# Challenge and Opportunities: A Qualitative Exploration of Junior High School English Language Educators' Perspectives on Implementing Differentiated Instruction

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**Abstract**
The article explores the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI), focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced by English language teachers in junior high schools. The study follows a qualitative approach within a social constructivist worldview, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies to address diverse learning needs. The research questions delve into teachers' perceptions of DI, the challenges encountered, and effective strategies for addressing diversity in the classroom. The proposed strategies reflect a systematic approach to address challenges in differentiated learning. Through team teaching, technology integration, and enhanced knowledge mapping, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers on DI. The findings anticipate informing support mechanisms for teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students effectively.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Instruction, Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Students may have ever been assigned a memorization task by your teachers. However, at that time, you couldn't memorize it? On the other hand, you find it easy to memorize a song, recall the plot of a movie you watched, and remember the details of the steps in an activity when you do it. This process reflects one of your abilities and tendencies in an activity, which is currently being explored in-depth in differentiated learning. This aligns with the opinion that a teaching approach aimed at meeting the needs of all learners within academically diverse classrooms (C. A. Tomlinson, 1999).

In Indonesia, the implementation of the Merdeka curriculum related to learning, assessment, and strengthening the Pancasila student profile is regulated by Permendikbudristek No. 262/M/2022. It refers that one of the learning models that support this is differentiated learning, which is starting to be applied in classes at various levels to achieve the learning goals of the Merdeka curriculum. Every student's learning needs must be met. in line with Dewey's opinion (1938) that schools serve as entities that integrate the experiences, interests, needs, and concerns of learners to promote academic progress. Recent research by Zólyomi, (2022) on the beliefs and practices related to Differentiated Instruction (DI) among Hungarian secondary school EFL teachers suggests that educators find it challenging to implement DI.

In the context of implementation in Indonesia, Elviya (2023) evaluates and reflects on the ongoing learning process. The implementation of differentiated Indonesian language learning has a positive impact on students, as shown by the increased enthusiasm and excitement of students during learning (Sardi et al., 2017). This study aims to explore the views of English teachers on the concept and implementation of differentiated learning, identify the main challenges faced by teachers in implementing this approach, and investigate opportunities and strategies considered effective by teachers in addressing diversity in the classroom. The expectation is that the acquired insights will contribute to enhancing our current comprehension of the perspectives of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding Differentiated Instruction (DI) and provide valuable information on how teachers can receive support in meeting the needs of their students (Sardi, JN, et al., 2022).

Based on the background above, a study will be conducted to explore "Challenges and Opportunities: A Qualitative Exploration of Junior High School English Language Teachers' Views on Differentiated Instruction" to understand the implementation and impact of Differentiated Instruction on students. The research questions in this study consist of three main topics: (1) How do English language teachers perceive the concept and implementation of differentiated learning? (2) What are the main challenges faced by teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction? (3) What opportunities and strategies are considered effective by teachers in addressing diversity in the classroom?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The educational strategy known as differentiated teaching places a strong emphasis on identifying each student's unique characteristics inside the classroom.

Teachers frequently encounter a number of challenges that may prevent this concept from being implemented as effectively as possible, despite the fact that it has the potential to significantly improve fulfilling varied learning needs. However, During the discussion of the difficulties instructors encounter while putting Differentiated Instruction into practice, it was noted that a major obstacle is the teachers' lack of expertise and comprehension of the idea. Another challenge was time limits, which meant that teachers had to set aside more time for education that was differentiated.

Additionally, potential and successful tactics for addressing diversity in the classroom were investigated. To accommodate varying learning styles, it is suggested that teaching teams be formed, highlighting the importance of teacher collaboration (Sardi, Surahmat, et al., 2022). Technology integration was recommended as a successful tactic for increasing student engagement and supporting different learning styles. Furthermore, it was thought that improving instructors' understanding of student mapping in terms of learning styles was essential for effective differentiation. Effective solutions included the use of applications and a thorough examination of the learning requirements and learning styles of the students.

To improve the efficacy and accuracy of the learning process, educators must go through a number of stages in the implementation of differentiated learning (Ambarita and Solida Simanullang, 2023). Teachers take a few steps to ensure that students learn effectively and get the best results.

Teachers must first map out students' learning needs based on three primary factors: learning profile, interest in learning, and readiness to learn. This mapping can be done using a variety of techniques, including surveys, interviews, observation, and more. Upon acquiring a mapping of every student's learning needs, the teacher's next task is to create instructional strategies, tactics, and activities based on these needs.

The process of assessing every action the instructor has taken in the classroom is the third step in the last stage. This supports the assertion made by Mahilda & Komalasari, n.d. (2023) that in order for teachers to successfully accomplish learning objectives, they must be able to provide meaningful, engaging learning experiences that are adapted to the requirements of their students. To further improve the caliber of education and learning in the classroom, educators are expected to actively use and develop innovations in a variety of learning tools, including instructional media.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

The study was situated within an interpretive, social constructivism worldview, assuming that reality is socially constructed, and there is no single, observable reality (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell 2013; Merriam 2009). In a social constructivist view, individuals seek an understanding of the world to develop subjective meanings of their experiences. The methodology employed in this research is qualitative with an exploratory approach. The choice of exploratory qualitative research is made to present descriptive data obtained from a phenomenon studied in the field. In this study,

"Challenges and Opportunities: A Qualitative Exploration of Junior High School English Language Teachers' Views on Differentiated Instruction," it is expected to describe the data comprehensively and accurately.

The required data is obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data from the research are collected from primary data sources and secondary data sources. Primary data sources originate from SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang, while secondary data is obtained from documents such as school documents, teacher documents, theoretical studies, and scholarly articles. The research instruments used consist of interview guides, observation guidelines, and documentation. The research data is then processed using data analysis techniques according to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), comprising three types of data analysis activities: Data Display, and Conclusion Drawing/Verification.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research was conducted in August 2023. It began with the submission of a Research Permit Letter to SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang, until the Research Permit Letter and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) were accepted by the school's head on August 12, 2023. Simultaneously with submitting the research permit letter, initial observations were also conducted to directly understand the general overview at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang.

On August 14, 2023, the research officially commenced at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang by interviewing English teachers as informants. Subsequently, to strengthen the interview results, observations were also made on teachers and students during the ongoing classes. This research is focused solely on the problem formulations written at the beginning, namely how Differentiated Learning is implemented in English language classes at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang; and the impact of implementing Differentiated Learning in the Independent Curriculum on English language learning for students at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang.

The findings regarding the Implementation of Differentiated Learning in English language classes at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang are detailed in this section. The elaboration of research data results consists of: (1) The Implementation of Differentiated Learning based on English language teachers' perceptions; (2) The main challenges faced by teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction; (3) The opportunities and strategies considered effective by teachers in addressing diversity in the classroom at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang.

### 1) The Implementation of differentiated learning based on English language teachers perceive

In implementing Differentiated Learning, there are several stages that educators must undertake to make the learning process more effective and accurate (Ambarita and

Solida Simanullang, 2023). To achieve effective learning with optimal results, teachers follow several steps.

In the first step, teachers need to map out the learning needs of students based on three main aspects: readiness to learn, interest in learning, and the student's learning profile. Various methods can be employed for this mapping, such as observation, surveys, interviews, and so on. The second step, after obtaining a mapping of the learning needs of each student, involves the teacher developing methods, strategies, and learning activities based on these identified needs.

The third step, in the final phase, is the process of evaluating everything that the teacher has done in the classroom. This aligns with Mahilda & Komalasari, n.d.'s (2023) opinion that teachers need to have the ability to design engaging and relevant learning experiences tailored to the needs of students to achieve learning objectives effectively. Furthermore, teachers are expected to actively utilize and develop innovations in various learning resources, including instructional media, to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Regarding the steps of implementing Differentiated Learning in the English language subject, information was obtained from the English teacher with the initials Mr. SM by asking, "How do you conduct a mapping of students' learning needs based on their interests, readiness, and learning profiles?" Mr. SM expressed:"What teachers must do at the beginning of the lesson is to conduct a diagnostic assessment to understand students' prior knowledge; this aims to determine the initial readiness of the learners. I also prepare a simple and manual survey or questionnaire on sheets of paper that includes questions about readiness to learn, interest in learning, and student learning preferences based on my basic knowledge."

The results of the interview and observation indicate that Mr. SM has already conducted a simple and manual mapping of learning needs, also known as diagnostic assessment, through written tests that students have to complete on sheets of paper. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher provides questions related to the material to be studied that day, which in this case is Chapter IV of English (This is my World). This activity is known as a Diagnostic Assessment.

After the teacher conducts the initial mapping of students, the next step is to develop learning activities tailored to the results of the initial mapping. This aligns with the explanation in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology book, the Curriculum Standards and Educational Assessment Agency (2021). The results of the diagnostic assessment then serve as the basis for planning activities, including the design of differentiated content, processes, and products.

Interviews were conducted again by asking, "How do you accommodate the talents and interests of students in designing learning so that they feel what they are

learning aligns with their learning expectations?" Mr. SM revealed: "Firstly, I find out what learning model suits and is liked by students. For example, in teaching describing text, I don't immediately teach the 'generic structure,' but first, I ensure whether the students already have enough vocabulary. If not, it becomes my homework to find a way for students to have a rich vocabulary. However, if everyone already has an adequate vocabulary, I am grateful, and the learning about 'describing things' can then proceed."

Mr. SM strives to design learning adapted to the students' learning conditions to accommodate their talents and interests. In the application of Differentiated Learning, this is indeed crucial. The interview continued by asking, "How do you develop learning that accommodates the differences in talents and interests of students, allowing them to choose diverse ways according to their desires?" Mr. SM expressed: "Based on the initial test results I obtained, I prepare teaching modules that support Differentiated Learning, achieve learning outcomes, and develop learning according to the results of the initial mapping. To anticipate students feeling jealous if the modules are different, I create teaching modules that are the same, only the students' achievements are differentiated. For students with special abilities in my knowledge, I provide simpler tests. When there are students with weaknesses, I will provide guidance. Due to time constraints, I find it difficult to provide specific guidance to students with weaknesses, so I provide guidance directly to all students so that they can learn again. If there is a student whose condition is very serious or cannot grasp the material at all, then I provide special guidance for that student. But so far, I haven't found a student with such a condition in my class, and I am very grateful."

In the implementation of Differentiated Learning by Mr. SM, different tests are given to students whose abilities are below their peers, providing simpler tests than other students. This does not align with C., & M. T. Tomlinson ( 2013) opinion that teachers should tailor their approach to teaching independence skills, recognizing that students demonstrate a broad range of proficiency levels in applying these skills. Similar to how they differentiate instruction for various skills, it's crucial for educators to individualize the development of independence skills based on each student's capabilities. In this book, she explains that each student is given test instructions according to their interests and learning styles, so the form of the test varies according to the student's learning style. In other words, students are tested with the same level of competency but with different instructions, resulting in differentiated learning in content, process, and product.

Mr. SM has already tried to develop learning that accommodates the differences in talents and interests of students. In the application of Differentiated Learning, all students can learn without exception; instead, they can collaborate and be active in learning. Mr. SM designs learning based on the mapping results, although not yet optimal. The design of Differentiated Learning in the English subject has been prepared by prioritizing differentiation. The lesson plan outlined in the teaching module is what the teacher will do. The activities in this teaching module fulfil the needs of students based

on the initial mapping results. Teachers have the freedom to choose teaching tools or media according to the students' learning needs.

The next question is about how Mr. SM understands the use of various learning strategies based on differentiated content, differentiated processes, and differentiated products. Mr. SM provided the following explanation: "Based on what I know, the use of differentiated content strategies is related to the content or material that will be taught to students according to their learning styles, conditions, and abilities. The material to be taught remains the same, only the type of coverage is adjusted to the learning needs of each student. Handling students is also differentiated based on their needs. If differences in student abilities are found, then the phase of learning achievement will be adjusted.

Next, for differentiated processes, this is related to the way of teaching and the application of a learning model. Teaching methods are again adjusted to the conditions and needs of students. As for differentiated products, this is related to the products of learning outcomes. In Indonesian language learning, products can be in the form of texts, posters, etc. It is adjusted to what the students like." Observations in learning also show that the learning design has been implemented according to the initial mapping. The teacher designs a teaching module that serves as a guide for implementing learning. The teaching module developed is aligned with the mapping results of the learning needs of English students.

If the steps of designing Differentiated Learning have been taken, the next step is to conduct evaluation and reflection. The interview continued by asking, "How do you assess or evaluate and reflect on Differentiated Learning in this English lesson?" Mrs. LV provided the following information: "I conduct evaluations at the beginning and end of the lesson. At the beginning of the lesson, I conduct a diagnostic assessment, and at the end of each lesson, I conduct Formative Assessment referring to the content flow of learning outcomes that I have listed in the teaching module. Before the lesson ends, I give students questions to work on. Although this is differentiated learning, the questions I give to students are not differentiated, except if there is a child with special needs, then I give that child different questions according to their ability. Alhamdulillah, so far, I haven't encountered a child like that. The abilities of the children in this class are almost the same overall. Teachers will not force their students to move on to the next stage if the student is not proficient yet, unlike the previous curriculum that required students to achieve learning objectives. If the evaluation results are not optimal, then I provide re-understanding to the students. As a follow-up, I also ask parents to help their children learn at home. Regarding reflection, at the end of each lesson, the students and I reflect on the learning that took place that day, what they liked, difficulties they experienced, whether they understood the material or not. If not, we agree to review the material."

One of the principles of Differentiated Learning is Continuous Assessment. Before the material is given, the teacher conducts an evaluation as the initial step in the

learning process. Initial assessment to measure the preparedness and proximity of students to learning goals and the depth of students' understanding of the subjects to be learned. The second assessment is formative assessment to assess whether there is anything unclear that is difficult for students to understand. Teachers observe how each student learns, who needs help with certain tasks, and whether there are task instructions that require clarification. Teachers will reassess learning outcomes at the end of the lesson.

The first stage is Mapping Learning Needs: Teachers map students' learning needs based on readiness, interest, and learning profile. This mapping involves observation, surveys, and interviews. In this study, teachers still conduct tests in a simple manner. According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Curriculum and Assessment Centre (2021), the model for developing differentiated learning states that diagnostic tests should be in the form of essay questions because they provide a more comprehensive picture of students' competencies online using the Google Forms application to see readiness to learn. To obtain data on students' learning styles and interests, schools hold online learning with teachers who are experts in the field, and then students are given questionnaires via Google Forms. From these results, teachers use them to map students and prepare learning tools that accommodate the diversity of students.

The next stage is Lesson Planning: After mapping, the teacher formulates methods, strategies, and learning activities based on the results of the needs mapping. The final stage is Evaluation: At the end stage, the teacher evaluates all aspects of the learning process to ensure its effectiveness.

## 2). The main challenges faced by teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated teaching is an instructional approach that emphasizes recognition of individual differences among students in the classroom. Although this concept has the potential to provide significant benefits in meeting diverse learning needs, teachers often face several obstacles that can hinder its effective implementation.

The next question is about the difficulties and challenges that Mr. SM faces in implementing Differentiated Learning in the English subject. Here are the interview results: "Differentiated Learning is a new thing in the education world; there is still a need for many adjustments in this regard. The experience of teachers accustomed to teaching using conventional methods, the shortage of teachers, limited teacher understanding, lack of teacher understanding of mastering the concept of Differentiated Learning, and the mastery of technology can pose challenges for teachers in defining and implementing the concept of Differentiated Learning. Therefore, much training, familiarization, and mastery in the field of technology are still needed to assist teachers in the learning process. As for obstacles, in implementing Differentiated Learning, more time is needed because

teachers have to vary the learning and provide understanding to students if they do not yet understand the material being studied."

From the interview results, it can be concluded that the difficulties Mr. SM faces in implementing Differentiated Learning in the English subject are the lack of experience and understanding of the concept, as well as digitalization skills. The hindrance is limited time because differentiating learning means teachers have to vary the learning and meet the learning needs of students, which requires a lot of time. According to Handiyani & Muhtar, (2022), rapid progress of technology accompanied by the development of the world demands that human beings can adapt to all changes that occur, and one of them influences the world of education. Learning is not only obtained at one time but through various ways by optimizing all the senses that every human being possesses.

### 3). The Opportunities and strategies are considered effective by teachers in addressing diversity in the classroom

Differentiated teaching demands careful and planned strategies to meet diverse learning needs in the classroom. The next question is about the strategies that Mr. SM uses in differentiated learning in the classroom. Mr. SM states that "After implementing differentiated learning in the classroom, I also encountered obstacles. From these obstacles, I implemented several strategies as feedback to the researcher. The first is that in differentiated learning, a teaching team should be formed because in differentiated learning, students are categorized into different learning styles. Therefore, a single teacher cannot represent three learning styles simultaneously. It is expected that there is a teaching team in the classroom, for example, a team of 3-4 teachers, where one teacher guides in front. Then, for different learning styles, there are teachers who guide students, explain procedures kinaesthetically, and explain visually how the learning process works.

This can be minimized with a teacher work team, so several teachers enter the classroom for one subject. This is in line with Anderson's statement about how team teaching helps students learn. According to the literature, team teaching encourages multiple perspectives, promotes dialogue/increased participation, and improves evaluation/feedback. What is quite amazing about all these benefits is that they crop up in disparate teaching situations in which various teaching strategies are employed.

My second strategy in differentiated learning is integrated technology because students nowadays prefer learning integrated with technology. The use of technology not only makes learning more interesting for students but also opens up various opportunities to accommodate diverse learning styles. This is in line with Benjamin's opinion. When implementing differentiated instruction, you'll rely on your students to take on much of the organizational tasks that you typically handle in whole-class instruction. Computers facilitate visual, auditory, and social learning opportunities. He said that integrating learning through technology is very suitable for implementing differentiated learning

because computers can facilitate all learning styles of students according to the principles of differentiated learning.

Regarding my third solution, it is related to the teacher's knowledge of mapping students in their learning qualifications. It is also very important for teachers to know more and deeper about how to map students into categories of learning styles because there are students whose learning categories are almost the same, for example, audio with visual or audio with kinaesthetic. At this stage, teachers must be careful in mapping students into their learning styles. So my solution now is for teachers to know more and deeper about mapping the analysis of students' learning needs, for example, learning through learning style applications so that teachers facilitate their learning, map their learning. Usually, the application is more accurate in determining the percentage and tendencies of students' learning styles, so I emphasize that teachers need to deepen their knowledge of mapping learning styles and student needs.

In differentiated teaching, Mr. SM identifies several strategies to overcome emerging challenges. The first strategy is to form a teaching team in the classroom. With a teaching team, each team member can focus on representing different learning styles, so students can receive guidance that suits their learning needs.

The second strategy proposed by Mr. SM is the integration of technology into learning. By leveraging technology, learning can become more engaging for students while providing flexibility to accommodate diverse learning styles. Technology also opens up opportunities for personalized learning that can be tailored to individual needs. According to Kilag (2023), the effective integration of technology in education heavily relies on empowering teachers, highlighting the pivotal role of continuous professional development and support programs. These initiatives are essential in providing educators with the requisite skills and confidence to adeptly utilize technology in their teaching practices. He emphasizes that the role of teachers in integrating technology into learning is crucial to improving the quality of learning, especially in differentiated learning.

Furthermore, Mr. SM underscores the importance of teacher knowledge about mapping students in their learning qualifications. This third solution highlights the need for teachers to have a deeper understanding of needs analysis and students' learning styles. By using applications or other analysis methods, teachers can more accurately map students' needs and learning styles, allowing for better alignment between teaching methods and individual student needs.

Overall, the strategies and solutions proposed by Mr. SM reflect planned and organized efforts to address challenges in differentiated learning. Through this approach, it is expected that teaching can be more effective and meet diverse learning needs in the classroom.

**CONCLUSION**

The goal of this article was to explore the implementation of Differentiated Learning in English language classes and its challenge and opportunities at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang. To do this, we integrated data drawn from interviewed with the teachers and classroom observation. The result of this study provides some illustration about the implementation of Differentiated Learning were outlined, emphasizing the steps taken by the English language teacher. The teacher highlighted the importance of assessing students' learning needs based on readiness, interest, and learning profile. The initial assessment involved diagnostic tests to determine students' initial knowledge and readiness for learning. Following this, the teacher adapted the learning content, process, and products based on the assessment results.

Challenges faced by teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction were also discussed, identifying the limited experience and understanding of the concept among teachers as significant barriers. Time constraints were another obstacle, requiring teachers to allocate additional time for differentiated instruction.

Moreover, effective strategies and opportunities were explored to address diversity in the classroom. it is proposed the formation of teaching teams to cater to different learning styles, emphasizing the need for collaboration among teachers. Integration of technology was suggested as an effective strategy, making learning more engaging and accommodating various learning styles. Additionally, enhancing teachers' knowledge of student mapping in terms of learning styles was considered crucial for successful differentiation. The use of applications and in-depth analysis of students' learning needs and styles were suggested as effective solutions.

In summary, the research sheds light on the challenges, opportunities, and strategies in implementing Differentiated Learning at SMP Negeri 1 Panca Lautang Sidenreng Rappang. The insights provided from this study offer valuable considerations for educators aiming to tailor their teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. For a better implementation of differentiated instruction in Merdeka Curriculum, more research should be conducted. The future researcher more focusses on specific part of implementation of DI, especially for the validity of pre-assessment in order that students' readiness, interest and learning profile will be accurate.

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