

EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences in Implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in The Merdeka Curriculum at Vocational Schools in Riau Islands Province

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Abstract

The study addresses the challenges of implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in vocational schools in Indonesia, particularly in the Riau Islands. The objective is to examine how teachers adapt DI to students' diverse needs and the impact of DI training, especially among the few Guru Penggerak-certified educators. This study utilizes a qualitative research design with a case study approach. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Purposive sampling was used to select three teachers from different schools, focusing on their perceptions and practices related to DI within the Merdeka Curriculum framework. The study concludes that while Differentiated Instruction (DI) is being implemented effectively by English teachers within the Merdeka Curriculum, there are variations in its application. Teacher training is crucial in enhancing DI practices, but challenges remain in material access, school culture, and alignment with modern trends. Recommendations include expanding DI-focused professional development, improving resource availability, and fostering a more supportive school culture for DI integration.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction (DI); Vocational Schools; English Teachers; Merdeka Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Introduced in 2020 as a revision of the 2013 Curriculum, the Merdeka Curriculum aims to address feedback and enhance the quality of education in Indonesia. By fostering a more balanced, adaptable, and student-centered approach to teaching, this new curriculum equips teachers with the tools to provide millennials with the necessary qualifications and 21st-century skills for success on a global scale. Adaptation and modification of educational practices, instructional techniques, and evaluation methodologies are integral to meeting the evolving demands of education in the modern era. Merdeka's curriculum in Indonesia incorporates Differentiated Instruction (DI) as a key component, aimed at meeting student's diverse learning needs and styles (Miftakhuddin et al., 2022). Through diagnostic evaluation data, the curricula adapt teaching methods to address student availability, preferences, and individual learning styles, promoting a student-centered approach. (Hasanah et al., 2022). Research carried out in Indonesian classrooms highlighted the implementation and acceptance of DI among primary school teachers. Pramono (2021) explored teacher perceptions of DI, finding that their experience and belief in using different strategies significantly influenced their acceptance of this teaching approach. Professional development programmers' have been identified as essential in enhancing teacher knowledge and confidence in providing different education, facilitating the application of DI in elementary classes. Similarly, (Digna et al. 2023) investigated the views of teachers on differential learning in independent curricula, highlighting different levels of understanding and integration of the principles of DI among teachers. Then

research from (Hasanah,2022), offers tangible benefits for all participants, who implemented differentiated instruction including enhancing learning abilities and student well-being. Effective implementation involves teachers developing awareness of differences and creating an environment suitable to the natural growth of students' potential.

The successful implementation of the Differential Instruction depends not only on the teacher's expertise but also on the underlying beliefs and thinking about education (Stollman, 2018). Despite its importance, implementing DI can be challenging due to certain curriculum requirements, as stressed by Stollman's research (2018). Further insights from Kelley (2018) research on DI in foreign language classes emphasize the importance of specific strategies and techniques in effectively meeting diverse student needs. However, both studies stressed the need to consider the perspectives of teachers and students to ensure the successful integration of DI into classroom practice, reaffirming the importance of continuous research and professional development in this field. There has been very little study on DI in this setting, given the significance of DI in vocational education and indications of inefficient teaching approaches (Onderwijs, 2021). The concepts set forth by (Keuning and van Geel, 2021), for example, are the product of research in other fields that looks at the practices that underpin good DI.

According to recent findings, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in vocational education still faces a number of challenges, particularly given educators' limited experience in the field of education and pedagogy." This has consequences for curriculum adaptation, which must incorporate not just academic instruction, but also practical training, internships, and professional abilities common in vocational education (Billett, Smith, & Jones, 2023). DI training as part of teachers' professional development has been predominantly received by only a select group of teachers referred to as Guru Penggerak, Comprehensive information on Differentiated Instruction (DI) can be obtained from Module 2 of the *Program Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* (PPGP). Data from BGP (*Balai Guru Penggerak*) As of July 2024 in Riau Islands Province had about 156 English teachers working in Vocational schools, but only ten English teachers have completed the *Program Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* (PPGP) training, signifying that these teachers were the sole teachers who have received extensive government-sponsored training in DI, Although only a small percentage of English teachers received government-funded DI training, it is necessary to expand the scope of DI professional development and make it available to more special teachers at Vocational Schools.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is essential in the Riau Islands because of its different geographical and strategic characteristics. The province is divided into two cities and five regencies that extend across many different islands. It maintains a direct border with Malaysia and Singapore. This situation presents unique issues in English language education, including as providing identical access to high-quality resources and instruction across the islands. With a focus on vocational high school students' job preparation, it is critical that they have good English language abilities. Students who want to work overseas must have good English language abilities because many international occupations require English communication. DI enables teachers to adjust their teaching approaches to the specific requirements of their students, allowing each student to learn in the most effective manner for them. In addition, DI allows for variations in student backgrounds and experiences, which is especially important in the Riau Islands, where access to education varies every island. By applying DI, English language instruction may be better adapted to local situations, preparing students for job opportunities around the world.

Based on the previous background of the study, the research questions can be identified as follows: 1) How do English language teachers apply Differentiated Instruction (DI) within the Merdeka Curriculum in the English teaching and learning process at Vocational School in Riau

Island Province?, 2) What are the perceptions of English language teachers at Vocational High Schools regarding the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) within the Merdeka Curriculum in English language teaching at Vocational School in Riau Island Province?

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine English language instructors' beliefs and practices in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in vocational high schools. A case study approach, as defined by Yin (2002), is particularly suited for exploring contemporary phenomena in real-world contexts, providing insights into how teachers adapt DI strategies to meet their students' unique needs. The descriptive qualitative method, which gathers rich data through interviews, observations, and document reviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), allows for an in-depth analysis of teachers' perceptions and practices within the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum in the Riau Islands Province. This method captures the complexities of teachers' experiences and the impact of DI on teaching and learning (Creswell, 2013).

Research Setting

The research initially targeted four vocational schools in the Riau Islands Province—SMK N 1 Gunung Kijang, SMK N 2 Batam, SMK N 3 Batam, and SMK N 2 Tanjung Pinang—selected for their status as SMK Pusat Keunggulan and their use of the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. However, SMK N 2 Batam was excluded due to difficulties in contacting teachers, leaving the study focused on three schools in Bintan, Tanjung Pinang, and Batam. Four English teachers—two male and two female—were selected using purposive sampling based on their experience and completion of the Guru Penggerak Program. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations to examine teachers' perceptions of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in vocational schools.

Research Instrument

The researchers employed three key instruments to gather data: a questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observations. The closed-ended questionnaire focused on assessing teachers' perceptions and factors affecting the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in areas such as teacher training, school culture, and student differences (Coubergs et al., 2017). Semi-structured interviews, adapted from Burkett (2013), were conducted to gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences with DI, with interviews lasting between 2.5 to 3 hours across three locations: Bintan, Tanjung Pinang, and Batam. Additionally, classroom observations were guided by Shareefa's (2023) seven domains, including curriculum quality, teaching practices, and student assessment, to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and the implementation of DI within vocational schools.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis techniques used in this study followed the model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions. Data condensation is the process of refining, categorizing, and summarizing data to highlight key aspects and identify themes. In this study, researchers condensed the data based on teachers' perspectives of Differentiated Instruction (DI) implementation in vocational schools in the Riau Islands Province. Next, data display involved presenting a narrative summary of teacher perceptions through matrices, graphs, and diagrams to make the information more actionable. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the data from interviews and observations, providing a descriptive understanding of teacher perceptions of DI in the vocational school context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The English language teachers Implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) at Merdeka Curriculum applied in English Teaching and Learning Process.

The research collected data through questionnaires (using Google Forms), interviews, and classroom observations to analyze the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) by teachers in vocational schools (SMK). The evaluation framework, based on Shareefa's (2023) guidelines, focused on key areas such as curriculum design, instructional practices, student assessment, and the classroom environment, employing a scoring system that ranged from "Exemplary" to "Not Evident."

In terms of curriculum quality, T2 (Tanjung Pinang) achieved the highest score of 83%, indicating effective adaptation of the curriculum to meet student needs. In comparison, T1 (Bintan) and T3 (Batam) both scored 75%, suggesting a need for greater variety in lesson planning. For preparation for learning, T2 excelled with a score of 92%, reflecting a robust response to learner needs, while T1 and T3 each received scores of 83%, demonstrating satisfactory preparation with room for improvement.

Regarding instructional practices, T2 again stood out with a score of 92%. T1 scored 67%, indicating a need for improved engagement and lesson adaptation, while T3 scored 75%. In classroom routines, both T1 and T2 scored 83%, showing effective support for students' varying learning levels, while T3 scored 75%, indicating a need for more varied activities.

For creating a supportive learning environment, T2 and T3 scored 83%, promoting positive classroom settings, while T1 scored 67%, suggesting areas for enhancing student engagement. Lastly, in evidence of differentiation, T2 led with a score of 92%, reflecting strong personalized instruction. T1 scored 83%, and T3 received a score of 75%, both indicating a need for more diverse differentiation strategies.

In conclusion, T2 demonstrates exemplary implementation of Differentiated Instruction, while T1 and T3 show strong efforts but require refinements, especially in lesson variety and differentiation approaches.

The perspective of teachers involved in the implementation differentiation Instruction (DI) at Merdeka Curriculum in English Language teaching

In this study, the perspectives of teachers involved in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) in English language teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum are evaluated using two data collection instruments: a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire used is a closed-ended one designed to gather data from three participants via Google Forms, consisting of 63 questions. The analysis of the questionnaire follows the framework of Coubergs, Struyven, Vanthournout, and Engels (2017), which evaluates indicators such as Teacher Training, School Culture, Access to Materials, Student Differences, Government Regulations, Professional Learning Communities, and Student Achievement, with assessments using a 5-point Likert scale. The results indicate that teacher training has a positive impact on preparing teachers to implement differentiated instruction in the classroom. The analysis results regarding school culture show that the school environment generally supports differentiated teaching practices, although there is still room for improvement. Furthermore, access to materials is rated positively, with teachers feeling they have adequate resources to support differentiated instruction. The student differences indicator shows that teachers feel sufficiently supported in addressing the diverse needs of students, while government regulations are perceived to provide effective support for implementing differentiated instruction. Despite the positive outcomes,

there is a need to enhance professional learning opportunities to comprehensively cover all aspects of differentiated instruction.

Discussion

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in three locations in the Riau Islands Province, analyzing four indicators: Teaching Experience, Experience with Differentiated Instruction, Perspectives and Implementation of Differentiated Instruction, and Challenges and Evaluation. The results of the interviews reveal that teachers acknowledge the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in enhancing student engagement and learning progress. Each teacher adapts their differentiated teaching strategies based on their school environment and subject area. Teacher T1, who teaches in an agricultural school, uses diagnostic assessments to evaluate students' readiness levels and creates tiered assignments. Teacher T2, in a hospitality-focused school, emphasizes students' interests in the service industry, while Teacher T3, who teaches in the engineering field, implements project-based learning to meet the diverse needs of students. Despite the contextual differences among the three teachers, all demonstrate dedication to implementing differentiated instruction with approaches relevant to the needs and characteristics of their students.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) by English language teachers within the Merdeka Curriculum and assess their perspectives on its application. The findings reveal significant variation in DI implementation, with Teacher T2 exhibiting the most effective practices through optimal adjustments to materials, engaging lesson designs, and effective formative assessments. In contrast, Teachers T1 and T3, while demonstrating strong skills, need to enhance their ability to integrate student interests and provide diverse learning options. Overall, while Teacher T2 leads in implementing DI comprehensively, all three teachers could benefit from refining their approaches to better cater to diverse student needs and boost engagement.

The teachers' perspectives gathered through questionnaires and interviews indicate a nuanced understanding of DI's implementation. A positive response of 88% from the questionnaire highlights the effectiveness of teacher training, with 78% noting supportive school culture and 81% indicating good access to materials. Interviews revealed that teachers actively employ DI strategies and value the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum, which allows for personalized learning. Despite effective practices, challenges related to material adequacy and alignment with educational trends persist, suggesting an ongoing need for adaptations in their teaching approaches.

To enhance the effectiveness of DI in vocational schools, several recommendations are proposed. First, English teachers should integrate differentiated instruction strategies into collaborative learning activities to address varying student readiness levels. Additionally, support from schools and parents is crucial, including adequate resources and time for implementing DI strategies. Encouraging students to explore a broader range of skills through DI projects can enrich their learning experiences and better prepare them for future vocational paths. Lastly, future research should investigate DI implementation across various vocational subjects and its impact on student outcomes, providing further insights to improve differentiated instruction practices within vocational education settings. These suggestions aim to foster an environment conducive to effective DI application, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students in the Riau Islands Province.

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