (Nefianthi et al., 2023). In line with this approach, Gusteti and Neviyarni (2022) emphasize that differentiated learning within the Merdeka Curriculum should inspire and motivate students while considering their developmental stages, fostering both physical and psychological growth. This pedagogical framework encourages teachers to create learning environments that accommodate diverse student needs through flexible instructional strategies and personalized support systems.

The significance of differentiated learning in English language education is particularly noteworthy given the subject's crucial role in developing students' linguistic competence and cultural awareness. English teachers must navigate the complex task of adapting content, process, and assessment methods to accommodate diverse learning profiles while maintaining consistent educational standards. This complexity is heightened within the Emancipated Curriculum framework, which emphasizes both individual student autonomy and standardized learning outcomes (Wahyuni, 2023). The implementation of differentiated learning requires teachers to consider various aspects of student diversity, including learning styles, readiness levels, and cultural backgrounds (Tilamsari et al., 2023).

Despite the theoretical foundations supporting differentiated learning, its practical implementation within the Emancipated Curriculum context presents unique challenges and opportunities. While previous studies have explored differentiated learning in various subjects, such as mathematics by Gusteti and Neviyarni (2022) and biology by Nefianthi et al. (2023), demonstrating its effectiveness in improving student engagement and learning outcomes. However, these studies primarily focused on content-specific applications and were not situated within the domain of English language education. Furthermore, existing research tends to examine differentiated learning from a classroom practices perspective rather than exploring teachers' lived experiences and perceptions. Consequently, there remains a limited body of qualitative research that specifically investigates English teachers' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning within the framework of the Emancipated Curriculum. This gap is crucial, as English plays a central role in developing students' linguistic competence and cultural awareness in Indonesia's increasingly globalized educational context. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of how English teachers perceive and implement differentiated learning strategies in alignment with the Emancipated Curriculum.

The importance of understanding teachers' perspectives on differentiated learning implementation is underscored by several factors. First, teachers serve as primary agents in translating curriculum objectives into classroom practices. Their experiences and challenges in implementing differentiation strategies directly impact the effectiveness of the Emancipated Curriculum's goals (Rahmani & Riyanti, 2022). Second, while technology integration and professional development support

differentiated instruction (Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020), there is insufficient research examining how teachers navigate these resources within their specific contexts (Azimah & Sujannah, 2024).

The implementation of differentiated learning in English language education presents unique challenges that warrant investigation. Teachers must adapt their instructional approaches to meet diverse student needs while ensuring alignment with curriculum standards. This includes developing materials at various complexity levels, incorporating culturally relevant resources, integrating digital tools, and implementing flexible grouping strategies (Setyaningrum et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers must consider emotional readiness and inclusive practices while maintaining high academic standards (Griffiths & Tajeddin, 2020).

The cultural context of Indonesia adds another layer of complexity to the implementation of differentiated learning. The country's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape necessitates careful consideration of local contexts while maintaining global educational standards. This includes respecting religious and cultural values in instructional materials, addressing varied levels of exposure to English, and considering socioeconomic factors that affect access to resources. Additionally, the role of technology in supporting differentiated learning cannot be overlooked, as digital tools and platforms offer opportunities for personalized learning experiences and real-time assessment, despite challenges related to infrastructure availability and digital literacy levels (Granås, 2019).

This study addressed these gaps by exploring English teachers' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum through qualitative interview-based research. The research specifically investigates how teachers perceive and implement differentiation strategies in their teaching practice, examining their approaches to content, process, product, and environment differentiation. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences, this study contributes to the understanding of practical challenges and opportunities in implementing differentiated learning within the Indonesian educational context.

The findings of this research have significant implications for educational practice and policy. They provide insights into the practical implementation of differentiated learning strategies, highlight areas requiring additional support or resources, and inform the development of professional development programs. Moreover, understanding teachers' perspectives can help bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom realities, ultimately contributing to more effective and inclusive English language education within the Emancipated Curriculum framework (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore English teachers' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum at a public junior high school level. The case study approach was chosen to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon in its real-life context, with a focus on "how" and "what" questions regarding teachers' experiences and implementation strategies. This design aligned with the study's objective of understanding teachers' perspectives and practices in differentiated learning implementation.

Research design

This research was a qualitative method with a case study design to investigate teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding differentiated learning within the context of the Emancipated Curriculum. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a case study is a qualitative approach that allows researchers to explore a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, particularly through "how" and "what" questions. This method is particularly suitable for understanding the complexities of educational practices and the subjective experiences of teachers in implementing differentiated learning.

Research site and participants

The research was conducted at a secondary school in Indonesia recognized for its progressive educational practices and commitment to the Emancipated Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning and encourages teachers to adopt diverse instructional strategies to meet varied student needs. Additionally, the selected school had a limited number of English teachers who met the sampling criteria: at least 2 years of experience implementing the Emancipated Curriculum and a willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. Therefore, the inclusion of two qualified participants was considered adequate and appropriate for achieving the objectives of this qualitative inquiry.

The researcher employed purposeful sampling to select participants who were most capable of providing rich and relevant information about differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum. Purposeful sampling, as explained by Creswell (2003), enables researchers to intentionally select individuals who meet specific criteria aligned with the research focus. In this study, the criteria included: (1) English teachers with at least two years of experience implementing the Emancipated Curriculum, and (2) a willingness to engage openly in discussions about their instructional practices. In addition to purposeful sampling, convenience sampling was applied by selecting teachers who were accessible to the researcher, which facilitated the data collection process. Ultimately, two English teachers were selected, and although the number is small, qualitative inquiry emphasizes depth rather than breadth Creswell (2012). Therefore, participants who were both experienced and accessible were considered sufficient to provide detailed and meaningful accounts of differentiated learning implementation at junior high school in Palembang. This combined sampling approach ensured that the chosen participants were information-rich and contextually relevant, supporting a deeper understanding of the research topic.

Data collection and analysis

The research employed qualitative interviews as the primary data collection method, specifically utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' experiences with differentiated learning implementation. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize, interviews serve as an effective means to gather detailed information through direct interaction with participants, enabling deeper understanding of complex phenomena. The interview questions were thoughtfully adapted from Talain and Mercado (2023) questionnaire, specifically designed to investigate teachers' experiences in implementing differentiated learning approaches within their educational context.

The choice of semi-structured interviews was particularly significant as this format combines the structure of predetermined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging topics in greater depth. This approach, supported by Creswell and Creswell (2018) framework, allows for guided discussions while giving participants the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences comprehensively. The flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviews proved valuable for capturing the nuanced complexities of implementing differentiated learning strategies in the classroom, providing rich, detailed data that illuminate teachers' lived experiences and perspectives.

The researcher used thematic analysis as a systematic qualitative method to analyze the interview data comprehensively. Following Creswell and Poth (2018) framework, this approach enabled a deep exploration of key ideas and patterns emerging from the interview transcripts. The thematic analysis process, guided by Creswell's (2012) methodology, involved several systematic steps to ensure alignment between the findings and research objectives. First, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representation of the participant's responses. Second, the researcher is immersed in the data to identify initial themes and patterns. Third, the transcripts were systematically coded to highlight significant statements related to the implementation of differentiated learning. Fourth, these codes were organized into broader themes and refined to ensure they accurately represented the participant's views. Finally, the themes were

interpreted within the context of existing literature on differentiated learning and the Emancipated Curriculum framework.

To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed where the participant reviewed the data and findings to verify the accurate representation of their perspectives. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential for ensuring reliable and meaningful findings, particularly when studying educators' perspectives on differentiated learning. Following Creswell (2012) framework, trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Member checking served as a primary strategy for establishing trustworthiness, where participants reviewed data and interpretations to verify accuracy. In this study, after conducting interviews, the researcher summarized key points and held follow-up meetings with participants to confirm interpretations and make necessary adjustments, ensuring that the final report accurately represented their perspectives. This systematic approach enhanced the research's validity and made the findings more accessible to a broader audience.

The research setting at the junior high school level was selected due to its progressive educational practices and commitment to the Emancipated Curriculum. The researcher's prior experience as an intern at a junior high school provided valuable contextual understanding of the educational environment while maintaining professional objectivity during the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis of the interview data revealed four main themes regarding the implementation of differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework. These themes and their corresponding sub-themes and codes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Content Differentiation	a. Feel satisfied when using digital, student-centered materials b. Feel concerned when content does not suit all students' levels	The teacher claimed that the students became more motivated when using materials like Canva, videos, and topics of interest. The teachers experienced difficulties when the content was too complex or unappealing.
Process Differentiation	a. Appreciate the flexibility grouping and integration of technology b. Often feel rushed during collaborative activities	The teachers stated that student more exited when they used flexible grouping and digital tools to support learning. The teacher claimed that collaborative or game-based activities took more time than expected.
Product Differentiation	a. Feel confident using rubrics to guide fairness of students outcomes b. Feel challenged in maintaining equal standards of students outcomes	The teachers claimed the use of rubrics helped assess varied student products, like posters or oral tasks. The teacher stated that fairness was difficult when comparing outputs across different forms.
Environment Differentiation	a. Feel responsible for building a respectful, shared classroom b. Aware that emotions influence classroom participation	The teacher emphasized the importance of fostering a clean, respectful, and collaborative classroom. The teachers needed to address emotional readiness and discomfort in group work.

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To begin with, the research revealed two key aspects of content differentiation implementation by English teachers. First, teachers effectively utilized digital and student-relevant resources to enhance motivation and engagement. This was evidenced through teacher statements such as "Students nowadays are more interested in interactive videos and media they can relate to" and "When students can connect the learning material with their interests, they become more engaged and excited," demonstrating alignment with Tomlinson's (2014) theory about the importance of connecting content to student interests. However, the second aspect revealed significant challenges when content did not match students' readiness levels. Teachers reported difficulties with vocabulary complexity and text intensity, requiring them to make adjustments such as simplifying vocabulary and incorporating student-generated resources to encourage creativity. This challenge aligns with both Tomlinson (2014) emphasis on readiness-based differentiation and Ilma and Dianti (2016) assertion that instructional materials must consider vocabulary load, cultural relevance, and linguistic proficiency. The findings suggest that while teachers successfully implement engaging content differentiation strategies, they must continuously assess and adjust materials to ensure accessibility for all learners, particularly those with lower readiness levels.

Moreover, the research findings revealed two significant aspects of process differentiation implementation by English teachers. The first aspect highlighted the successful integration of flexible grouping strategies and digital technology, as evidenced by teachers' statements about arranging mixed-ability groups for peer assistance and utilizing digital tools to accommodate diverse learning speeds and styles. This approach aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) model of process differentiation and is supported by Rahmani and Riyanti's (2022) research on peer-assisted learning for developing academic and interpersonal skills, while also reflecting Gardner's multiple intelligences theory through its accommodation of various learning modalities. However, the second aspect revealed significant time management challenges in implementing these collaborative strategies. Teachers reported that they were feeling rushed during engaging activities like games and group discussions, often struggling to complete planned materials, as illustrated by one teacher's comment about the time-consuming nature of these activities. This challenge aligns with Granås (2019) observation about the need for careful planning in differentiated instruction and Setyaningrum et al. (2023) emphasis on the necessity of structural support, including appropriate classroom scheduling and material pacing, to effectively implement flexible learning approaches within the curriculum framework.

It was also found that the research revealed two contrasting aspects of teachers' experiences with assessment rubrics in differentiated learning. Teachers demonstrated confidence in implementing rubrics to maintain fairness when evaluating diverse student outputs, showing proficiency in matching assessment criteria to different types of learning products. This practice aligns with Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2023) assertion that rubrics aligned with learning objectives help maintain equity in differentiated classrooms, and Dalila et al.'s (2022) emphasis on performance-based assessments in the Emancipated Curriculum. However, teachers encountered significant challenges in maintaining consistent standards across diverse product types, particularly when evaluating creative and expressive forms that require more subjective judgment. This challenge corresponds with Onyishi and Sefotho's (2020) findings regarding the need for professional training in rubric development and application, especially when assessing varied outputs such as digital media or artwork, highlighting the complexity of maintaining equitable assessment practices in differentiated learning environments. Additionally, Ayubi et al. (2021) emphasize that assessment practices in classrooms that use authentic assessment could be essential for evaluating students' real-world language competencies while accommodating their diverse abilities and learning styles.

Lastly, the research revealed two interconnected aspects of environmental differentiation implemented by English teachers. First, teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering a respectful and collaborative classroom environment, emphasizing cleanliness and mutual support

among students. This approach aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) focus on the learning environment as a key aspect of differentiation, and is supported by Rahmani and Riyanti (2022), who highlight the importance of a positive atmosphere for student confidence and engagement. Additionally, the study found that teachers were aware of the impact of emotions on classroom participation, with teachers actively monitoring and responding to students' emotional states to enhance learning. This sensitivity to emotional and social readiness is crucial for a differentiated classroom, as it supports both student well-being and pedagogical effectiveness, reflecting the core values of mutual respect and responsibility central to the Emancipated Curriculum. The findings demonstrate that successful differentiated instruction requires not only physical environment management but also careful attention to students' emotional states and social dynamics.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate how English teachers at SMPN 13 Palembang implemented differentiated learning across four domains: content, process, product, and environment. While these themes align with Tomlinson (2014) framework, a deeper examination reveals areas of convergence and divergence with previous empirical studies, providing a more critical interpretation of the results.

First, content differentiation in this study was realized through the use of digital tools, authentic materials, and culturally relevant texts. This finding supports El Akhdar et al. (2019), who demonstrated that interest-based materials increase student engagement in reading classes. Similarly, Nefianthi et al. (2023) found that differentiated content in biology lessons improved motivation and learning outcomes. However, unlike these studies, the teachers in the present research struggled to adjust materials to match students' readiness, especially in vocabulary and text complexity. This contrasts with findings by Setyaningrum et al. (2023), who reported that elementary teachers experienced fewer difficulties due to simpler content levels. The difference suggests that content differentiation at the secondary level requires more advanced diagnostic assessment skills, which may explain why teachers in this study felt inadequately prepared.

Second, process differentiation in this study was marked by flexible grouping and technology integration. These findings are consistent with Wahyuni (2023), who highlighted that grouping strategies and varied learning processes are central to implementing differentiation in English classes. The reliance on digital platforms also aligns with Susanti et al. (2024), who emphasized technology's potential in supporting students' diverse cognitive profiles. However, the time management challenges reported by teachers differ from those of Dalila et al. (2022), who found process differentiation more manageable in smaller class settings. This contrast indicates that contextual factors—such as class size, school culture, and scheduling—significantly influence the success of process differentiation, suggesting that structural limitations rather than teacher capability were the primary barriers.

Third, product differentiation was implemented through differentiated rubrics and varied output formats, echoing Tomlinson and Imbeau (2023) emphasis on flexible assessment. This finding aligns with Mardhatillah and Suharyadi (2023), who reported that differentiated assessment encourages student creativity and allows fairer evaluation of diverse abilities. However, while previous studies confirmed that such strategies improve fairness, teachers in the current study expressed concerns about maintaining consistent grading across different products—an issue not widely highlighted in past literature. This difference indicates that although differentiated assessment is conceptually supported, its practical application in Indonesian contexts still requires institutional guidance and standardized procedures.

Fourth, environment differentiation emphasized emotional readiness, classroom routines, and supportive interactions. This finding corresponds with Rahmani and Riyanti (2022), who stressed that emotional security is essential for learning success. However, unlike previous studies—such

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as Gusteti and Neviyarni (2022), which reported successful emotional support strategies at the elementary level—teachers in this study found emotional differentiation more complex because adolescents' emotional needs are more dynamic. This contrast highlights that environmental differentiation is not uniform across age groups, and secondary school teachers require specialised training in social-emotional learning frameworks.

Overall, while the findings affirm the applicability of Tomlinson's model, this study reveals that differentiation practices in Indonesian secondary schools are shaped by contextual constraints, including teacher readiness, class size, and structural support. These contrasts with prior research underscore the need for more robust professional development and institutional backing. Thus, the discussion not only confirms alignment with established theory but also highlights differences, contextual nuances, and practical implications, contributing to a more critical and comprehensive understanding of differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study investigated English teachers' perspectives on implementing differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework at the junior high school level. The findings reveal several significant conclusions about the implementation of differentiated learning in Indonesian educational contexts. Teachers actively applied differentiated learning across four domains: content, process, product, and learning environment. Content differentiation through digital tools and authentic materials effectively engages students, though matching content complexity to student readiness remains challenging. Process differentiation through flexible grouping and technology integration successfully accommodates diverse learning styles, despite time-management constraints that limit collaborative activities. Product differentiation through varied assessment methods demonstrates commitment to fair evaluation, though maintaining consistent standards across different outputs presents ongoing challenges. Environment differentiation successfully creates supportive classroom climates, aligning with both pedagogical and Islamic educational values.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge to enhance the implementation of differentiated learning. Teachers should continue developing their expertise in assessment strategies and classroom management through professional development, while engaging in peer collaboration through lesson study groups. School administrators must provide structural support through adequate resources, flexible scheduling, and reduced class sizes. Additionally, curriculum developers and policymakers should offer clear implementation guidelines, practical examples, and training programs that bridge theory and practice. Success in differentiated learning requires collaborative effort among educators, administrators, and policymakers to create an educational environment that effectively nurtures diverse student potential.

In summary, the successful implementation of differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum is a shared responsibility. Teachers, schools, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners must collaborate to create an educational environment that recognizes and nurtures the diverse potential of every student.

This study had several limitations. It involved only one school and a small number of participants, so the findings may not represent broader contexts. The study relied solely on interview data, without classroom observations. Future research is suggested to include more schools and participants, as well as additional data sources such as observations or student feedback, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of differentiated learning practices.

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