

Differentiated instruction in teaching writing narrative text to students of SMA 2 Tegal

¹Dwi Setyorini , ²Sri Wahyuni, ³Sri Wuli Fitriati

^{1,2,3} Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Email: dwisetyorini1214@gmail.com

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Abstract

Teaching writing requires teachers to use an appropriate approach. Differentiated instruction can be applied as it can facilitate children's diverse learning needs as well as one of the embodiments of the emancipated curriculum. This mixed-method research explored the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching English as a foreign language and focuses on writing narrative text to high school students. The main objective of this study is to explain the teacher's preparation, the implementation and its effects. A teacher and a class of students participated in this study. The result shows that the teacher has an understanding and concept of the application of DI in the classroom. The teacher implemented content, process, and product differentiation based on the students' readiness level and interest. DI was proven to have positive impacts on students. The research implications are expected to guide practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders in applying research findings in practical settings.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction (DI), EFL, writing, narrative text .

Abstrak

Pembelajaran menulis menuntut guru untuk menggunakan pendekatan yang tepat. Pengajaran yang dibedakan dapat diterapkan karena dapat memfasilitasi kebutuhan belajar yang beragam pada anak-anak serta merupakan salah satu wujud dari kurikulum yang emansipatif. Penelitian campuran ini mengeksplorasi implementasi pengajaran yang dibedakan dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing dan berfokus pada penulisan teks naratif bagi siswa sekolah menengah atas. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk menjelaskan persiapan guru, implementasi, dan dampaknya. Seorang guru dan satu kelas siswa berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa guru memiliki pemahaman dan konsep tentang penerapan DI di kelas. Guru menerapkan diferensiasi konten, proses, dan produk berdasarkan tingkat kesiapan dan minat siswa. DI terbukti memiliki dampak positif pada siswa. Implikasi penelitian diharapkan dapat membimbing praktisi, pembuat kebijakan, dan pemangku kepentingan lainnya dalam menerapkan temuan penelitian dalam konteks praktis.

Keywords: Pengajaran Berdiferensiasi (DI), Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL), menulis, teks naratif.

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is taught through listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with writing often considered the most challenging. Effective writing requires careful attention to text

structure, purpose, organization, and word choice. Students must also follow spelling, punctuation, and capitalization rules, as these can impact the meaning of the text. Djuharie (2019) notes that writing involves various aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, rhetoric, reader psychology, topic depth, and supporting references.

Indonesian students often struggle with writing narrative texts in English due to vocabulary limitations, sentence structure issues, and difficulty organizing a logical storyline. Psychological factors like low confidence and motivation also play a role. To improve writing skills, teachers should consider students' interests, language abilities, and personal experiences. Creating an engaging learning environment, encouraging self-expression, and providing constructive feedback can boost confidence. Differentiated instruction helps address diverse learning needs, fostering meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences.

Differentiation is a teaching approach in which teachers adjust curricula, methods, resources, and activities to meet students' diverse needs. It aims to help each student achieve learning objectives by customizing content, methods, and assessments based on their readiness, interests, and learning styles (Byrne, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiated learning supports learner-centered education by tailoring instruction to individual students' needs, ensuring that all learners can succeed. This approach aligns with the focus on an emancipated curriculum.

The emancipated curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) has been used in Indonesia for three years, focusing on student-centered learning. It prioritizes individual learning needs by tailoring materials and methods to students' levels and backgrounds. The emancipated curriculum emphasizes holistic student development by aligning learning strategies with their achievement stages, known as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). Recognizing students' diverse needs, interests, and learning styles, educators provide varied learning materials and employ differentiated teaching methods to support competency growth. As noted by Hasanah et al. (2022), the adoption of differentiated instruction represents a significant advancement in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile in Indonesia.

The Indonesian Ministry of Education's Merdeka Belajar program empowers teachers and students to explore ideas freely, fostering student-centered learning. A key aspect is differentiated instruction, a new approach in the Merdeka Curriculum and Pancasila Student Profile. The government supports its implementation through training, webinars, and teacher education programs via the Platform Merdeka Mengajar.

Despite the emphasis on differentiated learning, many teachers struggle with its implementation. In high school EFL writing classes, a one-size-fits-all approach remains common due to time constraints, large class sizes, and limited understanding of differentiation. Some teachers misapply the concept, focusing only on content or final products without assessing students' readiness, interests, and learning styles.

Teaching writing requires more time than other skills, making it suitable for differentiated instruction to address students' diverse learning needs. Effective writing involves understanding purpose, audience, and context, as students employ appropriate narrative styles for assignments and exams (Cheung, 2016). Writing skills are influenced by vocabulary, grammar, organization, spelling, and punctuation (Purba, 2018). To develop strong writing skills, educators must focus on cognitive processes that enhance writing effectiveness (Cheung, 2016). While some teachers successfully implement differentiated instruction, others face challenges due to differing perceptions and a lack of training (Melese, 2015). Professional development can enhance teaching capabilities and positively impact student achievement in areas like math (Prast et al., 2018). Teacher educators also express a need for more training in

differentiated instruction techniques (Ginja et al., 2020). Implementing differentiated instruction requires time and effort but can become manageable with practice (Smets, 2020). Teacher self-efficacy is linked to the effective use of these strategies for students with various achievement levels (Kalinowski et al., 2024). Differentiated instruction supports learner-centered education, especially for Generation Z students, who have distinct learning preferences. With easy access to information in the digital age, these students benefit from tailored teaching methods. As Tomlinson (1999) highlights, teachers should respond to individual learning needs in a differentiated instruction classroom.

This research aims to measure the preparation stage before implementing differentiated instruction in teaching writing narrative text, how differentiated instruction in teaching writing is implemented, and how the implementation of differentiated instruction affects students.

METHODS

This study used the mixed method and the Concurrent Embedded Design. In this design, one type of data served as the primary method, while the other, embedded within it, is the secondary method. The qualitative data were the primary, and the quantitative data were the secondary. It was conducted in SMA 2 Tegal. The participants were an English teacher and thirty-five grade XI students in the year 2024-2025. The instruments used were questionnaires, observation, interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaire aims to gather qualitative data on teacher and student perceptions of differentiated instruction and the teacher's reflections after implementing DI in the classroom.

The observation includes the teaching strategies, teacher-student interactions, and student participation in the classroom. The interview was conducted to collect qualitative data, focusing on the participant's understanding, perception of DI, reflections, and the students' perceptions about DI. The document analysis aimed to gather the qualitative data on the teacher's learning module and the quantitative data of the students' pre- and post-test results. The data of the study were analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative data, while statistical analysis was used for quantitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preparation Stage before Applying Differentiated Instruction

Teacher's knowledge of differentiated instruction

The interview results show that the teacher sees differentiated instruction (DI) as a strategy that adapts teaching methods and materials to meet students' diverse needs and interests. Its main goal is to create an inclusive learning experience for all. The analysis of the teaching preparation module confirms that the teacher has included learning strategies tailored to students' diverse styles, interests, and abilities. This differentiation is evident in the core section of the module. The interview also sought to clarify how the teacher differentiates traditional learning from differentiated instruction. The findings from the interview revealed that the teacher has engaged in professional competency improvement training, particularly through teacher motivator programs. The analysis of the teacher's teaching module documents revealed a strong understanding of how to create an effective teaching module and the necessary preparations to facilitate differentiated learning. The module demonstrates readiness for implementation in the classroom. As noted by Van Geel et al. (2022), once the preparations are

complete, the teacher can confidently present the lesson. This supports the research by Prast et al. (2018), which indicates that teachers who participate in such training can enhance their students' learning outcomes. Optimal learning outcomes are more achievable when teachers exhibit strong self-efficacy and enthusiasm, as Kalinowski et al. (2024) found a direct correlation between these traits and student competency achievement.

Teacher's Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

In preparing for DI, the teacher encountered several challenges. Analysis of the interviews revealed that a significant hurdle is the lack of confidence in developing effective teaching tools or modules. The teacher acknowledged that her students come from a wide range of backgrounds, presenting her with a unique challenge in crafting an effective teaching strategy. This diversity required her to consider the distinct needs and experiences of each student. This condition as mentioned by Shareefa et al. (2021) that in EFL, students may have varying levels of language proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Teacher expressed a need for more intensive training to enhance these skills, an essential requirement highlighted by Dixon (2014), who emphasizes the importance of teacher training in overcoming the challenges associated with DI.

Teacher's Lesson Plan

The lesson plan analysis reveals that the primary resource used by the teacher is a structured government-provided textbook, which serves as the foundation for the lessons. To enhance learning, the teacher incorporates engaging online materials, such as YouTube videos and interactive social media content, which motivates students and improves instructional effectiveness. The core learning phase is structured into four stages: Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), Modelling of Text (MOT), Joint Construction of Text (JCoT), and Independent Construction of Text (ICoT), spanning six sessions. The teacher employs differentiated instruction, offering a range of reading materials for different ability levels, while allowing students to choose their assessment products. The assessment plan includes an initial evaluation and ongoing assessments. Although enrichment and remedial activities are mentioned, specific details are lacking. Reflections after lessons are included to deepen understanding. The learning plan also contains an appendix with reading lists and worksheets but lacks additional resources for advanced students.

The Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Teaching Writing

The findings indicate that the teacher has implemented three types of differentiation: content, process, and product differentiation. This approach is similar to the study conducted by Satyarini et al. (2020), which focused on teachers at SMAN 1 Ubud who also used these three types of differentiation based on student interests, but did not consider students' learning readiness. In contrast, my study found that the English teacher at SMA 2 Tegal implemented differentiation based on differences in student learning readiness as well. This approach to differentiated instruction seems effective based on reflections from both teachers and students, although it does not include differentiation based on learning styles, as reported in the study by Demir (2021).

Observations show that the teacher assess students' learning readiness through diagnostic assessments at the start of the learning process. This aligns with the assertion by Samsudi et al. (2024) that conducting a preliminary or diagnostic assessment is essential.. According to Tomlinson (2006), recognizing varying readiness levels is crucial, as students' ability to grasp concepts and skills can change over time. Therefore, teachers must make appropriate adjustments to support each student's academic development. Teachers design learning models to improve student outcomes, aligning with Reis et al. (2011), who highlight

how differentiated instruction (DI) uses diagnostic assessments to customize teaching and to adapt curricula and teaching strategies. By adopting this approach, it effectively accommodates the diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students, ultimately increasing their chances of success in learning. According to Djatmika and Astutik (2023), classroom practices utilizing differentiated instruction prioritize the learning process by adjusting to the unique characteristics and needs of students, aiming to enhance the quality of learning outcomes.

In the second learning session, the teacher applied content differentiation to build knowledge. As Tomlinson (1999) explains, content includes what students learn and how they engage with it. To accommodate different abilities, the teacher provided two narrative texts of varying complexity, each with questions. The first category consists of texts with a simpler structure and content, specifically designed for students who require additional support or are performing at an adequate level. These texts provide a comfortable entry point for learners to explore narrative elements without feeling overwhelmed. Conversely, the second category features texts characterized by greater complexity, aimed at students who exhibit stronger reading skills and critical thinking abilities. This approach ensures appropriate challenge, as Byrnes (1996) warns that material below a student's level hinders growth. Taylor (2015) supports adjusting content complexity to meet individual needs, such as offering varied reading levels. The teacher assigned texts based on learning readiness, aligning with Jahan (2017), who emphasized tasks should range from basic comprehension to advanced analysis.

Differentiation in the learning process is evident in the second, third, and fourth sessions, adapting to students' readiness and interests. Initially, students are grouped by readiness, then by interest in later sessions. In the third meeting, the teacher introduced the Modeling of Text stage by showcasing four types of narrative texts: fables, myths, legends, and fairy tales. She provided a thorough explanation of narrative texts to deepen the students' understanding. To cater to their interests, she offered a diverse selection of texts. To assess these interests, the teacher asked the students to use sticky notes in various colors, with each color representing a different narrative genre. The students were then organized into groups based on their preferences. Aligning with Seibihi (2016), who emphasizes flexible grouping for effective differentiation. In the third session on text modeling, grouping by interest boosts motivation (Tomlinson, 2006). Here, the teacher introduces narrative writing, reinforcing the need for explicit writing instruction to support cognitive development (Cheung, 2016).

The fourth meeting focused on the collaborative construction of narrative texts. The teacher implemented differentiated strategies tailored to each student's learning readiness. Continuing with the approach from the second meeting, the teacher grouped students and provided a selection of picture series for them to choose from based on their interests. Once the students selected their images, they worked on arranging them to create a cohesive story, emphasizing the text structure and linguistic elements of the narrative texts studied in previous sessions. During this meeting, the teacher offered intensive guidance to groups that required additional support. In the learning process, the teacher grouped the students in the hope of facilitating students to understand the content better. The process provides students with the opportunity to make sense of the content, typically occurring during instructional activities (Tomlinson, 2017). However, the teacher had yet to incorporate student learning styles, as Heacox (2012) recommends. Learning profiles are influenced by gender, culture, style, and

intelligence preferences (Tomlinson, 2006), but time constraints prevent teachers from conducting non-cognitive assessments to address these differences, despite their importance.

In the fifth session, the teacher applied product differentiation by assigning individual writing tasks in the independent text construction stage. In this session, the teacher introduced the concept of product differentiation, allowing students to select the format for their writing projects. At the outset, the teacher presented the assessment criteria for the narrative texts. Students had a variety of options: they could write a complete story, incorporate simple illustrations, create a comic, or use the Canva application to develop their project. This task demonstrates students' learning outcomes, aligning with Tomlinson (1999), who states that products showcase and enhance understanding. Students can choose how to present their work based on their interests and abilities. Before the task, the teacher clarifies assessment criteria to ensure focus, with presentation mode serving as motivation. The writing rubric follows Brown (2004), assessing content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

During the sixth and final meeting, students refined and enhanced the narrative texts they had developed in the previous session. The teacher facilitated opportunities for each student to present their work and receive constructive feedback. The lesson wrapped up with a collective reflection, enabling both the teacher and students to discuss the shared learning experiences throughout the course.

This study found that the teacher at SMAN 2 Tegal implemented differentiated instruction (DI) mainly based on student learning readiness, using diagnostic assessments to adjust teaching. The teacher applied various DI strategies, including content differentiation (adjusting text complexity), process differentiation (flexible grouping by readiness and interest), and product differentiation (allowing students to choose their presentation method). While the study highlighted effective DI practices, it also noted the absence of learning style-based differentiation due to time constraints for in-depth assessments.

After implementing differentiated learning, the teacher participated in a four-stage reflection process. Initially, she reviewed what was implemented in the classroom. Next, she candidly expressed her feelings about the experience. Then, she identified both the positive aspects and the areas that require improvement. Finally, she developed a follow-up plan to enhance future learning. This reflective practice contributes to the enhancement of teacher competence. Research by Herber et al. (2024) indicates that effective school programs supporting teacher competency in implementing differentiated instruction (DI) incorporate elements of active learning, collaboration, and opportunities for reflection.

Impacts on students

Achievement in Writing

Pretests and posttests were conducted to assess students' narrative writing skills and evaluate the impact of differentiated instruction (DI) on their competency. Pretest scores were collected before DI implementation, while posttest scores were recorded afterward. Writing assessments followed Brown's rubric, measuring content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. The data was then analyzed to determine the average score difference between pretest and posttest results. Below is a graphical representation of these scores.

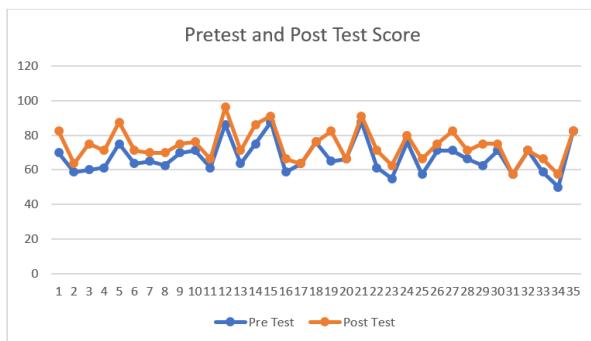
**Figure 1. Students Pretest and Posttest Score**

Figure 1 graphically illustrates that students' pretest and posttest scores do not overlap, indicating a difference between them. In addition to the graph, the following descriptive statistics table provides further insight into whether the scores increased or decreased.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Post-Test Data

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	35	36,25	50,00	86,25	67,46	9,233
Post Test	35	38,70	57,55	96,25	74,12	9,435
Valid N	35					

As noted in the findings, the average score rose by 6.67 points. This aligns with studies by Tulbure (2011), which also reported higher student test scores with differentiated instruction. Beyond academic improvement, questionnaire results indicated that DI boosted students' confidence and motivation. The improved scores suggest that differentiated instruction (DI) positively impacts students. According to a study by Mavidou and Kakana (2019), DI not only enhances learning outcomes in individual subject areas but also promotes the development of overarching themes, provided that fundamental concepts are set as the instructional objectives.

Non Cognitive Development

Findings from questionnaires and interviews indicate that students recognized the benefits of differentiated learning in English narrative writing. Key advantages included increased collaboration, improved teamwork, and a greater sense of competence in learning English. These results align with Smale-Jacobs et al. (2019), who highlighted the potential for enhanced student learning outcomes through differentiated instruction. Students reported feeling more comfortable working in groups with peers of similar skill levels, believing this approach could improve their skills. This aligns with Chen (2007), which found that students appreciated having ownership over leveled tasks, enhancing their English skills.

Grouping students by interests also enriched their learning experiences, increasing motivation. In line with Vargas-Parra (2018), who demonstrated that differentiated instruction in a virtual learning environment positively impacts students' experiences and motivation.

Overall, differentiated instruction improves student outcomes by fostering collaboration and acknowledging interests. Effective grouping strategies should consider readiness and interests, as supported by Sapan and Mede (2022), who found both students and teachers viewed differentiated instruction as beneficial. It is also in line with Fowen and Negara (2024) who

stated that DI can facilitate students' learning needs. This aligns with the independent curriculum's emphasis on collaboration and holistic competency development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions, conclusions were drawn regarding implementing differentiated instruction (DI) in the classroom: Before adopting DI, the teacher prepared by developing tailored teaching modules that align with curriculum objectives. While they possess a foundational understanding of DI from training, many face challenges such as time constraints and a lack of confidence in their ability to create effective modules. In teaching narrative writing skills, six sessions were conducted using the Before, During, After (BKoF, MoT, JCoT, and ICoT) learning stages. The teacher applied three types of differentiation—content, process, and product—based on students' readiness and interests, although the teacher did not fully utilize different learning styles. The implementation of DI positively impacted students' cognitive and non-cognitive development. Writing competence improved from an average of 67.46 in the pretest to 74.12 in the posttest, and students showed increased confidence and motivation.

Several suggestions are proposed for English teachers, school stakeholders, and future researchers. High school English teachers should adopt differentiated instruction to meet the diverse abilities of students, especially in writing. Understanding the stages of writing and adequately preparing lessons are crucial for meaningful learning. Schools need to assess teachers' professional and pedagogical competencies to develop targeted training programs and foster best practice sharing among educators. Additionally, further research is needed to examine how extra teacher assignments impact their readiness to teach and student outcomes.

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