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Differentiated Instruction in English Classroom at MTSN 1 Kota Gorontalo: A Teacher Perception Study

(Pembelajaran Terdiferensiasi Didalam Kelas Bahasa Inggris Di MTSN I Kota Gorontalo: Studi Persepsi Guru)

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore an English teacher's perception of student engagement in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) at MTsN 1 Kota Gorontalo. This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. The participant of this study was one seventh-grade English teacher, while several students were involved as supporting participants through mini-interviews. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, mini-interviews, teaching module documentation, students' assessment results, and field notes. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the teacher had a good understanding of Differentiated Instruction and implemented it through diagnostic assessment, adaptation of learning materials, the use of various learning media, and differentiation of content, process, and product. The teacher perceived that DI positively supported student engagement in English learning, which was reflected in increased participation, self-confidence, learning motivation, and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Students also responded positively because they felt more comfortable, appreciated, and not discriminated against based on their abilities. However, the teacher faced challenges related to the diverse ability levels of students within the same classroom. Overall, the teacher perceived that Differentiated Instruction contributed to creating a more inclusive learning environment and supported student engagement in English learning.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi guru Bahasa Inggris terhadap keterlibatan siswa dalam penerapan Differentiated Instruction (DI) di MTsN 1 Kota Gorontalo. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus. Partisipan penelitian adalah satu guru Bahasa Inggris kelas VII, sedangkan beberapa siswa dilibatkan sebagai partisipan pendukung melalui mini-interview. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, mini-interview, dokumentasi modul ajar, hasil asesmen siswa, dan catatan lapangan. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru memiliki pemahaman yang baik mengenai konsep Differentiated Instruction dan menerapkannya melalui asesmen iagnostic, penyesuaian materi pembelajaran, penggunaan media pembelajaran yang bervariasi, serta diferensiasi konten, proses, dan produk. Guru memandang bahwa penerapan DI mendukung keterlibatan siswa dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris yang terlihat melalui peningkatan partisipasi, kepercayaan diri, motivasi belajar, serta keterlibatan perilaku, emosional, dan kognitif siswa. Selain itu, siswa memberikan respons positif karena merasa lebih nyaman, dihargai, dan tidak dibeda-bedakan berdasarkan

kemampuan mereka. Meskipun demikian, guru menghadapi tantangan berupa keberagaman kemampuan siswa dalam satu kelas. Secara keseluruhan, guru memandang bahwa penerapan Differentiated Instruction membantu menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang lebih inklusif dan mendukung keterlibatan siswa dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education today increasingly emphasizes the importance of learning that accommodates students' diverse characteristics. Students differ in their abilities, interests, experiences, backgrounds, and learning preferences, requiring teachers to provide instructional practices that respond to these differences (Gheyssens et al., 2022). Traditional one-size-fits-all instruction may not effectively address students' varying learning needs and can limit opportunities for meaningful learning experiences (Chick et al., 2025). Therefore, teachers are expected to adopt flexible instructional approaches that support all learners and enable them to achieve learning objectives according to their potential (Adera, 2025; Sharma, 2024).

One instructional approach that has gained considerable attention in recent years is Differentiated Instruction (DI). Differentiated Instruction is defined as an approach that adjusts teaching and learning processes according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Through differentiation, teachers can modify content, learning processes, products, and learning environments to accommodate students' diverse needs. In the Indonesian educational context, the implementation of DI is closely aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes student-centered learning and recognizes individual differences among learners. Consequently, teachers are encouraged to design learning experiences that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to student diversity.

The importance of Differentiated Instruction is particularly evident in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where students often demonstrate significant differences in language proficiency. While some students possess adequate vocabulary and communication skills, others struggle with basic language competencies. Such diversity creates challenges for teachers in designing instruction that ensures meaningful participation for all students. Previous studies have reported that Differentiated Instruction can contribute positively to students' learning experiences. For example, Ramaila (2025) found that DI helps accommodate diverse learning needs and promotes active student participation. Similarly, recent studies on English language teaching have indicated that differentiated learning activities can improve student motivation, classroom participation, and learning engagement.

Student engagement is one of the most important factors associated with successful learning. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), student engagement consists of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that reflect students' participation, emotional involvement, and intellectual investment in learning activities. Likewise, Trowler (2010) describes student engagement as the time, effort, and resources students devote to educationally purposeful activities. Several studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between Differentiated Instruction and student engagement, suggesting that students are more likely to participate actively when learning activities are adapted to their individual needs and abilities. However, findings in the literature predominantly focus on the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction in improving student achievement, motivation, or engagement from students' perspectives.

Despite the growing body of research on Differentiated Instruction, limited studies have explored how teachers perceive student engagement during the implementation of DI, particularly in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Teachers play a central role in planning, implementing, and evaluating differentiated learning practices; therefore, their perceptions provide valuable insights into how student engagement is observed and interpreted in authentic classroom settings. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into teachers' perspectives regarding student engagement during the implementation of Differentiated Instruction.

This study was conducted at MTsN 1 Kota Gorontalo, a school that has implemented Differentiated Instruction for approximately two years as part of its instructional practices. The school has also provided professional development programs to support teachers in implementing DI. The unit of analysis in this study

is an English teacher's perception of student engagement during the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English language learning. Therefore, this study aims to explore an English teacher's perception of student engagement in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction at MTsN 1 Kota Gorontalo.

This article is organized into four main sections. The first section presents the introduction, including the research background and objectives. The second section describes the research methodology. The third section discusses the findings and discussion of the study. Finally, the fourth section presents the conclusion and recommendations derived from the research findings.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore an English teacher's perception of student engagement during the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand and describe the participant's experiences, perspectives, and interpretations rather than measure the effectiveness of DI or examine causal relationships.

The research adopted a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context. According to Cavaye (1996), a case study enables researchers to investigate a specific phenomenon comprehensively through multiple sources of evidence. This design was selected because it allowed the researcher to explore how student engagement was perceived by a teacher who had experience implementing Differentiated Instruction in the classroom.

The research was conducted at MTsN 1 Kota Gorontalo, Indonesia. The school was selected because it has implemented Differentiated Instruction for approximately two years as part of its learning practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. The participant of this study was one seventh-grade English teacher who had experience applying Differentiated Instruction in English language learning. In addition, several seventh-grade students participated in short interviews to provide supporting information regarding classroom learning experiences.

Data were collected through multiple sources to enhance the credibility of the findings. The primary data consisted of an in-depth interview with the English teacher, mini-interviews with students, classroom-related documents, including lesson modules and students' assessment results, as well as field notes from observations. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and other relevant literature related to Differentiated Instruction, student engagement, and teacher perception.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved six stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Through this process, the researcher identified patterns and themes related to the teacher's understanding of Differentiated Instruction, perceptions of student engagement, challenges in implementation, and perceived benefits of DI in English language learning.

To ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from interviews, documents, and field notes. The use of multiple data sources helped strengthen the credibility and consistency of the research findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research explored the teacher perception of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) and its influence on student engagement in English language learning at MTsN 1 Gorontalo City. Data were collected through an in-depth interview with an English teacher, supported by mini-interviews with students, lesson module documentation, and students' assessment records. Thematic analysis revealed eight major themes related to the implementation of DI and student engagement.

Table 1. Themes and Codes Identified from Thematic Analysis

No	Themes	Codes
1	Teacher's Understanding of DI	Learning based on students' abilities; adjustment to students' interests and talents
2	Implementation of DI in English Learning	Diagnostic assessment; task adjustment; teaching modules; learning media; differentiation of content, process, and product
3	Teacher Perception of Perceived Impact of DI on Student Engagement	Increased self-confidence; increased participation

4	Teacher Perception of Influence of DI on Motivation and Learning Outcomes	Increased motivation due to learning tailored to students' needs
5	Teacher Perception of Challenges in Implementing DI	Differences in students' abilities; classroom management challenges
6	Teacher Perception of Benefits of DI Implementation	Improved self-confidence; active and emotional engagement
7	Teacher Perception of Students' Responses and Attitudes toward DI	Feeling happy and secure; inclusive learning environment
8	Teacher Perception of Evaluation of Student Engagement	Process-based and summative assessment

3.1 Teacher Understanding of Differentiated Instruction

The findings indicate that the teacher had a clear understanding of Differentiated Instruction. The teacher described DI as learning that accommodates students' abilities, interests, and talents. This understanding aligns with Tomlinson's concept of differentiation, which emphasizes readiness, interests, and learning profiles. As the teacher stated:

"Basically, DI learning is learning based on students' abilities, interests, and talents."

Student responses supported this perception, as they described English lessons as enjoyable and easy to understand. Documentation from lesson modules also showed the use of diagnostic assessments to identify students' initial abilities and learning needs before instruction began.

3.2 Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English Learning

The teacher reported conducting diagnostic assessments before instruction to determine students' English proficiency levels. Based on these results, learning modules, tasks, and activities were adjusted according to students' abilities. Differentiation was implemented through content, process, and product modifications.

In addition, various learning media such as PowerPoint presentations, videos, games, group discussions, and peer tutoring were used to support learning. Student interviews revealed that games and peer assistance helped them understand English lessons more easily. Documentation also confirmed the integration of differentiated activities within lesson plans.

3.3 Teacher Perception of Perceived Impact of DI on Student Engagement

According to the teacher, DI positively influenced student engagement. Students became more confident because learning activities were adjusted to their current abilities rather than requiring all students to achieve the same level simultaneously. The teacher observed increased participation, particularly among students who previously struggled with English.

Student responses indicated that they felt more comfortable and confident because they were not compared with their peers. Assessment records also suggested increased participation in speaking activities and group discussions.

3.4 Teacher Perception of Influence of DI on Student Motivation and Learning Outcomes

The teacher perceived that DI enhanced students' motivation by aligning learning activities with their needs and interests. Students reported that English lessons became more enjoyable due to the use of games, collaborative learning, and peer support.

Furthermore, assessment data showed gradual improvement in vocabulary, pronunciation, and basic speaking skills. These findings suggest that DI may contribute to increased motivation and learning progress among students.

3.5 Teacher Perception of Challenges in Implementing DI

Despite its benefits, the teacher identified several challenges in implementing DI. The most significant challenge was the wide variation in students' English proficiency levels. Some students entered secondary school without prior English learning experience, while others already possessed moderate or advanced skills.

To address this issue, the teacher implemented peer tutoring and collaborative learning strategies. Student interviews confirmed that peer assistance played an important role in helping them overcome learning difficulties.

3.6 Teacher Perception of Benefits of DI Implementation

The teacher reported several benefits of DI, including increased student confidence, participation, and engagement. Students appeared more willing to answer questions, participate in discussions, and perform speaking tasks when learning activities matched their abilities.

Students also expressed feeling more comfortable and less anxious during English lessons. Lesson module documentation demonstrated the use of student-centered learning activities designed to support diverse learning needs.

3.7 Teacher Perception of Students Responses and Attitudes toward DI

The findings revealed positive student responses toward DI implementation. According to the teacher, students felt accepted and valued regardless of their academic abilities. This contributed to a more inclusive learning environment where students were encouraged to participate without fear of being judged.

Student interviews supported this finding, with several students stating that they felt more confident because they were not treated differently from their peers. Classroom activities such as group discussions and peer tutoring further strengthened students' sense of belonging and participation.

3.8 Teacher Perception of Evaluation of Student Engagement

The teacher emphasized that evaluating student engagement should focus not only on learning outcomes but also on the learning process. Assessment practices included diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments. Student engagement was evaluated through participation, collaboration, and progress throughout the learning process.

Documentation confirmed the use of multiple assessment methods, while student interviews indicated that learners were given sufficient time to understand materials according to their learning pace.

3.9 Differences Between Teacher Intentions and Student Perceptions

An interesting finding emerged regarding differences between teacher intentions and student perceptions. While the teacher intentionally differentiated tasks and learning activities according to students' abilities, most students described their learning experiences in terms of games, group work, and peer assistance rather than explicit differentiation.

This finding suggests that differentiated practices were often embedded naturally within classroom activities and were not always recognized by students as differentiated instruction. Therefore, the implementation of DI may be perceived differently by teachers and students, despite sharing similar positive learning experiences.

3.10 Discussion

This research explored the teacher perception of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) and its influence on student engagement in English language learning at MTsN 1 Gorontalo City. The findings revealed that the teacher demonstrated a clear understanding of DI principles and attempted to implement differentiation through diagnostic assessment, flexible learning activities, differentiated tasks, and various instructional media. The findings also suggest that DI was perceived to contribute positively to students' engagement, motivation, confidence, and participation during English lessons. The first finding indicates that the teacher understood DI as an instructional approach that accommodates students' diverse abilities, interests, and learning needs. This perception is consistent with Tomlinson (2014), who defines DI as an approach that modifies content, process, and product according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Evidence from interviews, student mini-interviews, and lesson plan documentation suggests that the teacher considered student diversity when planning instruction. Similar findings were reported by Suprayogi et al. (2017), who found that teachers' understanding of learner diversity is a fundamental prerequisite for successful differentiated instruction. The second finding highlights how DI was implemented in English language learning. The teacher reported using diagnostic assessment to identify students' initial abilities and subsequently adapting instructional materials, classroom activities, and assignments. The use of PowerPoint presentations, educational games, videos, group discussions, and peer tutoring reflected attempts to address different learning needs. These practices align with Tomlinson's (2005) framework, which emphasizes adapting instructional processes and learning experiences to accommodate learner diversity. Furthermore, the findings support previous studies suggesting that differentiated learning activities can help create more accessible and inclusive learning environments for students with varying levels of readiness.

A major finding of this study concerns the perceived relationship between DI and student engagement. The teacher reported that students became more confident, actively participated in classroom activities, and appeared more comfortable during learning. Students also described positive experiences, particularly through collaborative learning and peer support. These findings can be interpreted through Fredricks et al.'s (2004) engagement framework, which identifies behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement as key dimensions of student engagement. Although engagement was not measured directly, the teacher's observations and students' experiences suggest that DI may support engagement by providing learning opportunities that match students' abilities and needs.

The findings also indicate that DI was perceived to influence students' motivation and learning outcomes. According to the teacher, students demonstrated greater enthusiasm and willingness to participate when learning activities were adjusted to their learning needs. Supporting evidence from student interviews

and assessment documents showed improvements in vocabulary, pronunciation, and basic speaking skills among some students. These findings are consistent with Tomlinson (2014), who argues that students are more likely to engage meaningfully with learning when instruction is responsive to their readiness and interests. Similar conclusions were reported by Suprayogi et al. (2017), who found that differentiated instruction can encourage more positive learning responses among students.

Despite these perceived benefits, the study identified several challenges in implementing DI. The teacher reported difficulties in addressing substantial differences in students' English proficiency within the same classroom. Managing students with varying levels of prior knowledge required additional planning and classroom management strategies. To address these challenges, the teacher utilized peer tutoring and collaborative learning activities. This finding supports Gheyssens et al. (2020), who noted that learner diversity is one of the most common challenges faced by teachers implementing differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, peer tutoring has been recognized as a practical strategy for supporting differentiated learning and promoting student collaboration.

Another important finding concerns students' responses toward DI. Both teacher and student data suggest that students generally perceived the learning environment as more inclusive and supportive. Students reported feeling less anxious, more accepted, and more willing to participate in classroom activities. These findings align with Fredricks et al. (2004), particularly the concept of emotional engagement, which emphasizes students' sense of belonging, comfort, and positive relationships within the learning environment. Similarly, Sapan and Mede (2022) reported that differentiated instruction contributed to students' positive attitudes toward learning by reducing fear of making mistakes and encouraging participation.

Finally, the findings demonstrate that the teacher evaluated student engagement through both learning processes and learning outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on summative assessment, the teacher considered participation, collaboration, classroom interaction, and progress over time. This approach reflects Tomlinson's (2014) view that assessment within differentiated instruction should be continuous and responsive to student development. The findings suggest that ongoing assessment enables teachers to better understand students' learning progress and adjust instructional practices accordingly.

Overall, the findings indicate that the teacher perceived Differentiated Instruction as a valuable approach for accommodating learner diversity and supporting student engagement in English language learning. Although the study does not provide direct evidence of causal relationships between DI and student engagement, the teacher's perceptions, supported by student experiences and instructional documents, suggest that differentiated practices may contribute to creating a more inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning environment.

4 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

This research explored an English teacher perceptions of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) and its relationship to student engagement in English language learning at MTSN 1 Kota Gorontalo. The findings indicate that the teacher perceived DI as a student-centered approach that accommodates students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning needs. The teacher reported implementing DI through diagnostic assessment, differentiated learning activities, flexible grouping, peer tutoring, varied learning media, and differentiation of content, process, and product.

According to the teacher perceptions, the implementation of DI was associated with greater student engagement in English learning. Students were perceived to be more confident, actively involved in classroom activities, and more willing to participate in discussions and speaking tasks. The teacher also reported that DI contributed to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment in which students felt comfortable learning according to their abilities and needs. In addition, the teacher perceived that DI supported students' learning motivation and facilitated gradual improvement in several English language skills.

Despite these perceived benefits, the teacher also identified challenges in implementing DI, particularly related to students' diverse proficiency levels and classroom management. To address these challenges, strategies such as peer tutoring and heterogeneous group work were utilized to support students with different learning needs.

Overall, this study suggests that, from the teacher perspective, Differentiated Instruction is a valuable approach for supporting student engagement in English language classrooms. However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of teacher perceptions and cannot be generalized as direct evidence of the effectiveness of DI. Future studies are recommended to involve multiple participants and employ additional measures of student engagement to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of Differentiated Instruction in English language learning contexts.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be proposed. First, English teachers are encouraged to continue developing the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) by considering students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning needs. The use of varied instructional strategies, learning media, and classroom activities may help create more engaging and inclusive learning experiences for students. Second, schools are encouraged to support the implementation of DI through professional development programs, such as training sessions, workshops, and collaborative teacher discussions. Providing adequate learning resources and opportunities for teachers to share best practices may further strengthen the effective implementation of differentiated learning in classrooms. Third, students are encouraged to actively participate in learning activities and engage in collaborative learning opportunities provided during classroom instruction. Active participation and cooperation with peers may contribute to more meaningful learning experiences and support student engagement in English language learning. Finally, future researchers are recommended to investigate the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in broader educational contexts by involving a larger number of participants and different school settings. Future studies may also employ multiple data collection methods, such as classroom observations, student engagement scales, and mixed-method approaches, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how Differentiated Instruction influences student engagement and learning outcomes.

It is hoped that this study contributes to the growing body of literature on Differentiated Instruction and provides insights into teachers' perceptions of implementing differentiated learning practices in English language classrooms.

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