

## **The Analysis of EFL Teachers' Perception of Differentiated Instruction**

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction and how they implement it in vocational high school classrooms. This research employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations involving two EFL teachers at SMKN 4 Kepahiang, Indonesia. The finding reveals that both teachers have positive perceptions of differentiated instruction and actively implement its core components content, process, and product differentiated despite facing practical challenges such as limited facilities and difficulties in student grouping. The results emphasize that teacher commitment and adaptability play crucial roles in overcoming these obstacles. One teacher relied on structured planning, while the other adapted spontaneously based on the student's responses. This study provides new insight into the practical implementation of differentiated instruction in the Indonesian EFL context, particularly within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. Unlike previous studies, which often focused on theoretical frameworks or small-scale applications of differentiated instruction in conventional curricula, this research emphasizes its application in the context of a nationally mandated, student-centered curriculum reform. Its main contribution lies in highlighting the importance of teacher perception, readiness, and contextual flexibility, while recommending institutional support and continuous professional development to enhance inclusive teaching practices.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Instruction, EFL Classroom, Merdeka Curriculum, Teacher Perception

### **A. Introduction**

Education plays a vital role in developing a generation that can adapt to the demands of the times. In today's increasingly globalized and digital society, the ability to communicate in English has become one of the essential competencies, especially for students in vocational education who are expected to enter competitive and rapidly evolving job markets. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in Indonesian vocational schools (SMK), the

challenge of addressing a classroom full of students with different learning needs, backgrounds, and motivations is more complex than ever.

Students at the vocational level are often heterogeneous in terms of cognitive abilities, interests, socio-economic backgrounds, prior knowledge, and vocational specialization. As such, applying a uniform teaching method, or one-size-fits-all approach, often fails to engage them effectively. This educational mismatch not only reduces student motivation and learning outcomes but also increases the gap between high-achieving and struggling students. When left unaddressed, these differences can create disengaged learners and ineffective learning environments.

To overcome this issue, differentiated instruction has emerged as a promising approach that seeks to address learner diversity by allowing flexibility in instructional design. Tomlinson (1999) defines differentiated instruction as a teaching philosophy based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual student needs. It involves modifications to four key elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. Through ongoing assessment and flexible grouping, teachers can create inclusive, student-centered learning spaces that maximize the potential of every learner.

The need for such instructional strategies becomes even more critical in vocational schools like SMKN 4 Kepahiang, where students not only differ in their academic aptitude but also in the vocational domains they pursue – ranging from culinary and fashion to automotive and engineering. Each of these fields requires unique English vocabulary, functions, and skills. For example, a student in the hospitality major might need more exposure to conversational English and service-related terminology, while a student in the mechanical engineering track may focus more on technical vocabulary related to tools and machinery. This demands that EFL teachers have the ability to contextualize their materials and pedagogy based on students' vocational focus.

To support this need, the Indonesian Ministry of Education introduced the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes flexibility, autonomy, and personalized learning. It encourages teachers to identify and address student differences by designing lessons that reflect learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The Independent Curriculum includes a number of key aspects designed to change the conventional education approach to be more dynamic and relevant (Mardiana & Emmiyati, 2024). Differentiated instruction is explicitly highlighted as a core practice within this curriculum. Furthermore, the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning and character education aligns with the principles of differentiated by allowing students to explore content in diverse and meaningful ways. This independent curriculum focuses on the use of adequate technology because it is possible that we have entered a very sophisticated digital era, namely entering the 5.0 era (Zakso, 2023).

One of the learning concepts that is considered effective in Independent curriculum is differentiated learning (Sulaiman et al., 2024). However, despite strong policy support, the practical implementation of differentiated instruction in Indonesian classrooms, particularly in vocational schools, remains inconsistent and understudied. Many teachers still rely on conventional strategies, citing challenges such as limited time, large class sizes, lack of facilities, and insufficient professional training. There is also a general lack of awareness or understanding of how to translate differentiated from theory to practice, especially in resource-constrained environments.

Field observations from SMKN 4 Kepahiang suggest that although some teachers have started to adapt their instruction to accommodate learner differences, others remain hesitant or unsure. Concerns about fairness, increased workload, and possible misinterpretation by parents or colleagues contribute to the reluctance. For example, assigning different tasks to students is sometimes viewed as unequal treatment, even though the goal is to support individual learning needs. This highlights the need for a cultural and structural shift in how differentiated instruction is perceived and implemented.

Several studies have explored the relevance of differentiated in EFL and broader educational contexts. Yuniawati (2024) emphasizes the importance of teacher training in ensuring the success of differentiated practices. Handa (2020) notes that despite positive teacher perceptions, implementation often lags due to lack of clarity and support. Gibbs (2022) further identifies institutional constraints, such as unclear curriculum standards and inadequate planning time, as significant barriers. Nevertheless, few studies in Indonesia have focused specifically on vocational schools or considered how teachers' perceptions align with their actual classroom practices.

Successful implementation of differentiated instruction depends not only on teacher beliefs and competencies but also on external support systems. School leaders, parents, and educational policymakers must work together to create environments where differentiated can thrive. This includes providing time for collaboration among teachers, opportunities for continuous professional development, and open communication with parents to foster understanding and support for varied instructional strategies. Therefore, this study aims to explore in-depth how EFL teachers at SMKN 4 Kepahiang perceive and implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms. Using a mixed-method approach that combines questionnaires, interviews, and documentation analysis, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges teachers face. The study contributes to the growing literature on inclusive and adaptive instruction by examining the intersection between teacher cognition, curriculum mandates, and classroom realities.

The novelty of this research lies in its setting and approach—analyzing differentiated instruction in the underrepresented context of a vocational high school using both qualitative and quantitative data. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of school culture and leadership in facilitating innovative practices. Principals who value teacher autonomy and encourage experimentation can significantly influence teaching outcomes. Similarly, engaging parents and students in the rationale and benefits of differentiated can enhance acceptance and long-term success. In light of these issues, this research seeks to address the following questions: 1) How is differentiated instruction implemented in English language classrooms? 2) What challenges do teachers face in implementing differentiated instruction? 3) What are teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms?

## **B. Methods**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions and implementation of differentiated instruction. The mixed-methods approach was chosen to strengthen the validity of the findings by exploring not only numerical trends but also the underlying experiences, opinions, and classroom practices of the participants. The research was conducted at SMKN 4 Kepahiang, a vocational high school located in Kepahiang Regency, Bengkulu, Indonesia. This school was chosen purposively because it has officially implemented the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages flexible and student-centered learning, including the application of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. The school also has a relatively diverse student population in terms of learning styles, academic readiness, and vocational backgrounds, making it an appropriate setting for this study.

The respondents of the study consisted of two male English teachers who had prior experience implementing differentiated instruction. The choice of only two participants was intentional to allow for in-depth exploration of their experiences, perceptions, and teaching practices within the specific context of the Merdeka Curriculum. By focusing on a small, information-rich sample, the study aimed to capture detailed insights that might be overlooked in broader quantitative research. Moreover, the participants' relevant experience ensured that the data gathered would be directly aligned with the focus of the research, thereby enhancing the study's validity and depth. The first teacher was a 39-year-old educator with 17 years of teaching experience and is certified as a Guru Penggerak (Teacher Leader). He has actively practiced differentiated instruction for three years and serves as the Vice Principal for Quality Assurance at the school. Teacher 2 is 44 years old and has 13 years of experience teaching at the vocational level. He began applying differentiated instruction in 2022 based on his self-initiated professional practices. Both participants were selected through purposive sampling, as they met the criteria

of having relevant teaching experience and actively implementing differentiated strategies in their classrooms.

To collect the data, three types of instruments were used: (1) a questionnaire, (2) interview guidelines, and (3) an observation sheet. The questionnaire, designed with Likert-scale items, was distributed to gather quantitative data on the teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction. It included statements related to the importance, challenges, and strategies of differentiated teaching, and respondents rated their level of agreement. The interview served as the main qualitative data source, conducted in a semi-structured format to explore the teachers' views, experiences, and interpretations of differentiated instruction. The interview also delved into their preparation process, instructional planning, and classroom challenges. Furthermore, classroom observations were conducted to see firsthand how differentiated instruction was applied during English lessons, with specific attention to activities during the opening, core, and closing stages of the learning process. The observations focused on how teachers adjusted content, process, and products based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate the percentage and average score for each response. This helped to identify trends and overall perceptions. Meanwhile, the qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction (summarizing and selecting relevant data), data display (organizing data in visual or narrative form), and conclusion drawing and verification (interpreting patterns and validating findings).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was used by comparing results from the three different data collection techniques. Source triangulation was also applied by analyzing data from two different teachers to identify similarities or contrasts in perceptions and classroom practices. Furthermore, the researcher ensured member checking by confirming the accuracy of interview interpretations with the teachers involved. Peer debriefing was also conducted with fellow researchers to reduce potential bias and increase the reliability of the thematic coding process. Additionally, the questionnaire instrument underwent a preliminary pilot testing with two non-participant teachers to verify clarity and content validity. Minor revisions were made based on their feedback before administering the final version. This step was taken to ensure that the questionnaire items were easily understood and appropriately targeted to the core dimensions of differentiated instruction.

By combining multiple data sources and analysis methods, this study offers a holistic perspective on how differentiated instruction is perceived and implemented in the Indonesian EFL classroom, particularly under the influence of the Merdeka Curriculum. The integration of observation, teacher voice, and numerical trends offers a multi-layered understanding that highlights not only the presence of

differentiated practices, but also the contextual factors that enable or hinder their effective application. These methods provided rich insights into how teachers mediate between policy expectations and actual classroom dynamics, reaffirming the importance of teacher agency in implementing curricular innovation in diverse learning environments.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

This study was conducted at SMKN 4 Kepahiang using a mixed-method approach. The objective of the research was to answer three research questions: how teachers implement differentiated instruction, the challenges they face, and their perceptions of the approach. To answer these questions, data were collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation such as lesson plans (RPP) and classroom activity photos. The qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed and compared with relevant theories, especially Tomlinson's (1999) theory of differentiated.

#### **Implementation of Differentiated Instruction**

Based on documentation, interview results, and questionnaire analysis, it was found that both English teachers involved as participants implemented differentiated instruction in various stages of the teaching process, including opening, core, and closing activities. A comparison between the two teachers revealed distinct application styles: Teacher 1 emphasized planning, structure, and instructional consistency, while Teacher 2 highlighted adaptability, student freedom, and real-time decision-making. Despite these differing approaches, both effectively implemented the core elements of differentiated instruction. In the opening stage, the teachers greeted students warmly, explained the objectives, and provided an apperception to connect the material with students' daily lives. This approach aimed to create a conducive learning environment and encourage active participation from the beginning. Teacher 1 explained that he utilized early observations on students' interests and characteristics to design differentiated strategies. "I observe students from the beginning of the semester, then I adjust the lesson plan accordingly," he stated. This aligns with the principle of diagnostic assessment used as a basis for designing learning content. Teacher 2 added that he paid attention to students' learning styles and adapted teaching methods to match their preferences. "Each student has a different learning style. So, when I notice a student who is physically active, I ask them to create a poster or a related product. But for those who prefer listening, I read them a text or a story. That way, they can adjust according to their own learning styles."

In the core learning activities, differentiated was applied through content, process, and product. Teacher 1 varied the materials by preparing multiple media options such as reading texts, audio recordings, and images. He also created different

discussion questions based on students' comprehension levels. Teacher 2 implemented grouping based on students' readiness. Students with higher abilities were assigned to write descriptive paragraphs, while students with lower readiness were asked to describe images orally using guided questions.

In addition, teachers gave students options in completing tasks, such as choosing topics or presentation media that suited their comfort levels. This shows the implementation of product differentiated, allowing students to demonstrate understanding in various ways. The documented lesson plans also included evaluation methods tailored to students' needs and characteristics, such as rubric-based assessments, portfolios, and observation notes. During the closing activities, teachers carried out reflection by asking open-ended questions that encouraged students to evaluate their learning process. Teacher 1 concluded the lesson by summarizing the core material and giving students the opportunity to respond orally through class discussion. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 more often used discussion and short Q&A sessions to summarize the material and ensure student understanding. In general, the implementation of differentiated instruction by both teachers was in accordance with the principles proposed by Tomlinson (2001), including flexibility in designing instruction, understanding student profiles, and adjusting teaching methods. Although the implementation was not always perfect or consistent in every meeting, there was a clear effort to adapt instruction to meet students' needs. The comparison between the two teachers in this study reveals different yet complementary approaches to implementing differentiated instruction. Teacher 1 adopted a structured, well-planned strategy, emphasizing consistency and diagnostic planning, while Teacher 2 favored flexibility and responsiveness, adapting his teaching in real time to match students' immediate needs. These differences are outlined more clearly in the table below:

**Table 1. Differences of Teaching Stage**

Teaching Stage	Teacher 1: Structured & Planned	Teacher 2: Adaptive & Flexible
Opening	Warm greetings, stated objectives, diagnostic observations	Apperception linked to students' real-life experiences, spontaneous interaction
Planning	Designed lesson plans based on early student observations	Adjusted methods based on real-time learning style observations
Content	Provided varied media: texts, audios, and visuals	Used local stories and alternative content formats
Process	Used tiered discussion questions based on student readiness	Grouped students based on readiness, adapted tasks accordingly
Product	Allowed students to choose output formats (e.g., written, oral)	Encouraged creativity and flexibility in task presentation
Closing	Conducted structured reflection and full-class summaries	Used Q&A and short discussions to check comprehension

This comparison illustrates how both teachers implemented the key principles of Tomlinson's (1999, 2001) differentiated instruction model, particularly in terms of content, process, and product differentiated. Content differentiated was seen in the provision of various learning materials, while process differentiated was demonstrated through flexible groupings and instructional strategies tailored to learning styles. Product differentiated was evident in the freedom given to students to express their understanding in multiple formats. Moreover, both teachers engaged in ongoing informal assessment whether through observation or student interaction to inform their instructional decisions, aligning with Tomlinson's emphasis on understanding learner profiles and responding with appropriate strategies.

### **Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction**

Although the implementation went fairly well, teachers faced various challenges in terms of technical aspects, resources, and social factors. The first challenge was the lack of supporting facilities. Teacher 1 mentioned that the absence of a language lab hindered his ability to provide high-quality audio media. "I can only use regular speakers, and sometimes the sound isn't clear. So I switch to using local stories," he said. This strategy was effective in building cultural connection, but it could not replace ideal learning facilities.

Teacher 2 also pointed out issues with grouping students. He noted that students tended to sit with their close friends rather than being grouped based on learning needs. "If this continues, their skills won't develop," he stated. This created a dilemma for teachers in balancing students' emotional needs with academic effectiveness. This challenge was also reflected in observations where teachers had to adapt their methods when grouping plans did not go as expected.

Parental support was also a significant issue. Teacher 2 admitted that some parents misunderstood the intention behind differentiated instruction. "Sometimes when they see their child learning outside the classroom, they think the teacher is just playing around." This indicates the importance of intensive communication between school and parents so that this approach is understood as a way to address learning needs, not as a form of inequality or favoritism. Another obstacle was limited planning time. Teacher 1 stated that designing varied teaching materials for different students required more time, which had not been adequately supported by the school. "I already prepared a variety of materials, but when implemented, some still didn't match due to students' differing absorption levels," he said. This shows that even with maximum effort, without systemic support and proportional time allocation, the effectiveness of differentiated instruction will remain limited. These findings are in line with the research by Nurhayati and Handayani (2020), who stated that limited facilities and lack of stakeholder understanding are major challenges in implementing DI. Administrative support and adequate facilities are

essential to support effective implementation of differentiated instruction, especially in vocational schools like SMK.

### **Teachers' Perception of Differentiated Instruction**

Based on the questionnaire results analyzed descriptively, both teachers had very positive perceptions of differentiated instruction. The average overall score reached 4.38 out of 5, indicating a high level of agreement with statements that reflect differentiated principles. One of the highest-rated statements was "Varied teaching approaches can improve students' English skills," which received a perfect score. In interviews, Teacher 1 stated that differentiated instruction made teaching more interesting and creative. "In the past, we tended to rely on lecturing; the teaching media used were usually limited to what we created ourselves. However, now, with the advancement of technology, we can utilize audio, video, and various other interactive media to deliver content," he said. He felt that by providing alternative delivery methods, students were more actively engaged and learning outcomes improved. Teacher 2 added that the approach helped students become more confident because they felt given space to learn based on their own abilities and comfort. "The benefit of differentiated instruction is that it allows students to develop themselves from not being able to do something to being capable, they become independent, and they can understand what the teacher conveys."

These positive perceptions were influenced by the Merdeka Curriculum, which promotes flexible and student-centered learning models. Teachers explained that although the implementation was not always easy, national curriculum guidance gave them more courage to try new approaches. The lesson plans used already included differentiated principles, although the implementation needed to be adjusted to classroom realities.

However, these positive perceptions were accompanied by recognition that differentiated instruction requires training and collaboration. Teachers expressed the need for specific training that discusses concrete techniques for designing varied teaching materials, creating appropriate formative assessments, and building flexible classroom management strategies. They also hoped for teacher forums to share best practices and solutions to the challenges encountered. Based on all the findings above, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated instruction at SMKN 4 Kepahiang showed positive efforts aligned with theoretical principles and national policy directions. Both teachers demonstrated good understanding, positive perceptions, and willingness to apply differentiated strategies. However, real challenges remained, particularly in terms of resources, time, and stakeholder support. This study emphasizes the importance of collaboration, training, and school support systems so that differentiated instruction can be implemented optimally and sustainably in vocational school environments.

## **D. Conclusions**

This study concludes that differentiated instruction was implemented effectively by both English teachers at SMKN 4 Kepahiang through varied content, process, and product tailored to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Despite challenges such as limited facilities, student grouping difficulties, and lack of parental understanding, both teachers demonstrated adaptability and strong commitment to inclusive teaching. Their perceptions toward differentiated instruction were highly positive, recognizing its benefits in improving student engagement, motivation, and language proficiency, and aligning well with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Despite offering valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. First, the small sample size, involving only two teachers, limits the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative depth allows for rich description, the results cannot be used to represent all EFL teachers in Indonesia or even in vocational schools. Second, the contextual limitation of conducting the study in a single school (SMKN 4 Kepahiang) with its unique institutional culture and resources may not reflect the realities of other schools with different environments. Third, although data triangulation was attempted through interviews, questionnaires, and documentation, the absence of direct classroom observation means the study relied heavily on teacher-reported data, which may introduce subjectivity.

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