

Exploring Senior High School English Teachers' Experiences in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Endrian Maulana¹⁾, Mahdum Adnan²⁾, Eliwarti³⁾

¹Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, 28293
email: endrian.maulana6929@grad.unri.ac.id

²Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, 28293
email: mahdum.adnan@lecturer.unri.ac.id

³Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia, 28293
email: eliwarti@lecturer.unri.ac.id

Abstract:

The differentiated instruction is considered as a core pedagogical approach, yet teachers' lived experiences with this student-centered methodology remain underexplored. This study examined senior high school English teachers in Pekanbaru on their experiences in implementing differentiated instruction, as well as the barriers they encountered during the practices. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, researchers conducted classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with five English teachers from three varied school institutions; 2 from public, 2 from private school and 1 from *madrassa* between January and April 2025. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis to identify patterns in teachers' beliefs, practices, and barriers. Findings revealed that the participants share identical principles of differentiated instruction as transformative pedagogy that emphasized two-way communication, personalization based on learning needs, and accommodation of diverse learning styles, contrasting sharply with monotonous conventional methods they experienced as former students. Implementation yielded predominantly positive outcomes including enhanced student responsiveness, collaborative freedom, and enjoyable learning, though teachers acknowledged complexities requiring meticulous planning, extended preparation following physically intensive classes, and realistic goal-setting for foreign language learners. However, their implementations of DI in the classroom are circumscribed by significant barriers that impeded the effective implementation of DI: end-of-day scheduling caused student fatigue required extended recovery time before the lesson, prior English exposure that created proficiency gaps, possible vulnerabilities on technological utilization, cramped seating limited kinesthetic activities, and inadequate learning facilities undermined listening and speaking instruction. These findings demonstrate that while teachers view differentiated instruction as pedagogically valuable and experientially rewarding, successful implementation demands sustained institutional support addressing temporal, infrastructural, and professional development needs to overcome persistent barriers complicating committed teachers' differentiation efforts.

Keywords: *Differentiated Instruction, English Language Teaching, English Teacher Experiences*

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Kurikulum Merdeka* has some of its attributes: 1) A project-based learning in accordance with Pelajar Pancasila—a short term for Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)—a project that was designed to produce a youth that carries characters and morals under the five basic principles of Pancasila, which consists of the Faith, Independence, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Gotong Royong (Cooperation) and Global Diversity; 2) A competency-based learning material and 3) Flexible learning (Nafi'ah et al., 2023; Suryantari, 2022).

Among these attributes, flexible learning is correlated to a teaching approach called a differentiated instruction (DI). This teaching approach may consider 'fresh' in the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. In fact, it has been existed and utilized in the past. To put it briefly, when the teacher steps into this kind of learning environment, they will entail mixed-type of teaching strategies in the classroom to provide various information that students can select to receive and demonstrate the ideas they have learn (Tomlinson, 2001). Accordingly, efforts by the teachers are vigorously compelled to make decisions on which learning techniques that works on the students, as well as what suits them best to accommodate.

Nonetheless, the teachers tend to misperceive the concept of the differentiated instruction. One of those misconceptions is that they will create a 'chaotic' environment in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2001). It is undeniable that managing the classroom, especially the students, is one of the major interminable tasks that intimidates not only teachers in their first year of teaching, but also those who have been a teacher for a decade or more which can lead to a reckless condition due to the students' behavior. However, the teachers who implemented the differentiated instruction will be able to show their leadership to control their students and monitor their activities since they are still relying on teacher's assistances for developing basic norms and giving explicit instructions for learning activities.

However, despite helping the students to be able to discover their learning milestones (Pozas et al., 2021), it requires a solid commitment from the teachers to be capable in differing the instructions based on the students' learning needs. Consequently, this teaching strategy is aligned with some of the goals of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, stated by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia: encouraging teachers to conduct the student-focused teaching methods, as well as creating applicable and cutting-edge learning instruction (Anggara, 2023).

Several previous researches commonly focused on the teachers' perceptions and experiences on differentiated instruction. Conversely, the current research focused on particular educational contexts and settings that were set up on the practices of the differentiated instruction. This research gap highlighted empirical evidences that were lacked of on how variety of school institutions, teaching norms and unequal resources affect the English teachers' in pedagogical decisions on the implementation of differentiated instruction. Therefore, this research intended to address the following research questions:

- (1) What are senior high school English teachers' experiences in implementing Differentiated Instruction?
- (2) What barriers do teachers encounter when implementing Differentiated Instruction?

2. METHOD

The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach from Husserl (Moran, 2005) to explore English teachers' lived experiences with differentiated instruction (DI). It purely emphasized personal meanings over external theoretical explanations. Following Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation of 5–25 participants for phenomenological studies, five English teachers from five senior high schools from varied level in Pekanbaru, such as public school, private school, and *madrasa* (Islamic schools) were purposefully selected. The participants, who taught grades both 10th and 11th, had attended DI workshops and experienced DI for at least one year and taught in A-accredited schools, providing in-depth, experience-rich data on the implementation of DI. To capture real-time DI practices and English teachers' interactions with the students that video recording might miss, researchers observed various differentiation strategies (content, process, product, environment, and assessment) during the teachers' classroom hours, recording non-verbal cues and contextual details in field notes. Following the observation or at the end of the school day, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews using a prepared blueprint, inquiring the teaching pedagogies, beliefs on DI, student profiles, teaching strategies across the differentiated content, process, product, learning environment and assessment, barriers on the implementation of DI, and overall impressions. Each interview was conducted within maximum time of 60 minutes with a 5-minute post-interview cooldown. This approach is aimed to reveal teachers' subjective understandings and reflections, aligned with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology of lived experiences.

Table 1. *Descriptions of the Participants*

Participants	SHS's Institutions	Years of Teaching Experiences	Teaching Principles
Teacher 1	Private	<1 year	Collaborative Learning
Teacher 2	Private	4 years	Creative Learning, Real-world Application
Teacher 3	<i>Madrasa</i>	4 years	Relational Teaching with Boundaries
Teacher 4	Public	20 years	Maximum Language Exposure
Teacher 5	Public	3 years	Joyful Learning

Ethical engagement and trust were ensured by obtaining informed consent and signed consent forms, encouraging open and honest sharing of experiences. Researchers used Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to ensure credibility, which involved repeatedly reading transcripts, coding data, identifying, reviewing, and defining themes, and then reporting findings. Data collection took place from January to April 2025, as the qualitative design prioritized detailed descriptions of phenomena, no statistical testing was

conducted. Validating the data acquires the participants' authority for member checking to validate the data collection.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Beliefs and Experiences on Differentiated Instruction

To explore English teachers' understanding and implementation of differentiated instruction, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with five participants. Table 1 presented the categories discussed during these interviews, focusing on two main aspects: beliefs and experiences. In the context of this research, "beliefs" refers to the teachers' general knowledge and understanding of differentiated instruction as a pedagogical approach, while "experiences" encompasses their practical encounters in applying this method in their classrooms. The data gathered from these interviews revealed various perspectives on differentiated instruction, ranging from fundamental definitions to personal reflections on its implementation. Each teacher emphasized different focal points based on their teaching contexts and professional backgrounds.

Table 2. *Differentiated Instruction Beliefs and Experiences*

Participants	Categories Discussed	Main Focus
Teacher 1	1. Understanding DI 2. Conventional Teaching 3. Benefits of DI	Two-way interaction and communication
Teacher 2	1. Understanding DI 2. Conventional Teaching 3. Benefits of DI 4. Challenges of DI	Personalization and freedom to collaborate
Teacher 3	1. Understanding DI 2. Conventional Teaching 3. Benefits of DI 4. Challenges of DI	Pre-existing practices and realistic planning
Teacher 4	1. Understanding DI 2. Teaching Experience 3. Conventional Teaching 4. Benefits of DI Challenges of DI	Learning styles and enjoyable learning
Teacher 5	1. Understanding DI 2. Conventional Teaching	Student interests and stepping out of

-
- | | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| 3. Challenge of DI | comfort zone |
| 4. Personal Reflection | |
-

a. Beliefs on DI

This theme focused on what English teachers had understood, experienced and perceived before and after the implementation of the differentiated instruction.

Teacher 1 stated what she understood on differentiated instruction as any form of interactions between the teacher and the students. Teacher 1 added that the strategy that she applied helped her to alleviate the burden while explaining the lesson:

"Differentiated [Instruction] means that how you interact with your students, how [you] communicate with the students, and also how [are] the feedback[s] from the students [and] the responses of the students in the classroom...."

("Pengajaran Berdiferensiasi adalah bagaimana cara seorang guru berinteraksi dengan siswanya, cara [guru] berkomunikasi dengan siswanya, dan bagaimana umpan balik dari siswa dan respon mereka di dalam kelas....")

Teacher 1 highlighted the reliance of two-way communication between the teacher and the students, implied that a tight relationship between them is a vital element in the classroom.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 described the differentiated instruction as a learning personalization based on the students' learning needs and skills:

"Yang saya ketahui sejauh ini mengenai Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi itu adalah memberikan pembelajaran yang sesuai dengan kebutuhan murid [...] ataupun kemampuan murid itu sendiri...."

("What I know so far about Differentiated Instruction is providing a lesson that fits to the students' needs [...] or their learning capabilities....")

Unlike the first two participants, Teacher 3 echoed his personal perspective on the differentiated instruction, considered it was driven on the teachers' pre-existed, informal awareness on the student, which according to him was not a necessity prior to the emerge of *Kurikulum Merdeka*:

"...Sebenarnya kalau di [Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi] 'kan sebenarnya kita sebagai guru sudah lama melakukan itu, cuman hanya saja baru digembur-gemborkan pada saat sekarang, 'kan kalau menurut saya, karena pada dasarnya, kita itu pasti sudah tahu sejauh mana kemampuan siswa yang A, yang B sampai Z, gitu 'kan, hanya saja kita tidak mengkotak-kotakkan pada [kurikulum] sebelumnya...."

("...actually, we the teachers had been utilizing this Differentiated Instruction for a long time, but [the government] publicly formalized this teaching approach recently, which is from my standpoint, because basically, we already recognized the students'

capabilities from student A, student B until Z, you know, but we did not formally categorized these students on the previous curriculum....")

Next, Teacher 4 briefly shared a sentiment on the differentiated instruction as an inclusive teaching that depends on the students' learning style:

"Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi merupakan pendekatan yang kita lakukan pada siswa-siswa, karena siswa kita ini punya perbedaan.... dalam hal kemampuan.... kebutuhan, bergantung pada gaya belajar yang disenangi."

("Differentiated Instruction is the teaching approach that we practiced to the students, because our students have diversities.... in terms of their abilities.... their needs and their learning styles that they prefer to.")

Teacher 5 stated that the differentiated instruction was based on the students' learning interests, as well as creating an equitable classroom environment:

"Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi itu pembelajaran yang sesuai dengan minat siswanya masing-masing.... memfasilitasi keberagaman siswa di dalam kelas.... dengan tujuan yang sama: mereka bisa mengerti [terhadap] materi tersebut."

("Differentiated Instruction is a teaching approach that adapts to the students' personal interests.... [by] accommodating the students' diversity in the classroom.... and they share the same goal: to ensure they understand the material.")

b. Prior Exposures to Traditional Teaching

The researcher later discussed the participants' previous traditional teaching experiences before the existence of differentiated instruction or prior to the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. It is crucial to accentuate the context that 4 out of 5 participants have not applied the conventional teaching method prior to *Kurikulum Merdeka* as they started their teaching career since 2021. However, they expressed concerns on the conventional teaching method, mainly on the communication between the teacher and the students. Teacher 1 excerpted her standpoints on the conventional teaching method:

"....conventional [teaching method] only delivers speech; no communication [or] interaction between teachers and students, the students need a kind of engagement, the students need a kind of cares, and they need to understand more, however the teachers, in a conventional way, they don't care about [that], they just give explanation without think whether they understand or not."

("....Pengajaran konvensional hanya bergantung pada ceramah; tidak ada komunikasi maupun interaksi antara guru dan siswa, siswa membutuhkan keterlibatan mereka dalam pembelajaran, siswa membutuhkan rasa peduli dalam pembelajaran dan butuh pemahaman yang lebih, tapi guru, dalam pengajaran konvensional, tidak mempedulikan itu, mereka hanya memberikan penjelasan tanpa peduli siswa paham [dengan materinya] atau tidak.")

Teacher 1 emphasized one of teacher's demanded skills in the 21st century, which is an ability to collaborate with their students in the classroom. She felt that collaboration is a must to ascertain the students' learning issues and struggles in the classroom, as well as their emotional issues during the lesson. Furthermore, she concerned on the teacher's ignorance on the students' competencies, where such lack of awareness affected the students' learning progress in the classroom, as well as the engagement between the students, resulting in a loss of motivation and interest to learn in the classroom.

Teacher 2 displayed her concern on the conventional teaching method from her standpoint in the past as a student:

"...berdasarkan pengalaman saya sebagai murid, sebelum adanya Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi 'tuh kadang membuat kita merasa jenuh, takut dan juga bosan karena kita melakukan hal yang tidak sesuai [dengan yang kita inginkan]...."

("...from what I experienced as a [former] student, prior to Differentiated Instruction, the learning atmosphere felt intimidated and bored because we had to do the task that we don't ask for....")

The similar standpoint was shown by Teacher 3 when he stated his concerns on the conventional teaching method according to his experiences as a senior high school student:

"Kalau di pembelajaran konvensional, mungkin kalau dulu mungkin 'kan kita waktu SMA atau sekolah dulu 'kan mungkin guru-guru lebih ke kayak, "Oh, kita itu harusnya seperti ini.... seperti ini.... seperti ini....", jadi siswa itu harus kebut-kebutan atau bahkan menyerah sebelum 'berperang'...."

("In conventional teaching, maybe in the past when we were in senior high school as the students, those teachers were like, "Oh, we have to do this.... to do that.... and do this again....", so some students had to rush, and some other students had to give up before even in the 'battlefield'....")

Both Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 highlighted their perspective back in their time as a student. Teacher 2 expressed a monotony of the conventional teaching method itself that caused the students not to enjoy their learning in the classroom since there was not any variety of teaching instructions. On the other hand, Teacher 3 mentioned that the students tend to get pressurized by the teacher's intense learning demands that made the students to accomplish the tasks or activities without considering their objections, such as learning struggles, motivations to work on the tasks, as well as academic burnout, causing numbers of students either to endure their learning struggles or abandon the learning activities in the classroom before the lesson started, according to Teacher 3.

However, Teacher 5 reported her counter argument on the conventional teaching method as there were no other alternatives of teaching method:

"Kalau kita compare dari yang tradisional yang hanya metode ceramah saja, of course perbedaannya itu terlihat di anak itu; suka tidak suka dia harus menjalankan kewajiban itu, kan? Suka tidak suka dia harus menjalankan materi itu, walaupun

mungkin mereka itu tidak mengerti di metode ceramah, tapi karena itu hanya the only one method di kelas, mau tidak mau mereka harus [menjalankannya]...."

("If we compared to the conventional [teaching] that relied on lecturing only, of course there were differences on those students; they had to resort to carry out the obligation, right, whether they like it or not? Although they may not understand the material through lecturing, but because that's the only one method in the classroom, they had to resort to go along with it....")

Teacher 5 pointed out that there was a clear difference between the students who were interested in traditional teaching method, specifically lecturing and the students who were not. Although there was an awareness on such distinctive varies of learning paths and simultaneously and since lecturing is where the teacher was the only source available to communicate the lesson, the students were obliged to follow the rules, regardless of any objections since there was no other way around to deliver information for the students.

On the other hand, Teacher 4 shared his firsthand teaching experience back in his first year of teaching career when he taught about narrative text:

"Dulu saya pernah mengingat ketika saya mengajar pertama kalinya. Saya bingungnya begini, anak-anak ini kenapa tidak bisa? Anak-anak ini saya ingin tampil, misalnya presentasi materi apa; retelling [istilahnya], karena bahasa Inggris itu 'kan lebih retelling, ketika dia membaca suatu materi, lalu dia retell berdasarkan kemampuan [dirinya] sendiri. Ada anak-anak yang tidak bisa sama sekali, jadi saya bingung, "Ini anak-anak kenapa tidak bisa?", sampai saya paksa...."

("In the past, I remembered my firsthand experience on teaching. What confused me on that moment was this: Why couldn't these students perform the task? My students were about to perform, such as what do you want to present; or retelling as it's called, because English language were mostly retelling; when they read the material, then they would retell what they had read based on their own ability. Some of the students were not able to perform at all, which made me confused as to why couldn't these students perform, and I even attempted forcing them....")

Teacher 4 showed his bewilderment when teaching English that was presumably after being told or dictated by the teacher. He pointed out his confusion on his students' inability to tell or presumably recap the story based on their own word or understanding.

c. Perceived Benefits and Challenges on DI

The researcher later discussed the benefits the participants have personally perceived while implementing the differentiated instruction. The majority of participants received positive impacts of differentiated instruction in the classroom. Teacher 1 expressed her gratitude on a positive impact on the approach:

"I'm so glad that the students can respond [to] me and I'm not talking alone [in the classroom]. I'm a teacher and I need [them] to respond me and also need feedback[s] from the students while I'm teaching."

("Saya bersyukur siswa bisa merespon ke saya dan tidak membuat saya [seolah-olah] berbicara sendiri di kelas. Saya sebagai guru di kelas sangat membutuhkan mereka untuk berkomunikasi pada saya dan saya membutuhkan umpan balik mereka saat mengajar.")

The quote from Teacher 1 showed gratitude in providing information and feedback to their students, which was contrasted to conventional teaching method, where the distribution of feedback was only one-way; the teacher to the students, not the other way around. Moreover, Teacher 1 highlighted the reliance on their students through dialogic feedbacks as part of self-evaluation on teaching that contributes her professional development as a teacher.

Teacher 2 expressed what she perceived on utilizing differentiated instruction in the classroom. Teacher 2 shared the positiveness of differentiated instruction through her students' point of view, implied that there was a flexibility given from the teacher, enabling the students to collaborate with each other independently to solve some of the learning issues during the lesson in the classroom:

"...kita sebagai murid.... diberikan kebebasan untuk berkolaborasi, juga bereksplorasi dan juga berdiskusi pada teman-teman [di kelas]...."

("...we as the students.... were given a freedom to collaborate, explore and have a discussion with their peers in the classroom....")

Teacher 4 described his experiences with differentiated instruction as "normative" as what he implemented on in the classroom visualized precisely what he envisioned on the implementation of DI:

"...kesan saya normative.... kata kuncinya anak-anak ini 'kan yang penting mereka belajar itu menyenangkan.... mereka bisa mengerti.... mereka bisa menerapkannya.... mereka bisa mengimplementasikannyaI...."

("...my impression is normative.... the keyword is what matters to those students: an enjoyable learning. They can understand the materials.... they can apply the materials.... they can implement the materials....")

Despite of its benefits that was positively perceived directly, other participants also expressed that the teaching methodology may considered "tricky" due to several factors that affect the effectiveness of the differentiated instruction. For example, in the same interview, Teacher 2 highlighted a consideration for students' preparation on her subject following a certain subject with high-intensity activities:

"Tentu kita harus melihat kesiapan siswa dan belajarnya juga dan melihat hal yang mereka alami sebelumnya. Contohnya seperti [di kelas] tadi pembelajaran PJOK"

(Pendidikan, Jasmani, Olahraga dan Kesehatan), jadi kita harus butuh persiapan yang lebih panjang, karena mereka membutuhkan untuk mempersiapkan diri."

("Obviously we must consider on the students' preparedness, their readiness and the activities they have encountered before. For instance, in the class of Physical Education (PE) just earlier, so we need a longer preparation, because they [also] need to prepare themselves.")

The quote from Teacher 2 implied that teaching English in the classroom after Physical Education (PE) may consider difficult due to the students' fatigue after intensive activities within PE and took a long time to recover their learning motivation and preparedness. As a result, the teacher may need extra time and hard work for planning and preparation for a specific circumstance in order to preserve the students' learning engagement in the classroom.

Next, Teacher 3 mentioned the importance of planning the learning goals and expectations meticulously and realistically while implementing differentiated instruction:

"Pastinya sebagai guru, benar-benar punya rencana yang harus matang, pastinya dan juga punya ekspektasi yang besar pada siswa kita. Hanya saja, kembali lagi kita harus mengetahui bahwasannya yang kita ajarkan adalah memang benar-benar foreign language and we have to know that our students [are] not really understand this language, jadi kita juga punya batasan juga, jadi kita harus tahu bagaimana cara menghadapi itu."

("Definitely as the teacher, [we] need to have a meticulous plan and high expectations for our students. Still, we have to recognize that we are teaching a foreign language and we have to know that our students [are] not really understand this language, so we also have our boundaries that we need to know the ways to handle that.")

According to Teacher 3, despite of teacher's high expectations on the student's achievement, instructional planning must be realistic and aligned with the students' abilities and needs in the classroom. In addition, the teacher's awareness in planning the DI is also important as the students' language proficiencies in the classroom were vary and require deep researches on the distinguishes.

Teacher 4, on the other hand, while mentioning the teacher's preparation on planning the lesson for differentiated instruction, he also pointed out that teacher must able to control a lesson flow on the students' activities in the classroom in order to prevent the students from being tedious during the lesson:

"...kita sebagai guru harus mempersiapkan itu dengan baik, kapan waktu kita menjelaskan, kapan mereka diskusi, tentu sudah harus ada timing-nya yang tepat, sehingga anak-anak tidak monoton [pada] setiap pembelajaran itu...."

("...we as the teacher must prepare the lesson well – when should we explain the lesson, when should we discuss them – there has to be a proper timing, so every lesson won't become monotonous for the students....")

Teacher 5 discussed what she had perceived on implementing differentiated instruction, as well as the cost of practicing the approach:

"...Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi itu.... [metodenya] ribet, tapi di lapangan itu, bikin siswa senang.... hanya saja kita perlu ekstra kerja untuk ini. "

("...Differentiated Instruction is.... very complex, but in the practice, it makes the students enjoyable to learn.... still, we need to put extra work for it.")

The quote from Teacher 5 above summarized the reality of implementing the differentiated instruction, as there is a trade-off when implementing the approach, where the method itself demands a highly deep and intensive planning in order to ensure that the methodology accurately meets the students' needs and interests. However, the outcomes of the differentiated instruction are crucial: students are motivated to learn in the classroom, enabling the students to collaborate with each other and the teacher and the student are more engaged in the classroom.

Furthermore, Teacher 5 also discussed that the existence of the differentiated instruction persuaded herself to step out of her comfort teaching zone by facilitating their students instead of educating for the sake of serving her students for a better and positive learning environment. This suggested that the teacher is not considered a "sage" in the classroom; the only primary source available for information in the classroom for the students:

"Jadi, untuk [saya pribadi] yang sejujurnya itu lebih suka belajar yang tenang, saya harus bisa cari metode-metode bagaimana caranya [supaya] chaos-nya itu bermanfaat, jadi bukannya chaos-nya yang berisik-berisik tak tentu arah."

("So, for me [personally] who inherently prefer quiet learning, I have to figure out numbers of learning methods to make those 'chaos' beneficial, not just a random, meaningless chaos.")

B. English Teachers' Barriers on Differentiated Instruction

Following the exploration of teachers' beliefs and experiences, the researcher further investigated the practical challenges encountered during the implementation of differentiated instruction. Table 2 illustrates the various barriers identified through interviews with the five participants. These challenges emerged from the teachers' candid discussions about obstacles they faced in their daily teaching practice.

Table 3. English Teachers' Barriers on Differentiated Instruction

Participants	Categories Discussed	Main Focus
Teacher 1	Teaching Scheduling and Technological issue	Last period schedule and technology dependence
Teacher 2	Student Physical Condition and	Personalization and potential

	Teacher's Collaboration	lack of collaboration
Teacher 3	Student Language Proficiency and Technological issues	Language shock and technical issues
Teacher 4	Classroom Space	Limited student mobility space
Teacher 5	Trial-and-error and Learning Facilities	Experimentation time and facility maintenance

The next theme of the research referred on factors that prevented the participants from achieving a success on an effective differentiated instruction. The researcher discussed the participants on some of the factors, internally and externally that prevents them to a success of differentiated instruction.

a. Teaching Scheduling

Starting from Teacher 1, in her first year of teaching career, mentioned that most of her teaching time was scheduled nearly at the end of the school day:

"Usually, when it is the last session of the material, they will get tired because lots of lessons in a day, so I have the last schedule for English subject, so the differentiated [instruction] [was] less effective because they were tired of the class activity."

("Biasanya, ketika di pelajaran terakhir, mereka bakal ada yang lelah karena padanya pelajaran dalam sehari, jadi saya dapat jadwal di jam pelajaran terakhir, makanya pengajaran berdiferensiasi jadi tidak berjalan efektif karena rasa capek mereka.")

Teacher 1 pointed out that the fact she earned a teaching slot at last period before the end of the school day was considered a challenge for her as the students have to maintain their learning motivation since morning. Furthermore, tight schedules of the school can contribute the factor that results in a fatigue not only for the students, but also for the teachers, which affected the way they deliver the lesson.

b. Technological Dependency

In the observation, Teacher 1 primarily took an advantage of technology as the main learning method, such as laptop, social media and projector. However, the reliance on the technology in the classroom could become a double-edged sword for Teacher 1 if there was not any provided backup plan available for alternative learning method on certain circumstances, such as power outage, internet outage and broken or limited learning resources. Providing the backup plan helped the teacher to continue the learning process, regardless of the challenges and limitations encountered inside and outside the classroom.

In another observation site, the researcher also noticed where Teacher 3 was struggled to duplicate his presentation slides to the projection screen in the classroom, despite it was already connected through the HDMI cable. It involved two students to voluntarily help

him until several minutes later, it was finally connected to the projection screen. This disruption may consider minor for the teachers who understand to operate the software. However, providing back up plans remained crucial for Teacher 3, such as outdoor learning, in case there was a certain external disruption where internet or gadgets could not function, due to sudden power outage.

c. Potential Lack of Collaboration between Teachers

Teacher 2 mentioned that some of the barriers she had perceived while implementing differentiated instruction had been tackled:

"Sejauh ini, tidak ada tantangan yang besar atau bermakna bagi kami.... Artinya jika pun ada tantangan, kami bisa diskusi dengan sesama guru Bahasa Inggris di sekolah ini, jadi kami pun akan mendapatkan solusi tersebut.... siswanya [sudah] bisa berkolaborasi dengan guru dengan baik.... Sejauh ini, belum ditemukan tantangan besar untuk hal tersebut."

("So far, there have been no major or significant challenges for us.... My point is that even if those challenges emerged, we can discuss them with our fellow English teachers at this school, so we'll figure them out together.... Those students are already able to collaborate with the teachers.... So far, no major challenges have been found on this.")

Teacher 2 mentioned that there have been no clear issues on applying the differentiated instruction in her classroom. Despite of the absence, the researcher highlighted the underlying challenges that emerged based on Teacher 2's statement. One of them is the collaboration between the teachers. Such issue could bring a potential challenge for Teacher 2 where coordination between Teacher 2 and other English teachers in the school in terms of teaching strategies and learning expectations have to be conducted continuously. The coordination is required to be transparent, consistent and continuous over time. The absence of the teacher coordination may result in challenging outcomes, considering the variety of teaching experiences and knowledge with the differentiated instruction, as well as their busy teaching schedules.

d. Students' Preparedness

Teacher 2, in a similar fashion to Teacher 1, also pointed out that a certain subject that required physical activities may intensify the challenge for the English teachers, such as Physical Education, which takes amount of time to recover their learning enthusiast and motivation:

"...kita harus melihat kesiapan siswa dan belajarnya juga.... Contohnya seperti [di kelas] tadi, pembelajaran PJOK (Pendidikan Jasmani, Olahraga dan Kesehatan), jadi kita harus butuh persiapan yang lebih panjang, karena mereka membutuhkan waktu untuk mempersiapkan diri."

("...we must consider on the students' preparedness, their readiness and the activities they have encountered before. For instance, in the class of Physical Education (PE) just earlier, so we need a longer preparation, because they [also] need to prepare themselves.")

On the other hand, during the classroom observation in Teacher 3's classroom, the researcher discovered the classroom condition before the lesson began, as there were several students who were lying down at the rear corner of the classroom due to exhaustion following the Physical Education, according to Teacher 3. Coincidentally, this condition is aligned with what both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 have experienced in their interview where due to exhaustion, several students were fatigued after the intensive activities in PE. However, in Teacher 3's case, their fatigue was persisted, as several students were still appeared somnolent and lying their head down on their desk during the lesson. This condition affects the students' readiness level due to less given time to recover the students' motivation.

e. Language Shock

Teacher 3, in his time teaching at the school, addressed a concern on students' minimum provision of English language:

"...ada yang dari SD atau SMP-nya itu mereka dari SD tidak dapat [belajar] bahasa Inggris, terus mereka hanya dapat [mempelajarinya] di SMP, sedangkan di SMP itu, mereka mungkin kaget, terus jadi mereka merasa kayak, "Oh, bahasa Inggris ini kayak pembelajaran yang sulit.""

("...some of the students, from elementary or junior high school, did not get [an opportunity] to learn English in elementary school and they only started learning it in junior high school, while in junior high school, they may get shocked, then they feel like, "Oh, how difficult it is to learn English."")

In Teacher 3's classroom, some of his students have a minimum knowledge of English language or never even learned the language before entering the senior high school. This severely affected the students' readiness level as it creates separation in the classroom between those who have learned and experienced before and those have not that forced the English teacher to start over.

f. Limited Physical Space

Teacher 4 started the lesson with a physical ice-breaking activity, where the students must obey Teacher 4's instructions, such as "Step forward!", "Back forward!", "Right!" and "Left!". A mistake from one student will receive a 'punishment' by being the first to present the assignment. Despite of being the alternative pre-lesson activity, the researcher noticed several occasions where students struggled to move back and forward. The researcher also observed the seating arrangement of 5x8; 5 row seats and 8 column seats with three aisles in-between seats. The students were struggled to move around, especially while moving right and left due to the tight spaces on the aisles.

g. Trial and Error

Teacher 5 shared her barrier on obtaining a success on Differentiated Instruction:

"Tantangan terbesarnya.... ya, mau tidak mau, suka tidak suka kita sebagai guru itu harus banyak trial and error-nya, dan itu lumayan memakan waktu...."

("The biggest challenge.... well, like it or not, we as the teacher have to do lots of trial and error, and it takes quite a lot of time....")

In her interview, Teacher 5 highlighted that implementing the differentiated instruction required a constant experimentation due to discovering learning strategies that are perfectly suitable for their learning needs and interests. This resulted a time-consuming and challenging process that potentially discouraging the teacher to obtain consistency on the implementation of differentiated instruction.

h. Learning Facilities

Teacher 5, in the same interview, addressed expectations on the availability and maintenance of learning equipment in the classroom:

"....semoga fasilitas yang diberikan di kelas itu juga bisa menunjang Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi. Semisal, mungkin dari speaker-nya atau dari setiap kelas harus ada speaker [...] karena kalau speaker yang disiapkan oleh sekolah itu jauh lebih besar [suaranya], apalagi bahasa Inggris itu banyak listening [...] Nah, kalau misalkan pakai speaker bawaan dari guru itu kecil [suaranya] dan biasanya suaranya itu tidak meng-cover sampai ke belakang [kelas]. [...] Kalau misalkan [proyektor], setiap kelas itu sudah ada kalau menurut saya.... ataupun fasilitas-fasilitas yang menunjang pembelajaran, misalkan board game."

(".... I hope that the facilities provided in the classroom can support the differentiated instruction. For instance, probably the speakers or every classroom must have a speaker [...] because the speakers that provided by the school are much louder, not to mention English have lots of listening session [...] Well, the speaker that personally provided by the teacher were much quieter [in volume] and usually can't cover through the rear [of the classroom]. [...] As for projector, every classroom must have one, which is my opinion.... or any facilities that support the English learning, such as board games.")

As the researcher asked what would be her expectations on differentiated instruction in the future, she demanded the learning equipment that must be required in the classroom, such as the speaker; which was functioned specifically for the purposes of English listening, as well as the projector. Furthermore, she also demanded the additional equipment to support English learning in her classroom, such as board game. During the observation, the researcher found no speakers attached to the wall nor ceiling. The ceiling-mounted projector was also not available beyond the ceiling and they have to pick the projector from the school inventory.

Furthermore, during the interview cool down, she complained on board games that are available in the school tend to go missing or loss some of the its pieces and are nowhere to be found, which has become the school's challenge on reutilizing and maintaining the learning tool to facilitate the English classroom.

4. DISCUSSION

This research explored the English teachers' experiences on the implementation of differentiated instruction. Overall, the majority of participants shared identical principles of differentiated instruction with interaction between the teachers and the students as an engine that runs the process of instructional teaching and decision-making. Their principles aligned with Tomlinson (2001) where she displayed the methodology as a continuous interaction that responded to the students' readiness, interest and learning profile.

The finding of this research found that Teacher 3 was in a familiar territory with the differentiated instruction as he described the methodology as a formalization of the practice that have been intuitive before the existence of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This aligned with the previous study that differentiated instruction have been practiced and utilized long before the formalization of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Partami et al., 2019).

In the same occasion, the finding of the research also discovered that Teacher 3 was taught in a *madrasa* with the classroom setting of single-gender classroom that consists of male-only students. While numbers of previous research have investigated differentiated instruction in *madrasa* or Islamic schools (Dinana et al., 2024; Jannah & Fuad, 2024; Ismail et al., 2023), they were primarily concentrated on the students' perceptions or academic outcomes rather than describing the teachers' differentiation strategies on the implementation of differentiated instruction. This research gap remains underexplored and significant in this particular educational context on the way Teacher 3 practiced the differentiated instruction in the single-gender classroom. In addition, a homogenous gender in the classroom may potentially affect the English teachers' pedagogical decision-making in implementing differentiated instruction that aligns with the students' learning needs and preferences.

The finding of the research stated that Teachers 1 and 4 started the lesson at the afternoon at 11.30 a.m. and 2 p.m. The previous research from Dikker et al. (2020) stated the first finding that the classrooms that conducted at the middle of the morning (10.30 – 11.30 a.m.) were linked to students' level of attention at its highest peak, indicating that the students were more prepared to participate in the learning activities in-between the interval time.

In addition, the diminishment of the students' motivation and engagement is preventable.

While Dikker et al. (2020); Najemi et al., (2024); Ismail et al., (2023) displayed their second finding on the moderate level of engagement in the afternoon class, the current finding that an ice-breaking activity is beneficially helpful on maintaining the students' learning attention, motivation and engagement. Deploying engaging activity before the lesson did not only sustained the students' engagement and motivation, but also countered a typical deterioration that commonly occurred during the afternoon classes.

5. CONCLUSION

This research explored the English teachers' experiences on the implementation of differentiated instruction. Five participating English teachers share the similar conceptualization of DI as a transformative yet an eye-opening shift of mindset from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, personalization based on learning needs and abilities, as well as accommodation of diverse learning styles,

The implementation yielded predominantly positive outcomes on the students' responsiveness, collaborative freedom, enjoyable and applicable learning. However, their implementation entailed compromises, such as intensive, meticulous and realistic

pedagogical planning, realistic goal-setting for the students, instructional time allocation, and pedagogical risk-taking.

On the other hand, the participants encountered multifaceted obstacles that diminish the effectiveness of DI, such as teaching scheduling issues, students' academic preparedness before the lesson, language shock that created proficiency gaps from the students, technological vulnerability, lack of physical space, resource constraints, and possible teachers' coordination vulnerability.

These findings collectively demonstrate that while teachers view DI as pedagogically valuable and experientially rewarding, successful implementation demands sustained institutional support addressing temporal, infrastructural, and professional development needs to overcome persistent barriers that complicate even committed teachers' differentiation efforts.

REFERENCES

- Anggara, S. (2023). Exploring the Effectiveness of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka Policy in Indonesian Higher Education Institutions: An In-depth Case Study Analysis. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v15i2.3885>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Dikker, S., Haegens, S., Bevilacqua, D., Davidesco, I., Wan, L., Kaggen, L., McClintock, J., Chaloner, K., Ding, M., West, T., & Poepel, D. (2020). Morning brain: Real-world neural evidence that high school class times matter. *Social Cognitives and Affective Neurosciences*, 15(11), 1193 – 1202. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsaa142>
- Dinana, M. F., Makhfud, M., & Mukhlison, M. (2024). The Use of Differentiated Instruction in Achieving Learning Objectives of Islamic Religious Education in the Merdeka Curriculum. *Intelektual: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Studi Keislaman*, 14(1), 79 – 92. <https://doi.org/10.33367/ji.v14i1.5318>
- Ismail, S., Kasriyati, D., Herdi, H., & Andriani, R. (2023). Teachers' perception of Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) in teaching at senior high school in Pekanbaru. *ELT-Lectura*, 10(2), 75-82. <https://doi.org/10.31849/elt-lectura.v10i2.14695>
- Jannah, E. R., & Fuad, A. F. N. (2024). Implementasi Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi dalam Meningkatkan Pemahaman Peserta Didik pada Pelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam. *Hikmah*, 21(1), 71 – 83. <https://doi.org/10.53802/hikmah.v21i1.365>
- Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia. (2020). *Kemendikbud Terbitkan Kurikulum Darurat pada Satuan Pendidikan dalam Kondisi Khusus*. Retrieved February 29th, 2024 from <https://www.kemdikbud.go.id/main/blog/2020/08/kemendikbud-terbitkan-kurikulum-darurat-pada-satuan-pendidikan-dalam-kondisi-khusus>
- Moran, D. (2005). *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology*. Polity Press.

- Nafi'ah, J., Jauhari Faruq, D., & Mutmainah, S. (2023). Karakteristik Pembelajaran pada Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Di Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. *Auladuna : Jurnal Prodi Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 5(1), 1–12. <https://ejournal.uas.ac.id/index.php/auladuna/article/view/1248>
- Najemi, S., Ardiasih, L. S., & Sundari, H. (2024). The Effectiveness of Google Sites in Differentiated Instruction to Increase Students' Learning Motivation and Reading Comprehension on English Narrative Texts. *ELT-Lectura*, 11(2), 110-122. <https://doi.org/10.31849/elt-lectura.v11i2.21768>
- Partami, I., Padmadewi, N., & Artini, L. P. (2019). Differentiated Instruction In Multicultural Classroom Of Primary Years Programme In Gandhi Memorial Intercontinental School - Bali. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Indonesia*, 7(1).
- Pier, L., Hough, H. J., Christian, M., Bookman, N., Wilkenfeld, B., & Miller, R. (2021, January 25). COVID-19 and the educational equity crisis: Evidence on Learning Loss from the CORE Data Collaborative [Commentary]. *Policy Analysis for California Education*. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/covid-19-and-educational-equity-crisis>
- Pozas, M., Letzel, V., Lindner, K. T., & Schwab, S. (2021). DI (Differentiated Instruction) Does Matter! The Effects of DI on Secondary School Students' Well-Being, Social Inclusion and Academic Self-Concept. *Frontiers in Education*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.729027>
- Roy, A., Guay, F., & Valois, P. (2013). Teaching to address diverse learning needs: Development and validation of a Differentiated Instruction Scale. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(11), 1186–1204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.743604>
- Sibagariang, D., Sihotang, H., Murniati, E. (2021). Peran Guru Penggerak Dalam Pendidikan Merdeka Belajar di Indonesia. *Jurnal Dinamika Pendidikan*, 14(2), 88-99. <https://doi.org/10.51212/jdp.v14i2.53>
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Suryantari, H. (2022). Exploring Character of Pancasila Students in the English Textbook for the Tenth Grade Senior High School Students. *Journal of English Language Learning*, 6(2), 229–243. <https://doi.org/10.31949/jell.v6i2.3772>
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2nd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2023). *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tuerah, R., & Tuerah, J. (2023). Kurikulum Merdeka dalam Perspektif Kajian Teori: Analisis Kebijakan untuk Peningkatan Kualitas Pembelajaran di Sekolah. *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 9(19), 979–988. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10047903>

- Uswatiyah, W., Argaeni, N., Masrurah, M., Suherman, D., & Berlian, U. C. (2021). Implikasi Kebijakan Kampus Merdeka Belajar terhadap Manajemen Kurikulum dan Sistem Penilaian Pendidikan Menengah Serta Pendidikan Tinggi. *Jurnal Dirosah Islamiyah*, 3(1), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.47467/jdi.v3i1.299>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process*. Harvard University Press.
- World Bank. (2021). *What is Learning Poverty*. Retrieved October 7th, 2023 from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty>