

Exploring the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Vocational English Classrooms

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore the challenges an English teacher faces in implementing differentiated instruction in a vocational English classroom. The study was conducted at a Muhammadiyah vocational high school in Ambon, Indonesia, using a qualitative single-case study design, as described by Yin (2014). The participant in this study was an English teacher with experience teaching in a vocational context. Data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to the challenges the teacher encountered. The findings reveal that the teacher experienced several significant challenges in implementing differentiated instruction. These include a lack of professional training, limited theoretical understanding of differentiated instruction, and difficulty in conducting initial assessments of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In addition, the teacher faced challenges in differentiating instruction, particularly in grouping students and providing varied student products. The study also found that traditional teaching habits and mindset contributed to the difficulty in adopting differentiated practices. Overall, the findings suggest that while there is an awareness of differentiated instruction, its implementation remains limited and not fully aligned with its theoretical principles. This study highlights the importance of providing professional development and practical support to help teachers effectively implement differentiated instruction in vocational English classrooms.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction; English Language Teaching; Qualitative Case Study; Teacher Challenges; Vocational English Classroom

Introduction

Student diversity is an inevitable reality in today's educational landscape. Students come from different backgrounds and possess varying abilities, interests, and learning styles. This diversity must be acknowledged and addressed within the educational process. Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' futures; therefore, teachers are required to facilitate learning in ways that respond to students' diverse needs. As stated by (Tomlinson, 2017), effective teaching requires responsiveness to learner differences, emphasizing that "students learn best when instruction is tailored to their readiness, interests, and learning profiles." This highlights the importance of adopting instructional approaches that accommodate diversity, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all method.

In this context, differentiated instruction has emerged as a powerful and relevant approach. Differentiated instruction recognizes individual variations among students and aims to provide learning experiences tailored to their needs. According to (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019), differentiated instruction significantly improves student engagement and learning outcomes when implemented systematically. Similarly, (Whitley et al., 2019) emphasize that inclusive and differentiated practices are essential for creating equitable learning environments that support all learners. These perspectives reinforce that differentiated instruction is not merely an alternative strategy, but a necessity in modern classrooms to ensure meaningful and effective learning experiences.

Furthermore, students differ in their levels of ability, learning pace, and readiness to understand learning materials. Some students grasp concepts quickly, while others require more time and support. If teachers apply uniform teaching strategies without considering these differences, it may result in unequal learning opportunities. As argued by (Deunk et al., 2018), the lack of differentiation in classrooms can lead to learning gaps, where high-achieving students are insufficiently challenged, and lower-achieving students struggle to keep up. Therefore, differentiated instruction serves as a solution to ensure that each student receives optimal learning opportunities aligned with their abilities and needs.

The primary goal of differentiated instruction is to create an inclusive, equitable, and meaningful learning environment in which every student feels valued and supported. In this approach, teachers not only focus on delivering content but also on facilitating students' learning processes. According to (Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2019), differentiated instruction enhances both student achievement and motivation by aligning teaching strategies with learners' individual differences. This demonstrates that differentiated instruction contributes not only to addressing classroom diversity but also to improving overall learning quality and outcomes.

Differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in designing and delivering instruction. (Tomlinson, 2001), in *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, identifies three key aspects of student learning needs: readiness, interest, and learning profile. Students tend to perform better when tasks align with their current level of understanding (readiness), stimulate their curiosity (interest), and match their preferred ways of learning (learning profile). In addition, differentiation can be applied through three main components: content, process, and product. Content differentiation involves adjusting learning materials based on students' levels of understanding. Process differentiation focuses on using varied teaching methods and strategies. Product differentiation allows students to demonstrate their learning in different ways. These components are essential in ensuring that instruction meets diverse learner needs effectively.

In the context of Vocational High Schools (SMK), student diversity becomes even more complex due to differences in academic abilities, interests, learning styles, and vocational specializations. Each major requires specific knowledge and skills, which influence how students engage with general subjects, including English. For instance, students in Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) need to master technical English related to software and networking, while students in Electrical Power Installation Engineering (TITL) require comprehension of manuals and safety procedures in English. Similarly, Architecture students engage with design-related terminology, and Accounting students must understand business and financial English. As noted by (Widodo, 2016) and further supported by (Poedjiastutie and Oliver, 2017), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is highly relevant in vocational education, as it aligns language learning with students' professional needs. This highlights the necessity for adaptive teaching approaches, such as differentiated instruction, in vocational English classrooms.

However, despite its importance, teaching English in vocational schools presents several challenges. One major issue is students' low motivation and interest in learning English. (Johnson, 2017) stated that vocational students tend to prioritize technical skills over language learning, as they perceive technical competencies as more directly relevant to their future careers. Recent studies also support this claim. For instance, (Lamb and Arisandy, 2020) found that Indonesian students often exhibit low motivation in learning English due to a lack of perceived relevance to their immediate goals. This creates a significant challenge for teachers in designing engaging and meaningful English learning experiences that can motivate students.

In addition to student-related challenges, teachers also face difficulties in implementing effective instructional strategies. Many teachers struggle to design innovative and meaningful learning experiences, particularly when applying differentiated instruction. This issue is evident in Muhammadiyah Vocational School Ambon, where preliminary findings indicate that although differentiated instruction has been introduced in the curriculum, its implementation remains inconsistent and lacks structured application, especially in English classes. According to (Suprayogi et al., 2017), one of the main barriers to implementing differentiated instruction is teachers' limited understanding and practical knowledge of how to apply it effectively in classroom settings.

Despite the growing recognition of differentiated instruction, there is still limited research focusing specifically on its implementation in vocational English classrooms, particularly in the Indonesian context. Most existing studies discuss differentiated instruction in general education settings, leaving a gap in understanding how it is applied in vocational schools with highly specialized learning needs. This gap highlights the urgency of conducting research that explores not only the implementation of differentiated instruction but also the challenges faced by teachers in applying it.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the implementation of differentiated instruction in vocational English classrooms at Muhammadiyah Vocational School Ambon, focusing on how teaching practices align with differentiated instruction principles and identifying the challenges faced by teachers. Given this context, the researcher has chosen the topic: **"Exploring the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Vocational English Classrooms."**

Literature Review

Definition of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiation originates from the verb *differentiate*, derived from the Latin word *differentia*, meaning "difference" or "distinction." Initially, the term referred to the act of making something distinct from other comparable entities, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary. In educational contexts, this concept has evolved into what is now known as differentiated instruction (DI), a teaching approach that emphasizes adapting instruction to meet diverse student needs.

Carol Ann Tomlinson is widely recognized as a key figure in the development of differentiated instruction. She emphasizes that effective teaching requires adjusting instructional strategies based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). This perspective positions differentiated instruction as a student-centered approach aimed at enhancing motivation and engagement. Similarly, Anggraeny and Dewi (2023) argue that differentiated instruction helps teachers create more effective classrooms by accommodating diverse learning styles and aligning instruction with students' needs.

While these perspectives highlight the benefits of DI, they also reveal a common emphasis on its flexibility and responsiveness. However, Marlina (2020) extends this understanding by conceptualizing DI as a cyclical process that begins with identifying students' needs and continuously adapting instruction. This view is supported by Puspitasari et al. (2020), who emphasize that DI provides practical strategies such as varied materials, interactive activities, and differentiated tasks to address diverse student abilities.

Despite these similarities, differences emerge in how scholars conceptualize the implementation of DI. For instance, Anggraeny and Dewi (2023) focus on classroom effectiveness, whereas Marlina (2020) highlights the process-oriented nature of DI. Meanwhile, Puspitasari et al. (2020) emphasize practical classroom strategies. This indicates that although DI is widely recognized, there is still variation in how it is understood and applied, suggesting a need for more context-specific studies, particularly in vocational education settings.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), differentiated instruction becomes even more crucial. Students often have varying levels of language proficiency and learning preferences, making uniform instruction ineffective. Therefore, DI offers a way to ensure that all learners receive appropriate support. However, despite its theoretical advantages, its practical implementation—especially in vocational English classrooms—remains underexplored, highlighting a significant research gap.

In Indonesia, differentiated instruction has gained increasing attention, particularly with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum as part of post-pandemic educational reform. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2021) introduced DI through the Sekolah Penggerak Program, followed by broader implementation in the Merdeka Curriculum (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This policy shift reflects a move toward more personalized and inclusive learning. However, while policy support exists, previous studies have shown that teachers often face challenges in translating these principles into classroom practice, indicating a gap between policy and implementation.

Core Components of Differentiated Instruction (Readiness, Interest, Learning Profile)

Tomlinson (2001, 2003) identifies three key components of differentiated instruction: readiness, interest, and learning profile. These components serve as the foundation for designing responsive teaching strategies.

Readiness

Readiness refers to students' current level of knowledge, understanding, and skills (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers are expected to assess students' prior knowledge and adjust instructional complexity accordingly (Tomlinson, 2001). Students with lower readiness require more structured support, while advanced learners benefit from more complex and abstract tasks.

This concept aligns with Vygotsky's (1986) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively when tasks are slightly above students' current ability levels. However, while Tomlinson focuses on instructional adjustment, Vygotsky emphasizes cognitive development, suggesting that DI integrates both pedagogical and psychological perspectives.

Interest

Interest refers to students' curiosity and preferences in learning (Tomlinson, 1999). When learning activities align with students' interests, they are more engaged and motivated (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Maslow, 1962). Tomlinson (2001) further emphasizes that interest plays a key role in increasing student involvement.

While these theories highlight the importance of motivation, they differ in focus. Maslow (1962) emphasizes basic human needs, whereas Csikszentmihalyi (1990) focuses on intrinsic motivation and flow. DI integrates these perspectives by using interest as a tool to enhance engagement in learning.

Learning Profile

Learning profile refers to how students learn best, including their learning styles, cultural background, and cognitive preferences (Tomlinson, 2001). Research by Sternberg et al. (1998) and Campbell and Campbell (1999) suggests that students perform better when instruction aligns with their preferred learning modes.

However, some scholars argue that learning styles should not be rigidly categorized, as this may limit instructional flexibility. Therefore, DI should not merely classify learners but provide multiple learning pathways to accommodate diversity.

Dimensions of Differentiated Instruction (Content, Process, Product)

Differentiated instruction is implemented through three main dimensions: content, process, and product (Tomlinson, 1999, 2001, 2003). These dimensions translate theoretical principles into practical classroom strategies.

Content Differentiation

Content refers to what students learn. Teachers modify materials based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. For example, students with different proficiency levels may receive varied materials or scaffolding strategies.

Pozas et al. (2020) argue that content differentiation promotes inclusive learning by providing multiple pathways to understanding. However, while content differentiation is widely supported, its implementation requires careful planning to ensure that all students achieve the same learning objectives despite using different materials.

Process Differentiation

Process refers to how students learn. Tomlinson (2001) emphasizes flexible grouping, allowing students to work in different groups based on readiness, interests, or learning profiles.

This approach supports collaborative learning and promotes social interaction. However, some studies suggest that process differentiation can be challenging for teachers due to time constraints and classroom management issues. This indicates that while theoretically effective, its practical application requires strong teacher competence.

Product Differentiation

Product refers to how students demonstrate their learning. Students may produce different outputs such as essays, presentations, or projects based on their abilities and preferences (Tomlinson, 2001).

Product differentiation encourages creativity and autonomy. However, it also raises challenges in assessment, as teachers must ensure fairness and consistency when evaluating diverse outputs. This highlights the need for clear assessment criteria in DI implementation.

Principles of Differentiated Instruction

Tomlinson, as cited in Fitri (2024), outlines five key principles of differentiated instruction: learning environment, quality curriculum, ongoing assessment, responsive teaching, and classroom management.

These principles emphasize that DI is not only about instructional strategies but also about creating a supportive learning ecosystem. Ab Hajis and Othman (2024) further highlight the importance of an inclusive learning environment that promotes respect and equal opportunities.

However, while these principles are theoretically comprehensive, their practical implementation often depends on teachers' competence and institutional support. This suggests that successful DI requires not only understanding but also professional development and systemic support.

Vocational English Classroom Context

In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject and is considered an international language (Lie, 2009; Kasihani, 2010). However, English instruction in vocational schools differs significantly from general education due to its focus on specific professional needs.

Vocational English is closely related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which tailors language instruction to learners' professional contexts (Widodo, 2014). This approach emphasizes functional language use, contextualized learning, and practical application.

Compared to general English instruction, Vocational English requires:

1. Specific language skills for professional tasks
2. Mastery of technical terminology
3. Practical, real-world application

This distinction highlights the importance of differentiated instruction in vocational contexts. While ESP provides content relevance, DI ensures that instruction is accessible to students with varying abilities and learning needs.

However, despite the compatibility between ESP and DI, previous studies rarely integrate these two approaches explicitly. This creates a research gap, particularly in understanding how differentiated instruction is implemented in vocational English classrooms.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Overall, previous studies agree that differentiated instruction is an effective approach for addressing student diversity. However, differences exist in how DI is conceptualized and implemented. Some studies focus on theoretical frameworks (Tomlinson), while others emphasize practical strategies (Puspitasari et al., 2020) or policy implementation (Kemendikbudristek, 2021, 2022).

Despite extensive research on DI, there is still limited exploration of its implementation in vocational English contexts, particularly in Indonesia. Moreover, few studies examine the challenges teachers face in applying DI in real classroom settings.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the implementation of differentiated instruction in vocational English classrooms and identifying the challenges faced by teachers. This research is expected to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical application of DI in vocational education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to obtain in-depth and meaningful data. According to Sugiyono (2015), qualitative methods are used to explore data that contain meaning and to understand phenomena in natural settings. This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore deeply how differentiated instruction is implemented in vocational English classrooms, particularly at SMK Muhammadiyah Ambon. Rather than measuring effectiveness quantitatively, the study focused on understanding teaching practices, strategies, and challenges from the participant's perspective. As stated by Sugiyono, as cited in Mustafa et al. (2022), qualitative research is descriptive in nature, emphasizing interpretation over measurement.

This study adopted a **single case study design** to investigate one specific case in depth, namely an English teacher in a vocational school. A case study is a qualitative approach used to gain a comprehensive understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011). Bloomberg and Volpe (2022) also note that case study is one of the most widely used qualitative methods in social sciences due to its ability to address practical and theoretical issues.

Case study design is particularly appropriate when the research focuses on “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2018). Yin (2017) further explains that a single case study is suitable when the researcher investigates a specific individual or bounded system in detail. Therefore, this design was selected to allow an in-depth exploration of differentiated instruction practices and challenges within a specific vocational English classroom context.

Participants

The participant of this study was one English teacher at a vocational high school in Ambon, Indonesia. The participant was selected using **purposive sampling**, based on criteria relevant to the research objectives. The teacher had more than five years of teaching experience and had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum. Although the teacher had applied some elements of differentiated instruction, they had not received formal training in this approach. This criterion enabled the researcher to capture authentic classroom practices and the teacher's natural understanding of differentiated instruction.

Research Instruments

This study used three instruments: **classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.**

1. **Classroom Observation**

Observation was conducted to obtain direct evidence of teaching practices in the classroom. It focused on identifying elements of differentiated instruction, particularly in terms of content, process, and product.

2. **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews served as the primary instrument to explore the teacher's experiences and challenges.

This format allowed flexibility for follow-up questions, enabling deeper insights into the participant's perceptions and instructional decisions.

3. Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to examine lesson plans and student assignments. This helped verify whether classroom practices were aligned with differentiated instruction principles and provided triangulated evidence.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in three stages to ensure systematic and comprehensive data gathering.

1. Observation Stage

Initial classroom observations were conducted to understand the teaching and learning process and identify preliminary differentiated instruction practices.

2. Interview Stage

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to explore the teacher's challenges in greater depth. Guiding questions were used while allowing flexibility for elaboration.

3. Document Analysis Stage

Relevant documents, such as lesson plans and student work, were analyzed to support and validate findings from observations and interviews.

To minimize bias and control external variables, data were collected within the same instructional period and classroom context. Additionally, triangulation across observation, interview, and document data was applied to ensure consistency and credibility.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using **thematic analysis** following Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allows the identification of patterns and themes within qualitative data.

The analysis involved the following steps:

1. **Familiarization** – Reading and reviewing all data from observations, interviews, and documents.
2. **Generating Initial Codes** – Identifying significant statements related to differentiated instruction and its challenges.
3. **Searching for Themes** – Grouping codes into broader categories.
4. **Reviewing Themes** – Ensuring themes accurately represented the data.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes** – Clearly describing each theme.
6. **Reporting** – Presenting findings in a coherent narrative.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the quality of the research, several strategies were applied:

- 1) **Credibility**: Achieved through data triangulation (observation, interviews, documents).

- 2) **Transferability:** Provided through detailed descriptions of the research context.
- 3) **Dependability:** Ensured by maintaining a clear and consistent research procedure.
- 4) **Confirmability:** Supported by basing findings on actual data rather than researcher bias.

Synthesis Improvement (Critical Note)

Unlike purely descriptive methodologies, this study integrates multiple data sources and applies triangulation to strengthen validity. While previous qualitative studies often rely heavily on interviews, this study combines observation and document analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding. This approach reduces subjectivity and enhances the reliability of findings, particularly in exploring classroom-based instructional practices.

Results

The findings of this study reveal several key challenges faced by the teacher in implementing differentiated instruction in a vocational English classroom. These challenges emerged from the analysis of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

1. Lack of Professional Training

The study found that the teacher had not received formal training related to differentiated instruction. As a result, the teacher relied on personal understanding and informal practices, which limited the effectiveness of implementation.

2. Limited Understanding of Differentiated Instruction

Although the teacher attempted to apply differentiated instruction, their understanding of its core principles—such as readiness, interest, and learning profile—was still limited. This led to instructional practices that appeared differentiated on the surface but were not fully aligned with theoretical concepts.

3. Difficulty in Conducting Initial Assessment

The teacher experienced challenges in conducting initial or diagnostic assessments to identify students' needs. Consequently, lesson planning was not based on accurate information about students' readiness levels.

4. Challenges in Grouping and Differentiating Student Products

The findings also indicate that student grouping was not consistently based on differentiated criteria. In addition, student outputs (products) tended to be uniform, showing limited variation in task design and assessment.

5. Influence of Teacher Mindset

The study revealed that the teacher still relied on traditional teaching approaches. This mindset influenced the implementation of differentiated instruction, making it less flexible and less responsive to student diversity.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several challenges that are closely related to both theoretical and practical aspects of differentiated instruction.

First, the lack of professional training identified in this study is consistent with previous research indicating that teachers often struggle to implement differentiated instruction due to limited access to professional

development. Without adequate training, teachers may find it difficult to translate theoretical concepts into effective classroom practices.

Second, the teacher's limited understanding of differentiated instruction supports Tomlinson's view that effective implementation requires a deep understanding of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In this study, the teacher's partial understanding resulted in practices that resembled differentiation but did not fully align with its theoretical foundations.

Third, the difficulty in conducting initial assessment highlights a critical gap between theory and practice. In differentiated instruction, assessment plays a central role in identifying students' needs before planning instruction. However, the absence of systematic assessment in this study made it difficult for the teacher to design appropriate and targeted learning strategies.

Furthermore, the issue of grouping and the uniformity of student products indicate that process and product differentiation were not optimally implemented. This reflects a broader challenge in applying differentiated instruction, where teachers may understand the concept but struggle with its practical execution in classroom settings.

Finally, the influence of teacher mindset underscores that implementing differentiated instruction is not only a matter of knowledge and skills but also of willingness to change. The persistence of traditional teaching practices suggests that educational innovation requires both cognitive understanding and behavioral transformation. This finding aligns with the view that meaningful educational change depends on teachers' readiness to adopt new approaches and move beyond conventional methods.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by an English teacher in implementing differentiated instruction in a vocational English classroom. The findings revealed several key challenges, including a lack of professional training, limited theoretical understanding, difficulty in conducting initial assessment, constraints in differentiating learning processes and products, and the persistence of a traditional teaching mindset. These findings indicate a clear gap between the theoretical principles of differentiated instruction and its practical implementation, particularly in vocational education contexts where student diversity is highly complex.

Based on these findings, it is essential for teachers to enhance their pedagogical competence, especially in conducting diagnostic assessments and designing varied instructional strategies. Schools and educational institutions are also expected to provide structured training, ongoing support, and collaborative forums such as professional learning communities to facilitate effective implementation. Furthermore, future research is recommended to involve broader participants and varied contexts to deepen understanding of differentiated instruction practices and develop more practical implementation models.

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