English Teachers' Strategies in Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Three Public Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of English teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka at three public senior high schools in Yogyakarta. It focuses on the strategies applied by the teachers in differentiating content, processes, and products. This research employed a phenomenography design by observing the learning process, interviewing the teachers, and analyzing teachers' lesson plans. A purposive sampling method was used to opt the sample of this study. The sample was three English teachers from different schools in Yogyakarta (SMA N 1 Yogyakarta, SMA N 3 Yogyakarta, and SMA N 6 Yogyakarta). The findings reveal that teachers used various strategies to implement DI. They differentiate content by presenting material in multiple forms, using texts of varying difficulty levels, and incorporating diverse resources. Regarding process differentiation, teachers employ strategies such as group discussions and allowing students to choose their preferred working arrangements. Then, students can choose topics and forms for product differentiation to express their ideas, skills, and knowledge. The findings of this study offer meaningful insight that can assist educators in implementing DI, especially in senior high schools.

Keywords: English Teachers' Strategies; Differentiated Instruction (DI); Public Senior High School

Introduction

Curriculum is a vital element of the education system. It is a framework that compiles and directs the education system in an institution so that the same goals can be achieved (Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022). Thus, periodic curriculum adjustments are not unavoidable as they must effectively address the demands of the current era. Indonesia has undergone multiple shifts and is transitioning from Curriculum 2013 to the Merdeka Curriculum. The modification is based on recent legislation enacted by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which is based on an educational philosophy devised by Ki Hadjar Dewantara.

According to Marwah et al. (2018), Ki Hadjar Dewantara's education approach focuses on developing individuals with positive character traits and fostering a commitment to lifelong learning. Implementing the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes developing learners' comprehensive skills and character. It allows learners to select learning paths aligned with their interests, talents, and needs (Nurzen, 2022). Nahdhiah et al. (2024) add that in implementing Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are

expected to prioritize academic learning while considering the development of students' social and emotional well-being. Therefore, Merdeka Curriculum suggests that teachers apply differentiated teaching methods called Differentiated Instruction (DI).

DI is an educational approach in which teachers adapt their instructional methods to accommodate the diverse needs of students within the classroom (Ying et al., 2022). It can be impacted by various factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, students' skills, religious orientation, socio-economic background, family status, and other forms of diversity (Ginja & Chen, 2020). Pozas et al. (2022) add that the diversity among students may also stem from their social, cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics. Teachers who embrace these philosophical principles must actively adapt their lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students (Tomlinson, 2017). Teachers can address these needs by modifying various elements of their lessons, including the content students engage with, the instructional methods and learning processes, the learning environment, and the outcomes or products students produce to show their understanding. Hence, the implementation of DI is also suggested in English classrooms.

Prior research has demonstrated that implementing DI in English classrooms benefits students and teachers. It increased students' motivation, improved their relationships with friends and teachers, and narrowed the gap among students (Abdillah et al., 2022). Ayuningtyas et al. (2023) add that DI also improves students' English skills (reading, speaking, listening, and writing). This literature review demonstrates that differentiated instruction positively impacts students' reading abilities, enhancing vocabulary, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, and comprehension. Regarding speaking skills, researchers assert that differentiated instruction improves students' English-speaking abilities, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Furthermore, in the context of listening, the studies suggest that differentiated instruction improves students' listening skills, particularly in sound recognition, vocabulary, comprehension, and grammar. Lastly, the review highlights that differentiated instruction positively influences students' writing skills, encompassing mechanics, grammar, and vocabulary.

Even though the implementation of DI provides many benefits for students and teachers, the implementation of DI in Indonesian schools is still limited. The implementation of DI is prioritized for schools at *Sekolah Penggerak* program, in which the teachers get training for implementing DI. Therefore, conducting this study is critical for enriching teacher knowledge and providing further guidance in adopting DI, particularly in the English classroom.

This study explores English teacher strategies for implementing differentiated instruction in the classroom by identifying teachers' methods to individualize content, process, and product in the learning process. The findings of this study will offer practical guidance for the teacher to implement DI in their classroom.

Method

This study aims to understand the current situation regarding implementing differentiated Instruction (DI). DI is a multi-faceted and complex teaching and learning process that educators can interpret differently in diverse contexts. To capture such diversity, researchers employed a qualitative approach using phenomenography design. Phenomenography is a suitable qualitative approach for uncovering how a group of individuals perceives a particular phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used a purposive sampling method to select participants with prior experience in implementing DI in their classrooms. The participants were three English teachers from different public senior high schools in Yogyakarta province. They were English teacher at SMA N I Yogyakarta, SMA N 3 Yogyakarta, and SMA N 6 Yogyakarta.

Furthermore, to get a comprehensive understanding of the teacher's experience in applying DI in the classroom, the researcher used three instruments: observation of the learning process, interview with

the teacher, and document analysis. In observation, the researcher attends the participants' instruction activity, which takes 45-90 minutes for every session. Fix et al. (2022) asserted that the frequency of collecting data through direct observations depends on the data needed to get supportive and accurate answers through observation tools. During the process, the researcher obverse the process and used an observation checklist. The observation checklist was developed from Tomlinson & Imbeau (2023) theory about how teachers implement DI in terms of content, process and product.

Furthermore, a semi-structured interview was also used as the research instrument to gather insights from the teacher's perspective in implementing DI in the classroom. The questions focused on the teachers' strategies for differentiating content, process, and product in the learning process. The interviews, which lasted 10 to 15 minutes, were conducted in Indonesian to prevent misunderstandings that could arise from using English. In addition, the researcher also employed document analysis by examining teachers' lesson plans and students' artifacts.

Through these instruments, the researcher aimed to answer three primary research questions: (1) How do English teachers' strategies differentiate instruction in terms of content? (2) How do English teachers' strategies differentiate instruction in terms of process? (3) How do English teachers' strategies differentiate instruction regarding products?

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was divided into three stages: 1) the data from observation, which consists of teacher strategies in implementing DI in English classrooms, analyzed using classroom discourse analysis 2) the data from interviews with the participants analyzed by thematic analysis technique based on Braun and Clarke (2006) theory; 3) the data document from teachers' lesson plan and students' artifact also analyze by Braun and Clarke (2006) theory.

There are six stages in analyzing data based on Braun and Clarke (2006) theory: 1) The researcher transcribed the interview results into written form, closely examining the content to fully understand it and identify the most appropriate codes for each data segment. 2) After understanding the data, the researcher created initial codes by categorizing the data and linking these codes to corresponding data extracts. 3) The researcher identified overarching themes and categorized irrelevant codes into potential themes. 4) The researcher assessed the themes to determine if they effectively presented a compelling narrative about the data and began describing the characteristics of each theme. 5) The researcher defined and named the themes, analyzing their interrelationships to see if there were any connections between them. 6) Producing the report: in this final phase, the researcher compiled a coherent and compelling report, integrating the results of data analysis.

Result and Discussion

Result

Research question 1: How do English teachers' strategies to differentiate instruction in terms of content?

Related to the research questions, the data results identified several strategies used by the teacher to differentiate content. Table 1 illustrates the themes related to differentiated content strategies applied by the teacher.

Table 1. Content Differentiating Strategies Applied by the Teacher

Theme	Descriptions
1.	Teachers present material in different modes.
2.	Teachers distinguish content by using varied levels of difficulty.
3.	Teachers differentiate content by providing varied text.

Theme 1 in Table 1 indicates that teachers differentiate content by presenting material in different modes. The teacher utilized some modes to present content: video, PowerPoint, LKPD, textbook, and quizzes (students' learning style). For example, the interviewee said that.

"For content, I usually do it per KD, eeeh, not per KD, per indicator, for example, indicator A, I use videos, indicator B does not give quizzes, Indicator C, wait, I will give you what it is called, I will give them a voice note, so I will change it. There are various ways to provide content, you know." **(Teacher 3)**

Theme 2 of this study explored how teachers distinguish content by designing it for different difficulty levels based on pre-assessment results. The teacher differentiates content into 3 levels of difficulty (high, medium and low level), as highlighted in the following excerpt:

"So there are check questions, then I usually give eee "vocab" questions, if many students say it, then they are given a more difficult level. There are three levels 1,2,3, the highest score gets an A, the lowest score gets C." **(Teacher 2)**

"There are the most difficult ones, for example there is listening where you are asked to make a mind map, that is the highest level, if there are medium questions, then there are questions directly answering questions based on that question, so the easiest level is fill in the blank, you are both listening, the text is the same, but the activities are different." **(Teacher 2)**

Furthermore, the teacher also provides the learning material on some topics, as reflected in the following excerpts:

"As you see in my classroom before, I provide the learning material in some topics, like Komodo Dragon for animal, Mangrove Tree (plant), Tana Toraja (place) and Earthquake (natural phenomenon) and students allow to opt the theme based on their interest" **(Teacher 1)**

Therefore, the teacher can apply some strategies to differentiate content, such as designing learning material in various themes, forms, and difficulties.

Research question 2: How do English teachers' strategies in differentiate instruction in terms of process?

The study explores teachers' methods of individualizing the learning process. Through qualitative analysis, two key themes emerged from teachers' differentiated learning process techniques, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Process Differentiating Strategies Applied by the Teacher

Theme	Descriptions
1.	Group discussion
2.	Choice of working arrangement

In theme 1, teachers differentiate the learning process by grouping strategies. Teachers differentiate the learning process by assigning students to some group during the learning process. Students were allowed to choose the group member and the topic they wanted to discuss. The students can choose topics such as plants, animals, places and natural phenomena.

In theme 2. showed that educators also differentiate the learning process by choice of working arrangement. Students could choose where to finish the assignment during the learning process. They can complete their assignment in or outside the classroom on the chair or floor. It is shown in the script.

> *"So, it is not that student has to come to me. However, when it comes to discussions, there are groups there, there. Report to me, miss, I want to do it over there, okay. There, okay, it is important, I know you're working over there. Later I'll walk to Tambun. " What difficulties do you have, okay, where does the process end?".* **(Teacher 3)**

These reflections illustrate that the teacher can use some strategies to differentiate the learning process, such as group discussion and working arrangement.

Research question 3: How do English teachers' strategies differentiate instruction regarding products?

The last aspect the researcher intended to discuss in this study was differentiating products. The data reveals that the teacher implemented two strategies to differentiate product in implementing DI, as seen in the table below.

Table 3. Product Differentiating Strategies Applied by the Teacher

Theme	Descriptions
1.	Students are allowed to choose the topic.
2.	Students can choose the mode of expressing knowledge, ideas, and skills.

In theme 1, teachers differentiate products by allowing students to choose the theme they want to discuss. For example, in the Teacher 1 classroom, it can be seen that the teacher gives some topics in the report text, such as animals, plants, places, and natural phenomena. Students can discuss the issue and use the form to present their ideas. It can be in the form of video, photographic or PowerPoint slides. Allowing students to choose the mode and topic of a product gives some benefits, like students produce high-quality products, as supported by other teachers below:

> *"Haaah, if there are five Recountkan, I will let them choose which one they want, whether they want sharing experiences or fiction, or imaginative experiences, whatever they want. "So, so that they feel comfortable, if they choose, they will end up being serious and doing it to the maximum because it suits their interests and their abilities."* **(Teacher 3)**

As stated above, teachers believed that allowing students to select the topic or theme based on students' interests and abilities would motivate them to maximize their potential in creating the project.

Discussion

The findings of the data collection technique revealed three themes: 1) English teacher strategy in differentiating content, 2) English teacher strategy in differentiating process, and 3) English teacher strategy in differentiating product. One of the most significant outcomes of the study is that teachers differentiate content in three ways: presenting material in different forms, different levels of difficulty, and different text themes, which is in line with Sukarno et al. (2024) study. The teacher utilized some modes to present the material, such as video, text, and PowerPoint. It means that teachers differentiate content based on students' learning profiles. As elaborated by Abella et al. (2022) and Riandi (2022), suiting the way materials are presented to students' styles can potentially foster knowledge immersion as their senses are better stimulated.

The study also found that teachers implement DI by differentiating processes based on student's interests and learning profiles. Based on observation, the teacher used two ways to differentiate the process: grouping and choice of working arrangement. Teacher strategies in differentiated processes are

in line with the theory proposed by (Zelalem et al., 2022), which outlines several strategies for effective process differentiation, including using tiered activities (tasks with varying levels of difficulty but aimed at achieving the same fundamental learning goals); providing task directions that are detailed and specific for some learners while remaining more open for others; offering resource materials at different levels of readability and complexity; varying the pacing of student work; and encouraging both collaborative and independent work. In this study, the teacher differentiates the process by grouping students based on their interests. Besides, the teacher allows students to choose where to finish their project on the floor or chair, in or outside the classroom, which aligns with Tomlinson's theory.

Furthermore, teachers differentiate products by allowing students to choose the topic and allowing students to choose the mode of expressing knowledge, ideas, and skills. This study was in line with Taylor's (2015) theory; he stated that differentiating products means that students have a choice in how they demonstrate what they have learned. Teachers believed that by affording students the freedom to create products based on personal interest and readiness levels, they fostered a climate conducive to high-quality outcomes, as students exhibited increased motivation and engagement in their work.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that teachers employed various strategies to differentiate content, process, and product. Content differentiation primarily involved presenting material in diverse formats (videos, text, PowerPoint), adjusting difficulty levels, and varying text themes to cater to students' learning styles. This approach aligns with research highlighting the importance of multi-sensory learning experiences. Process differentiation focused on strategies such as grouping students based on their interests and providing flexible working arrangements (choice of workspace). These strategies mirror established DI principles, emphasizing accommodating diverse learning paces and preferences. Product differentiation empowered students by allowing them to choose their project topics and select the mode of expressing their learning (e.g., presentations, essays, artwork). This approach fosters student ownership and motivation, encouraging deeper engagement and higher-quality outcomes.

Overall, the study demonstrates that English teachers in Indonesian public senior high schools implement key aspects of differentiated instruction. However, further research is necessary to investigate the impact of these strategies on student learning outcomes and to explore the challenges and supports teachers encounter in effectively implementing DI within their classrooms.

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