

Original Research

Differentiated Instruction Strategies to Enhance EFL Learning in A Mixed-Proficiency Seventh-Grade Classroom

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**Abstract**

In the context of EFL in Indonesian junior high schools, classrooms often comprise students with mixed proficiency levels. This poses challenges due to the heterogeneity in their initial proficiency. This study explored the practical implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) strategies in a seventh-grade English class with mixed competency levels and investigated students' perceptions of the implementation in terms of its efficacy and acceptability. This study was conducted in four weeks and involved thirty-one seventh-grade students from a public Junior High School in Yogyakarta. Data were collected using a questionnaire, observation field notes, semi-structured interviews, and teaching-learning artifacts. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while thematic approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data. The findings showed that various DI strategies were implemented across the three learning dimensions, i.e. content, process, and product. Students generally had positive perceptions of the DI strategies as they had better learning experiences, enhanced learning motivation, and improved collaboration skills. The mean score for student satisfaction was high ($M = 4.22$), with product differentiation receiving the highest rating ($M = 4.48$). However, a concern was raised regarding the mixed-proficiency grouping. These findings suggest that carefully-designed DI strategies could enhance students' learning experiences and minimize challenges in EFL mixed-proficiency classrooms. This study provides insights into practical implementation of DI in secondary-level EFL contexts. It also suggests that instructional practices in diverse EFL classrooms should be improved.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, classrooms generally comprise diverse learners (Liu & Nelson, 2017; McBain, 2018). This is because naturally, every learner is unique and different in various aspects, including personalities, cognitive abilities, learning preferences, and social development (Gayle, 2013). This diversity is evident in EFL classrooms, where students bring a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Liu & Nelson, 2017). An EFL classroom may include accelerated students, struggling learners, and individuals with different learning modalities, such as auditory, visual, or kinesthetic preferences (Cabual, 2021). Additionally, these differences are influenced by the varying types of intelligence identified by (Gardner, 1987), wherein some students may excel in one type of intelligence but not in others. Furthermore, students' distinctive characteristics and learning abilities are shaped by their previous educational experiences (Gayle, 2013).

The latter argument is particularly relevant in the context of seventh-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in Indonesian junior high schools. The English proficiency of seventh-grade students in Indonesian schools varies, ranging from A1 to B1 (Abdullah et al., 2023; Meisani et al., 2020), influenced by factors such as school quality and geographical location. Among other factors, this variation in English proficiency is affected by the students' previous English learning experiences at their respective primary schools. Some students come from public schools that follow the national curriculum, while others attend private schools that may adhere to either the national curriculum or alternative non-standard curricula. This creates gaps in students' English proficiency. Other than that, differences in students' English proficiency can also be attributed to their different areas of origin. Research indicates that students in urban areas generally possess better English proficiency compared to their rural counterparts (Almansour, 2022; Hossain, 2016; Urbonienė & Koverienė, 2017). This gap is likely due to the greater opportunities for exposure to and practice of the language available to urban students, opportunities which are often limited for rural students (Fu & Liu, 2024).

In the Indonesian context, the teaching of English varies significantly across primary schools. According to the current Indonesian curricula, specifically the 2013 curriculum (hereafter K-13) and the Freedom Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka, hereafter Kumer), English is not a mandatory subject in primary education (Alfarisy, 2021; Oktavia et al., 2023). Under K-13, English is not included as a primary school subject, while in Kumer, English is recommended only as an elective subject (Oktavia et al., 2023). Consequently, it is common for English not to be taught at all, particularly in public primary schools. However, in some public primary schools, English is offered as a local-content subject for higher-grade students, specifically in grades 4, 5, and 6 (Meisani et al., 2020). In contrast, English is typically taught in most private primary schools, particularly those that adopt non-standard national curricula, such as Montessori or International programs. In fact, each primary school has the authority to establish its own policies regarding the provision of English instruction (Alfarisy, 2021; Sutarsyah, 2017). As a consequence, it is inevitable that students entering their first year of junior high school will exhibit highly diverse levels of English proficiency.

In one of the seventh-grade classrooms at the school where this research was conducted, some students have very limited or nearly no knowledge of English, while a small number of other students possess fluent and natural proficiency in both written and spoken English. According to information obtained from the English teacher, this situation is influenced by the students' learning at their primary schools. Due to the implementation of the school zoning program (*program zonasi sekolah*), the school does not have full authority to select students based on their academic competence. Instead, the school is required to accept students residing in the local area, regardless of their academic achievement. The student intake reflects varied initial academic competencies as well as different levels of English proficiency.

This situation poses challenges to English teachers. The traditional one-size-fits-all instructional approach, which typically focuses on the middle range of students' language proficiency, is no longer adequate (Bondie et al., 2019). This diversity must be embraced, and teachers must adapt their instruction to meet the varied learning needs of their students. One effective response to this challenge is to differentiate instruction in order to accommodate learners' differences in readiness, interests, and learning profiles. To provide more insights on this matter, this research elaborated the practical implementation of differentiated instruction in a seventh-grade English class of mixed-proficiency students. Additionally, this study seeks to explore students' perceptions regarding the implementation of DI in English learning, particularly in the context of descriptive texts.

Educational research focusing on mixed-ability learners has revealed numerous benefits of differentiated instruction (DI) globally, particularly in the EFL field. For example, DI has been proven to be effective in improving high school students' grammar learning achievement in an Ethiopian EFL class (Melka & Jatta, 2022). Another research conducted in an Iranian elementary school setting showed that DI could help teachers create an inclusive and positive learning environment (Celik, 2019). In one class of mixed-ability English learners in Lebanon, it was found that DI has a great positive impact on the achievement of low achievers after a series of experimental research (Kotob & Ali Abadi, 2019). Research by Magableh and Abdullah (2020) conducted in a Jordanian EFL setting was aimed to examine the effectiveness of DI in improving students' overall English achievement. The results show that DI had a great effect size in reducing classroom diversity (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

Several studies on differentiated instruction (DI) conducted in Indonesian high school settings report on how teachers implemented DI during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges they faced (Padmadewi et al., 2022). The findings indicate that teachers encountered difficulties related to student participation in virtual classes, the large number of students, and the limited opportunities for group activities during instruction. Another recent study investigating Indonesian teachers' perspectives on DI found that while teachers demonstrated a solid theoretical understanding of DI (Mairoza et al., 2024). However, they expressed uncertainty and incomprehension when it comes to the planning and implementation of DI in the classroom.

Basen on existing research on the implementation of DI in the EFL context, few studies have explored the efficacy and best practices of implementing differentiated instruction specifically in the context of secondary level schools in the Indonesian context (Suryati et al., 2024). Similarly, Arianto et al. (2023) indicate that studies examining within-class DI in secondary education remain scarce. Moreover, most of the extensive research on DI implementation has been limited to the mere frequency of DI use or its impact on student achievement (e.g. Arianto et al., 2023; Azimah & Sujannah, 2024) while studies on actual DI practices have not been adequately conducted (Pozas & Schneider, 2019). This highlights the necessity for research that elaborates practical implementations of DI in secondary school settings. Showcasing the practical implementations of DI is essential to provide valuable insights and guidance for teachers to enhance their instructional practices that meet the needs of mixed-proficiency students.

Existing studies of differentiated instruction (DI) in the EFL context have primarily focused on teachers' perspectives rather than exploring students' viewpoints and learning experiences within a DI environment. Similarly, research in the Indonesian EFL setting has shown a trend toward teacher-centered analysis. For instance, Mairoza et al. (2024) report on high school English teachers' perspectives regarding their implementation of DI and the associated challenges. Other studies have similarly investigated teachers' perceptions, including their perceived practices and challenges in implementing DI in their pedagogical methods (Maruf, 2023; Mutmainah et al., 2023; Rahmaniar et al., 2024; Sukarno et al., 2024). In contrast, student-centered investigations and analyses remain underexplored, despite the critical importance of understanding student voices, as they can significantly affect learning outcomes. Thus, more explorations on students' viewpoints regarding their learning process and experiences within the DI environment need to be carried out. With these considerations in mind, this research aims to fill gaps in the literature by addressing the following two questions: 1) How is DI practically implemented in a seventh-grade English class with mixed-proficiency students?; 2) What are students' perceptions of the implementation of DI, particularly concerning learning the topic of descriptive texts?

To meet this research's objectives, this paper first reviews relevant literature on DI. Then, the methodology employed in a seventh-grade classroom is described. This is followed by an elaboration of the practical implementation of DI in a seventh-grade classroom and analysis of the students' perceptions of DI implementation. This paper concludes with the implications of these findings. The results of this study are expected to benefit diverse classrooms by informing future teaching strategies employing DI. The findings may influence educational policies concerning the adoption of DI in public schools and provide insights for further research in similar educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

Differentiated Instruction is a learning approach that has been widely used in mixed-proficiency classes. It facilitates students to learn in various ways based on their unique characteristics (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019). In differentiated instruction (DI), teachers tailor their instruction to meet the individual needs of students. This approach involves adjusting teaching strategies to accommodate students' diverse learning styles, interests, and levels of readiness (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). The primary objective of DI is to enable learners with varying competencies and characteristics to achieve the common objectives of the lesson. In other words, although students may engage in different learning processes, the goals they strive to reach are fundamentally the same (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

When differentiating instructions, there are three general aspects that teachers could modify to create more manageable and meaningful experiences, namely content, process, and product (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019; Tomlinson, 2001). Content is what is being taught or the learning materials. Process deals with how learning is structured or how students learn. Meanwhile, product is how students demonstrate

learning or how learning is assessed (Bondie et al., 2019). The three aspects that teachers can differentiate need to be adjusted according to students' readiness level, interests, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2017).

A more recent comprehensive taxonomy of differentiated instruction (DI) practices was developed by Pozas and Schneider in 2019, aiming to bridge the gap between pedagogical theory and everyday instructional practice through a thorough examination of theoretical and empirical research. Pozas and Schneider (2019, pp. 77-78) proposed a taxonomy of DI practices consisting of six categories: "tiered assignments, intentional composition of student groups, tutoring systems within the learning group, staggered nonverbal learning aids, mastery learning, and open education/granting autonomy to students." This taxonomy provides practically useful and concrete options to guide teachers and educational researchers in designing lessons within the DI framework.

Much research has reported teachers' perceptions of DI implementations in various educational contexts, most of which reported similar concerns regarding workload, time constraints, and needs for professional trainings. For instance, a study conducted by Bidari (2021) found that DI has not been implemented, even at the initial stage, in the context of Nepalese private secondary schools due to multiple hindering factors, such as time constraints, large class sizes, and insufficient DI training for teachers. Similarly, Al Siyabi and Al Shekaili (2021) concluded that while teachers recognize the potential impact of DI and are aware of practical strategies for its implementation, there is a critical need for structural support to ensure the continuity of DI practices. Additionally, Yavuz (2020) reported that teachers encounter numerous challenges, including maintaining DI while managing their regular workload and understanding the diverse needs of all learners. Furthermore, the teacher participants expressed the need for professional development training that would enable them to apply DI effectively.

Studies on teachers' practical implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in EFL, especially in Indonesian secondary schools, remain limited. Despite the scarcity of research addressing practical implementations of DI, existing findings suggest that EFL teachers who implement DI across various academic contexts have attempted to differentiate three crucial aspects of instruction: content, process, and products. Research indicates that lesson content is differentiated through the provision of leveled learning materials and resources, primarily adjusted to students' varying readiness levels (Saban & Atay, 2023; Sun, 2023). In terms of process differentiation, it is common for EFL teachers to employ flexible grouping formats (Hung & Chao, 2021; Saban & Atay, 2023; Suryati et al., 2024). Meanwhile, allowing diverse modes of presenting learning outcomes is a typical strategy employed by EFL teachers to differentiate products (Sun, 2023; Suryati et al., 2024).

Students' perceptions regarding teachers' implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have been scarcely investigated (Kóty-Nagy, 2023). Among the limited research on this topic, some findings indicate that students respond favorably to DI. Generally, students perceive DI activities as entertaining, engaging, effective, empowering, and collaborative when compared to conventional learning practices (Güvenç, 2021; Saputri et al., 2023; Yavuz, 2020). Similarly, Maulana and Oktavia (2023) report that students feel they learn more effectively due to the autonomy afforded to them based on their individual learning profiles, abilities, and interests. Overall, the existing studies indicate generally positive perceptions of DI across contexts. Further research is essential to identify students' potential challenges and concerns regarding its implementation.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative research employed the case study design as it aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of situations and meaning for those involved in a case (Hancock et al., 2021). The case may not only be an individual, a classroom, a school or a program. The case may also be an event, an activity, or an ongoing process (Fraenkel et al., 2023). To obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of DI in a mixed-proficiency classroom context, empirical investigations of a phenomenon were conducted within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2015), including observations, semi-structured interview, and learning artifacts. Evidence obtained from a case study allowed the researcher to capture multiple realities that are not easily quantifiable (Hancock et al., 2021), such as the practical implementation of DI and students' perceptions. By analyzing the evidence, themes or categories were identified to enable in-depth exploration and confirmation of students' perceptions regarding DI implementation in a heterogeneous-proficiency EFL class.

In this research, the case being studied was the process of implementing DI in a mixed-proficiency seventh-grade EFL class. The strategies were carefully planned and executed in accordance with the theoretical framework of DI proposed by Tomlinson (2014), which involves modifying instruction by adjusting the learning content, the processes through which students practice skills, and the summative products that students use to demonstrate learning outcomes. All strategies were implemented to support student interests and needs (Dack & Tomlinson, 2024).

3.2 Context and Participants

This research was conducted in a seventh-grade class at a state junior high school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, specifically focusing on the English subject. In responding to students' diverse English proficiency levels, the researchers taught in the English class of the particular seventh-grade class using the principles of DI. The application of DI was embedded in four meetings of English subject with Project-based learning as the suggested learning model. The four lesson meetings were scheduled to cover the Descriptive Text about Animals. During the two-to-three-week DI implementation, researchers collected data.

The participants in this research were thirty-one students from the sample class. This sample size is sufficient for qualitative analysis in a case study design since a case study focuses on an in-depth analysis rather than a broad generalization. In addition, the aim to explore a specific phenomenon can be achieved through the varied perspectives obtained from the thirty-one participants (Malterud et al., 2016). The participant selection was conducted using the purposive sampling technique to ensure that the sample is uniquely suited to the objective of the research (Fraenkel et al., 2023). These thirty-one participants were selected since they met the criteria for this study, as confirmed by the result of the academic and non-academic diagnostic assessments. First, the participants had different initial English proficiency levels as shown by their objective pre-test scores. Second, the participants were between 12 and 13 years of age with different backgrounds of formal English study experiences prior to entering Junior High School. The students' different formal English study experiences are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Background Experiences of Studying English Formally

Experiences of studying English formally	Number of students	Percentage
Since kindergarten and continued in elementary school	5	16.13%
During Elementary School grades 1-6	12	38.71%
During Elementary School but not all grades 1-6	8	25.81%
No formal study experiences in elementary school	6	19.35%
TOTAL	31	100%

To meet ethical standards, detailed information on research purpose and procedures was provided prior to the data collection. All data were kept anonymous. In addition, students' participation in this research was voluntary and students' grades would not be impacted.

The research timeline was designed in accordance with the academic setting of the research site. According to the curriculum, the students had two English classes per week, each lasting two hours, resulting in a total of four hours of English instruction weekly. Due to various constraints, this research was conducted over a period of only two weeks, amounting to four meetings or eight study hours. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of the research timeline.



Figure 1. Research Timeline

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from several sources to address the research questions. To examine the practical implementations of differentiated instruction (DI) in the classroom, the researcher utilized observation field notes that included checklists of DI dimensions (Tomlinson, 2017) to measure DI practices. One field note was completed for each lesson session and filled out during the lesson. Records of teaching activities were also used to assist the researcher in completing the observation field notes after each lesson. To gather data related to students' responses to the implementation of DI, a questionnaire was distributed following the class sessions. This questionnaire consisted of five items measured on a 5-point Likert scale and three open-ended questions, all developed based on Tomlinson's (2001) three dimensions of DI: content, process, and product. As a result, thirty-one completed questionnaire responses were collected. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposefully selected participants representing different English proficiency levels to further explore students' responses and perceptions. Additionally, teaching and learning artifacts were examined to support the research findings.

To analyze the qualitative data, we employed a thematic approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012). First, the data were re-read to foster familiarity. Second, the data were systematically analyzed, coded, and grouped into themes. The themes were then developed, refined, and named. Finally, the findings were reported. Meanwhile, data from the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire items were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the means and standard deviations, which provided insights into students' general perceptions of DI implementation. To maintain trustworthiness, the researcher employed triangulation by using multiple data sources and types (Miles et al., 2014). In this data triangulation, findings from both the questionnaire and the interviews were combined to capture a comprehensive picture of the participants' perceptions regarding the implementation of DI.

4. Results

The findings are presented based on the research questions addressed in this study. The first section elaborates the practical implementation of DI in the seventh-grade English class of mixed-proficiency students. Meanwhile, the second section reveals the findings related to students' responses and perceptions of the DI strategies implementation.

4.1 The Implementation of DI of Mixed-proficiency Students

Data from the research suggest that there were differentiations in the three aspects of the DI framework, namely content, process, and product. First, it was found that there was differentiation in terms of the learning content as indicated in the selection and implementation of the reading materials. To facilitate students' differences in terms of readiness, a set of reading texts with two different language levels was presented. Both sets of reading texts presented five one-paragraph texts about five different animals. The first set of reading texts contained shorter paragraphs with shorter sentences, which was prepared for the lower-proficiency students. Meanwhile, the other set of reading texts contained paragraphs with more sentences and had some complex sentences. Additionally, the vocabulary used in the second set of the text was more advanced. This second set of the reading texts was intended to facilitate students with higher-proficiency. The reading texts were intended not only to provide language input, but also to check the students' comprehension on the texts. Therefore, along with the reading activity, the students were also required to match each paragraph with the correct animals being described. Figure 2 depicts the two-level contents presented throughout the lesson.

"DESCRIBING ANIMALS" (Set 1)		"DESCRIBING ANIMALS" (Set 2)	
Name : _____ No : _____		Name : _____ No : _____	
• Match the descriptions in the left column with the correct animal in the right column.		• Match the descriptions in the left column with the correct animal in the right column.	
1 I am a _____ I am tall and heavy. My fur is yellow with dark spots. I eat leaves and fruits on tall trees. I live in the savannah. I have small horns on my head. I also have a long neck.		1 I am a _____ I am tall and heavy. My fur has a light yellowish or brownish colour with dark spots. I eat leaves and fruits on tall trees. I live in the savannah. I have small horns on my head. I also have a long neck.	
2 I am an _____ I have a big, grey body. I have a trunk; it is a long nose. I use my trunk to eat, to drink and to take a bath. I also have long white tusks. I live in the savannah. My voice is like a trumpet.		2 I am an _____ I have a big, grey body. I have a trunk, which is a long nose. I use my trunk to eat, to drink and to take a bath. I also have long white tusks. I live in the savannah. When I shout, my voice is like a trumpet.	
3 I am a _____ I live in the sea and on the beach. I have smooth brown fur. I can swim, jump and play in the water. On the land, I can walk with my flippers. I eat fish.		3 I am a _____ I live in the sea and on the beach. I have smooth brown fur and whiskers, just like a cat. I can swim, jump and play in the water. On the land, I can walk with my flippers. I eat fish and I like sunbathing very much.	
4 I am a _____ I am a friendly animal. I have four legs and big brown eyes. I have white and black fur. I eat green grass and hay. I live in the farm and I like munching on the grass. I also produce milk.		4 I am a _____ I am a friendly animal with four legs and big brown eyes. I have white and black fur. I like eating fresh green grass and hay. I live in the farm where I munch on the grass all day long. I am also known as the best milk producer. Do you like my milk?	

Figure 2. The two-leveled reading texts

Apart from facilitating readiness, the content material presented in the form of short reading texts was also suitable for accommodating students' different interests since they present different types of animals.

The second aspect in which DI took place was process. Process encompasses knowledge and skills enhancement with different ways of engaging with materials. Process should take into account multiple learning strategies and studying paces (Sun, 2023). The findings showed that to differentiate the process, several strategies were employed, including giving tiered exercises and flexible grouping. To allow students to have writing practices, a writing worksheet with three-tiered system was developed. The goal of the worksheet was the same, i.e. to make students develop short descriptive paragraphs about four different animals. The three-tiered worksheet was tailored for lower, middle and higher proficiency students respectively, each with different level of scaffolding. The lower-tier worksheet was presented with clues in the form of unfinished sentences. Thus, the task of the lower-achieving students is to complete unfinished sentences in order to form paragraphs. To scaffold the lower-proficiency students, two first texts were equipped with selections of possible answers, while for the rest two animals, the students had to use their own creativity to complete the paragraph. The worksheet of the first tier is displayed in Figure 3.

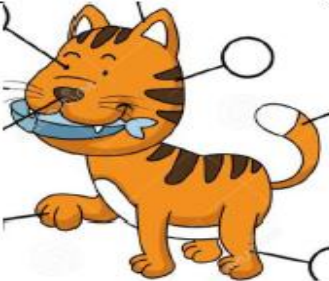
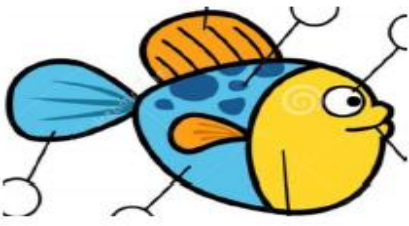
"DESCRIBING ANIMALS" (Set 1)		
Name : _____ No : _____		
• Complete the sentences. Use the words in the right column whenever available.		
1		It has soft _____ and a long _____. It likes eating _____. It lives in _____. It can _____. It is a _____ • Play with humans • Tail • Fur • Fish • The house • Swim
2		It has _____ It likes eating _____. It lives in _____. It can _____. It is a _____ • Run • A mane • The farm • A fin • Grass
3		It has _____ It likes eating _____. It lives in _____. It can _____. It is a _____
4		It is _____ It has _____ It likes eating _____. It lives in _____. It can _____. It is a _____

Figure 3. Worksheet for Lower-tier Students

To accommodate the middle and higher proficiency students respectively, fewer scaffolding activities were provided. For the middle-range students, the worksheet was presented with guideline questions accompanying the animals' pictures. Meanwhile, for the higher-proficiency students, the worksheet provided very minimum scaffolding. Thus, the students were free to write the animal descriptions using their own creativity. Upon doing the task given through the worksheet, the students were allowed to work individually or in the same-proficiency groups. Figure 4 and 5 depict the worksheets for the middle and upper tier students.

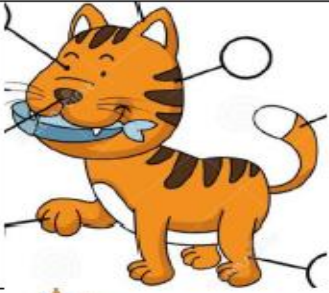
"DESCRIBING ANIMALS" (set 2)	
Name : _____ No : _____	
- Write a description of the animals by answering the questions: - What is it? - What does it have? - What does it eat? - Where does it live? - What can it do? - What does it like?	
1	
2	
3	
4	

Figure 4. Worksheet for Middle-Tier students

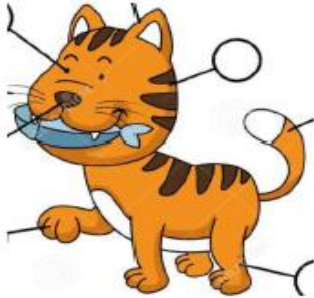
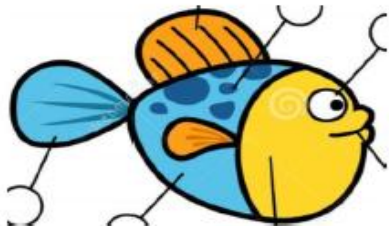
"DESCRIBING ANIMALS" (set 3)	
Name : _____ No : _____	
• Write a paragraph that describes each of the animals.	
1	
2	
3	
4	

Figure 5. Worksheet for Upper-Tier Students

Findings from observation fieldnotes showed that flexible grouping strategies were employed throughout the lessons. In addition to the same-proficiency grouping in completing the tiered worksheets, mixed-proficiency grouping was also carried out in other class activities. In the project-working class session for example, the 7th grade students were purposefully assigned to work with students from different proficiency levels.

Finally, the third area in which DI was implemented was product. The findings indicated that there were strategies adopted to allow students to present learning products. To demonstrate their learning outcomes, students were assigned with a group project entitled “The Animal Expo”. In this project, the students had to work in mixed-proficiency groups arranged by the researchers to create visual media for an animal exhibition and present descriptions of an animal group of their interest. Each group was given freedom to decide both the animal groups and the type of exhibition media. This product differentiation aimed to accommodate students’ diverse interests and learning profiles. Figure 6 shows some of students’ works created for the project.



Figure 6. Samples of Students' Works

As figure 6 indicates, the students created different types of presentation media in the form of posters, scrapbooks, and pop-up cards. The student groups had different selections of animal classifications to be presented, e.g. wild animals, sea animals, carnivores, insects, etc. according to their group's interests.

4.2 Students' Perceptions to the Differentiated Instruction Implementation

To address the second research question, data were collected through a post-program questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In this study, students' responses was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire containing items developed from the three dimensions of DI, namely content, process and product. The majority of the participants responded positively to the implementation of DI strategies as depicted by their responses to the close-ended items of the post-program questionnaire. The following table shows the descriptive analysis results of students' responses towards the DI strategies.

Table 2. Students' Responses to the Implementation of DI Strategies

No	Items	Mean score	St. deviation	Interpretation
1	Content differentiation	4.3	0.82	Positive
2	Process differentiation (same proficiency grouping)	4.15	0.95	Positive
3	Process differentiation (mixed-proficiency grouping)	3.96	1.09	Positive
4	Product differentiation	4.48	0.97	Positive
5	Overall satisfaction of DI	4.22	0.89	Positive

Table 2 summarizes students' perceptions of the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) strategies. The analysis of descriptive statistics revealed that students generally held positive perceptions regarding the implementation of DI strategies across all five items, with scores ranging from 3.96 to 4.48 on a 5-point Likert scale. Similar findings emerged from the qualitative data analysis. Three primary themes illustrated the participants' positive perceptions, while one theme reflected their concerns. The four emerging themes were: 1) DI enhances learning satisfaction and experience, 2) DI facilitates the exploration of interests, 3) DI fosters collaborative learning and problem-solving skills, and 4) students' concerns about varying learning abilities.

The first theme that emerged as a positive perception expressed by the participants was related to the enhancement of learning satisfaction and experience. The interview results indicated that both lower- and higher-proficiency students had a better experience when learning the descriptive text material. Participants reported being given equal opportunities to understand the content based on their respective levels of English proficiency. This was reflected in some students' responses, which indicated that they enjoyed using worksheets of varying difficulty levels because it allowed them to complete tasks appropriate to their proficiency levels. This sentiment was articulated by participants S.2 and S.3.

"Ini mudah dipahami meskipun Bahasa Inggris saya tidak terlalu bagus." – S.2, wawancara 02.00

"It's easy to understand for me although my English is not that good." — **S.2 interview, 02.00**

"Aku senang, aku bisa mengerti materinya secara jelas dan banyak pertanyaan sama jawaban yang bikin kelasnya ramai." – S.3, wawancara 02.18

I'm happy, I can understand the materials clearly and there are lots of questions and answers session making the class alive." — **S.3, interview, 02.18**

These responses show that the tiered exercises could specifically address different proficiency levels. Lower proficiency students, like S.2, perceived that the simplified language had helped them understand the materials well, boosting their confidence. Higher proficiency students, such as S.3, appreciated the additional challenges they received, encouraging deeper engagement with the material. This finding is supported by the quantitative data showing students' positive perception of the content differentiation as indicated by the high mean score ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.82$). In addition, another student said that they had a new experience since the teachers used a different approach in teaching as shown in this statement:

"It's fun and unique, plus I can improve my English skills" — **S.10 ,open-ended questionnaire**

The second theme reflecting the positive aspects of the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) is that the DI approach created abundant opportunities for students to learn and complete tasks in accordance with their interests and creativity. The open-ended tasks provided in the DI environment allowed students to showcase their learning products through their unique perspectives and creative interpretations of animal descriptions. The opportunity for product differentiation appeared to grant these students a sense of freedom while completing assignments, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

“This way of learning is so fun because we can choose to describe animals based on what we are interested in.” — **S.9, open-ended questionnaire**

“I like when we have the chance to use our creativity to do assignments.” — **S.13, open-ended questionnaire**

“Because we can work with friends and are free to choose media on the exhibition day.” — **S.18, open-ended questionnaire**

These responses highlight several benefits of product differentiation. Students not only appreciated the freedom to choose topics of interest as S.4 stated, but they also valued the opportunity for creative expression and collaborative works as expressed by S.5 and S.6. These findings suggest that product differentiation may enhance both subject-specific learning and other important skills such as creativity and teamwork.

The DI-based activities facilitate students to showcase their interest without limitation of rules. There are some statements that support this idea, shared by the students:

“*Saya suka banget soalnya kita bisa punya kebebasan waktu mengerjakan tugas.*” — **S.7, wawancara 11.35**

I like it so much because we can have freedom in doing the assignment.” — **S.7, interview 11.35**

“This activity is fun because we can create projects of our own creativity.” — **S.1, open-ended questionnaire**

These findings are also resonated in the participants' questionnaire responses, as shown in the mean score for product differentiation ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.97$). The emphasis on freedom and fun in participants' responses signifies that the DI strategies may have shifted students' perceptions of assignments from mandatory tasks to enjoyable learning experiences. This change in attitude could lead to increased motivation engagement in learning activities following the sense of enjoyment in their work.

The third positive perception highlighted the ability of differentiated instruction (DI) to foster collaborative learning and problem-solving skills. The collaborative aspect of DI was particularly evident in the differentiated processes, especially during flexible group activities. In some flexible grouping arrangements, students had the opportunity to work in both mixed- and same-proficiency groups. Quantitative data revealed slight differences in students' perceptions of these groupings. While same-proficiency grouping was perceived very positively ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.95$), the mixed-proficiency grouping strategy received a slightly lower rating ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.09$). Qualitative data corroborated these findings. On one hand, when working in mixed groups, students with both high and low proficiency levels were able to complete tasks and assist one another. The following excerpts illustrate the perspectives of lower-proficiency students:

“The group-work is fun because I can discuss problems with my friends in the group.” — **S.10, open-ended questionnaire**

“I enjoy the assignment because when I face problems, my friends help me.” — **S.12, open-ended questionnaire**

The excerpts above suggest that lower-proficiency students felt positively impacted by the mixed-proficiency grouping. The use of words such as “fun” and “enjoy” indicates that these students felt comfortable and engaged, benefiting from peer support within the mixed groups. Conversely, a differing perception was expressed by higher-proficiency students. The following excerpt presents a contrasting response from one of the higher-proficiency students:

“It's fun, although it's kinda exhausting trying to put my team in order. At least I have a reliable teammate to help me solve the problems.” — **S.8, open-ended questionnaire**

This response from S.13, a higher-proficiency student, reveals a more complex perspective on mixed-proficiency grouping. While the student felt some enjoyment, a sense of burden was also acknowledged, suggesting unexpected additional responsibility for higher-proficiency students. This may potentially lead to both positive outcomes, such as development of leadership skills, and challenges such as

increased workload or stress. Despite this, not all students with higher proficiency expressed complaints regarding the mixed-proficiency grouping. One student of higher proficiency stated otherwise:

“Ya, meski aku gak begitu suka dikelompokkan sama guru, aku tahu kalau ada sisi positifnya, misal kita bisa melengkapi satu sama lain dan aku juga bisa bantu teman lain.” – S.6, wawancara 06.11

Well, although I didn't really fancy being put in a teacher-assigned group, I know that there's a positive side of it... like we could complete each other and I could help my other classmates.” — **S.6 interview 06.11** The response from S.6 shows a more subtle understanding of the benefits of mixed-proficiency grouping from a higher-proficiency student's point of view. Although there was initial reluctance, the student recognized the mutual benefits of working in a diverse group, including the opportunity to help others. This suggests that some higher-proficiency students could potentially develop more positive attitudes towards mixed-proficiency grouping, particularly when they recognize its benefits for themselves and their peers.

The other emerging theme found in this study is related to students' concerns regarding varied readiness. Even though the DI strategies were generally accepted, it is important to recognize that students had concerns about the difficulties they faced, as indicated in the following excerpts:

“I don't really like the different worksheets because I need more time in understanding the assignment handed to me.” — **S.27, open-ended questionnaire**

“ Dengan kemampuanku, sepertimya aku jadi beban di kelompokku kalau pendekatannya seperti ini. ” – S.3, wawancara, 10.40

With my current ability, I feel like I become a burden in my group in this kind of approach” — **S.3 , interview, 10.40**

The data from both the questionnaire response and interview were stated by two students with relatively lower English proficiency. These show that students have difficulties in using the instructional materials and following the strategies for collaborative learning. Some students, like S.14, expressed difficulty in comprehending assignments presented through worksheets. These findings highlight the need for tailored support and scaffolding in both individual and group learning contexts.

5. Discussion

This study explored the practical implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) strategies and investigated students' perceptions of the implementation in terms of its efficacy and acceptability. There are several key findings of the study. First, the findings show that DI was comprehensively implemented across all three aspects of DI Framework, namely content, process, and product (Tomlinson, 2014). This comprehensive approach aligns with best practices in DI as it addresses multiple aspects related to student diversity (Bondie et al., 2019). Content differentiation was reflected through the use of tiered reading texts which catered to students' different readiness levels. This strategy is in line with recent research on the effectiveness of tiered materials in mixed-ability classrooms (Dack et al., 2022; Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Sapan & Mede, 2022). Differentiating content is an essential strategy since it facilitates the developmental progress and range of development of the learners through varying the materials' difficulty levels. The content materials that a teacher develops must be both difficult yet still manageable for all levels of learners so that they will not be demotivated nor struggle (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023). Further, the inclusion of various animal topics in the texts addresses students' diverse interests, which is one of the key principles of DI (Brevik et al., 2018). When learning content is diversified in terms of theme or topic, it can increase engagement levels between the students and the subject matters, which subsequently leads to improved learning motivation (Sapan & Mede, 2022; Sun, 2023).

Based on the findings, process differentiation also took place in the EFL learning of the seventh-grade classroom. Process is “how students give meaning to the content presented, how they understand and acquire key facts, concepts, and skills” (Karatza, 2019, p.9). Further, Karatza (2019) explains that learning process can be differentiated by varying the complexity levels of the activities, engaging students to think critically and creatively, and exploring alternative methods to achieve curriculum objectives. In line with these principles, the current study reveals that the process differentiation was achieved through tiered exercises and flexible grouping strategies. The two strategies of process differentiation were implemented to meet several expectations.

First, tiering exercises into three levels was aimed to accommodate students' different level of readiness. This strategy is evidenced to be one of the most effective strategies to be implemented in EFL classes since it helps increase students' reading comprehension skills (Saleh, 2021; White & Vibulphol, 2020), EFL writing skill (Mehany, 2022), and overall English achievement (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). Moreover, the three-tiered worksheets were an example of the provision of effective scaffolding techniques necessary for meeting the needs and abilities of learners with different level of English proficiency (Elandeef & Hamdan, 2021). This finding resonates Pozas et al. (2020) who found substantial amount of teachers' strategy for differentiating instructions by tiering activities or implementing flexible grouping. In the application of both tiered exercises and flexible grouping, teachers need to pay extra attention to students who need more assistance to ensure students' L2 improvement (Azimah & Sujannah, 2024). Besides being reported to be effective in several research, the two aforementioned strategies are generally perceived positively by students in several previous research (Hung & Chao, 2021; Liou et al., 2023; Lombarkia & Guerza, 2022).

The second notable strategy in process differentiation is the use of flexible grouping. Flexible grouping is a key component of effective differentiated instruction, which accommodates students' varying skill levels in different academic areas (Tomlinson, 2001). The goal of flexible grouping is "to have students work consistently with a wide variety of peers" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 15). This strategy fosters not only peer learning but also collaboration skills (Ginja & Chen, 2020; Purnamaningwulan, 2024). Flexible grouping has been one of the most widely-used DI strategies that offers intentional composition of student groups in which teachers establish decidedly homogeneous or heterogeneous groups based on performance, readiness, interests, etc. (Pozas & Schneider, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). In this study, the flexible grouping strategy was firstly implemented to support the learning process using the tiered worksheet. Therefore, in the first group work, students were assigned into groups based on homogeneous readiness. Meanwhile, the second group work aiming for project preparation was decided based on the heterogeneous readiness. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping strategies have been evidenced to contribute to L2 improvements, according to some research. The homogeneous grouping scheme is reported to be effective in optimizing A2 level students' learning, thus helping students to improve their proficiency significantly after a three-year EFL study (Wu et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the heterogeneous grouping strategy was highly valued by students in a higher education setting as it elevates their learning motivation, yields effective learning outcomes, and fosters collaborative learning (Hung & Chao, 2021).

In another study, the flexible grouping strategy has been one of the strategies found to help improve the overall academic achievement of English language learners (Kotob & Ali Abadi, 2019) and students' grammar learning achievement (Melka & Jatta, 2022). In this study, however, the findings showed that there was a slight discrepancy between students' perceptions of homogeneous-proficiency ($M = 4.15$) and heterogeneous-proficiency grouping ($M = 3.96$). A lower mean score was obtained in students' perceptions of the heterogeneous-proficiency grouping compared to homogeneous-proficiency grouping. This indicates that students might have found homogeneous-proficiency grouping more comfortable or effective compared to the heterogeneous-proficiency grouping. Nonetheless, existing research has not been conclusive on this matter. Instead, it is suggested that teachers consistently apply variations of grouping strategies, such as grouping based on students' topic interest or learning preferences (Suwastini et al., 2021). Further, it is also beneficial to sometimes allow students to decide their own groups.

The other dimension of DI found in this research is product differentiation. Product differentiation refers to how students demonstrate what they have learned and what they can do subsequent to a period of study (Karatza, 2019). Product differentiation allows students to choose their work format or evaluation method. Teachers should adopt alternative assessments, modify assignments, and incorporate project-based tasks to foster creativity. (Karatza, 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). In this research, the product differentiation was implemented through the "Animal Expo" project allowing students to demonstrate their learning outcome in various ways. The project-based group task was mainly aimed to "deliver open education and grant autonomy to students" (Pozas & Schneider, 2019, p.81) in which students are given responsibility and options to demonstrate their own learning outcome. Results of the descriptive statistics of this research showed a high mean score for product differentiation ($M = 4.48$), suggesting that students perceived product differentiation in a highly positive way. The freedom to choose topics and presentation media likely contributed to students' highly positive responses. This aligns with previous research (Maulana & Oktavia, 2023), which found that students value creative expression based on their interests and abilities in producing learning products.

The second research question addresses students' perceptions of the implementation of DI strategies in the topic of descriptive text. Data obtained from the questionnaire suggested that the implementation of DI in the learning of descriptive text topic was perceived positively by the students in general. The high mean score for the overall positive response to DI strategies ($M = 4.22$) signifies that students generally appreciated and benefited from this approach. Moreover, students expressed positive perceptions in the overall aspects being measured, i.e. content differentiation ($M = 4.3$), process differentiation involving homogeneous-proficiency grouping ($M = 4.15$), process differentiation involving heterogeneous-proficiency grouping ($M = 3.96$), with product differentiation being perceived most positively ($M = 4.48$).

The high satisfaction with product differentiation ($M = 4.48$) suggests that allowing students to demonstrate their learning outcomes is effective, particularly in the EFL context. This finding implies the needs for EFL teachers to employ more open-ended, creative projects enabling students to demonstrate their language skills improvement through various media. For this aim, it is also necessary for teachers to develop guidelines for project-based assessments. The slightly lower satisfaction with heterogeneous grouping ($M = 3.96$) compared to homogeneous grouping ($M = 4.15$) suggests a need for further research and instructional strategy development in this area. For instance, future research could explore effective scaffolding techniques for supporting lower-proficiency students in mixed groups (Casinto, 2024).

The qualitative data also confirmed the quantitative findings as students admitted having better learning experiences, getting facilitation to channel their learning interests, and gaining benefits from collaborative learning activities presented in DI. This finding resonates with recent studies that have revealed positive student attitudes towards DI in various contexts (Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018). The key findings obtained from students' open-ended responses to a questionnaire and interview suggest that DI was able to enhance the learning experiences of students in the mixed English proficiency class. It gave students with both low and high English proficiency the same chance to learn things, in this case the descriptive text topic. Students were able to engage more in the classroom's learning-teaching dynamics due to the tiered materials and exercises tailored to their competence level. The DI strategies were able to facilitate students' different abilities and provided encouragement to students in order that they show better performance in the classroom. This finding confirms previous research findings reported in Safawi and Akay (2022), who concluded that students' learning attitudes are likely to be more positively affected following longer DI interventions. Another study also reports similar things, in that teacher and student interactions will feel more effective and learning will feel more interesting and relevant for students in a DI learning environment (Pane et al., 2022).

Another theme generated from the qualitative findings suggested that DI could facilitate the exploration of students' learning interests. According to research, learning interest has a strong connection with learning motivation (Renninger & Hidi, 2020). With higher learning motivation, it is more likely that students can have better academic achievements (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to always try to meet students' interests to boost students' learning motivation. Among others, this can be done through differentiating learning contents and product that could accommodate learners' interests (Tomlinson, 2014). This way, DI strategies play a pivotal role in increasing students' learning motivation (Sapan & Mede, 2022).

Enhancement of collaborative learning was another major finding based on students' response to DI. In fact, collaborative learning is one of the keys to the students' academic success within the DI learning environment (Purnamaningwulan, 2024). A variety of collaborative strategies, including flexible grouping can also be used to accomplish differentiated education. To help students collaborate and learn from one another, teachers can, for instance, group pupils according to their interests or learning preferences. Whenever necessary, teachers can also group students based on their English proficiency. This notion is supported by some previous studies which revealed the effectiveness of the combination of homogeneous- and heterogeneous-proficiency groupings (Balungaya, 2018; Witono, 2022).

Despite the positive responses stated by the students, a few concerns regarding mixed-proficiency grouping should not be neglected. One of the findings of this study is that a student with lower English proficiency felt like a burden for the rest of the group members due to his perceived underperformance. On the other hand, one student with higher English proficiency found the grouping exhausting since he perceived to be given a bigger responsibility and portion of tasks to handle compared to his peers. This finding implies that in the context of seventh-grade classrooms, students with any proficiency levels may feel a sense of discomfort being assigned in heterogeneous groups. To cope with this challenge, it is suggested

that teachers provide more effective scaffolding techniques to provide additional assistance to lower-proficiency students (Elandeef & Hamdan, 2021). In relation to this, teachers are advised to administer pre-assessment instruments and conduct preliminary observations regarding their readiness level, preferred learning styles, and interests to better design lessons that align with the students' general characteristics (Yavuz, 2020). With better lesson planning, grouping arrangements and task designs, the aforementioned challenges in DI-based lessons could be minimized and avoided.

Nevertheless, it needs to be highlighted that this concern was particularly found among seventh-grade students whose ages were approximately 12-13 years old. This finding is quite contradictory to two other studies conducted in different contexts. In a study involving students aged 18-31 years old in a non-formal EFL classroom setting, it was found that students favoured the heterogeneous-proficiency grouping more since it could make students benefit more optimally compared to the homogeneous proficiency grouping (Purnamaningwulan, 2024). Another study was carried out in the context of EFL classrooms at a military institution in Taiwan (Hung & Chao, 2021). It was revealed that students appreciated the opportunity to work collaboratively with varying English proficiency levels since it aligned with the military cultures and values that highlight group solidarity and hierarchical framework (Hung & Chao, 2021).

These elaborations imply that students' perceptions towards the heterogeneous-grouping strategies vary across different classroom contexts and students' age groups. While the heterogeneous grouping strategy is highly valued by students in a higher education setting for several reasons, this preference was not observed among younger learners within 12-13 years of age. This urges teachers to pay more attention to a number of factors before applying the mixed-proficiency grouping strategy. The factors include students' ages, students' emotional and psychological conditions, and cultural orientations (Ghanbari & Abdolrezapour, 2020; Hung & Chao, 2021).

6. Conclusion

This study offers novel insights in terms of the practical application of DI strategies in a culturally diverse, mixed-proficiency EFL classroom at a secondary school level in Indonesia. Particularly, this study elaborates the challenges and successes of implementing DI unique to the Indonesian seventh-grade EFL class context. Differentiation strategies were implemented in content, process, product, to address students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Students generally gave positive responses and reported better learning experiences and satisfaction, increased learning engagement, and improved collaboration skills. Notably, product differentiation received the highest level of student positive perception ($M = 4.48$), which means that it is recognized as the most effective DI strategy. Thus, EFL teachers are advised to keep providing options for students in demonstrating their learning outcomes. The tiered materials, flexible grouping, and choice in product allowed students of different proficiency levels to access and engage with the content meaningfully. However, the finding regarding the mixed-proficiency grouping was rated the lowest compared to the other DI strategies ($M = 3.96$). These imply that seventh-grade students may feel discomfort being assigned in heterogeneous groups, regardless of their proficiency level. In fact, multiple different responses to the mixed-proficiency grouping strategy were given by students across age and cultural contexts. Embarking from this, educators and researchers are encouraged to be more cautious and considerate in applying the flexible grouping strategy, especially the mixed-proficiency grouping. Administering a well-designed diagnostic assessment and providing more effective scaffolding techniques are recommended for teachers who aim to adapt DI strategies for students across different age groups or proficiency levels.

Despite these findings, the research does have some limitations. First, it was conducted over a short period and with a limited sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Secondly, while this study thoroughly explored students' responses and perceptions of differentiated instruction (DI), it did not measure students' learning outcomes, which could have provided additional evidence of the impacts of DI on academic achievement. Future research should extend over a longer period with larger sample sizes and include learning outcome measurements. Beyond assessing students' perceptions, studies should examine DI's long-term impact on academic performance. Concerns about mixed-proficiency grouping highlight the need for further investigation into effective strategies across age groups and proficiency levels. Teachers should also consider students' emotional and psychological factors, especially with younger learners. Lastly, exploring DI implementation in subjects beyond EFL, such as science and mathematics, is recommended.

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