

Enquiry towards Middle-School Teachers about Differentiated English Instruction in a Big Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Differentiated instruction (DI) practice in Indonesia puts teachers in a dilemma because they need to accommodate students' diversity within significantly large class sizes. The present multi-case study scrutinizes Indonesian middle-school English teachers' strategies and needs while implementing DI in big classrooms. Four English teachers in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to gather the data. Thematic analysis were applied to analyse the qualitative data, following the stages of data reduction, display, conclusion drawing, and validation. The results indicate that teachers are currently implementing DI independently with no systematic guidelines for scaffolding. Consequently, teachers urgently need structured DI models, training, and institutional support for effective DI implementation. Additionally, ongoing challenges in large, diverse classrooms highlight policy gaps and trends across ASEAN. Ultimately, this study offers a comparative perspective on DI development in ASEAN to foster more inclusive teaching approaches worldwide.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, English language teaching, middle school, teacher development

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Introduction

Differentiated instruction (DI) has emerged as a common teaching model implemented in Indonesian middle school classrooms in recent years, especially in the English Language Teaching (ELT) context (Gultom et al., 2022). Teachers have experimented with various strategies to effectively implement DI by complying with DI principles, including differentiating the learning content, process, product, and environment. However, extensive research in Indonesia has shown that teachers encounter various challenges in practice, with big classroom sizes becoming the most reported barrier (Satyarini et al., 2022). The vast population in Indonesia contributes to the big classroom size in middle schools, which inevitably leads to overcrowded classrooms (Hamied & Musthafa, 2019; Suwastini et al., 2021). Attending to the individual differences in a big classroom can be daunting for teachers with limited experience in practicing DI. Therefore, teachers must adapt strategies that can address the immense size of the mainstream middle-school classrooms.

Prior to this study, a pilot study was conducted in a Yogyakarta middle school. The results indicate that the teachers are reluctant to practice DI, assuming that they need to prepare different lesson plans for each student. It seems possible that this misconception is due to a knowledge gap regarding the distinction between DI and individualized instruction (II). Fundamentally, DI differs from II in maintaining the same learning goals for all students while respecting individual needs to tailor the learning tracks (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2017). However, teachers often equate DI with II in practice, and consider this strategy as impractical and time-consuming (Gibbs,

2022; Satyarini et al., 2022). Studies indicate that this confusion is likely due to a lack of adequate training and limited DI exposure (Alojado, 2024; Merawi, 2021; Ziernwald et al., 2022). This gap signifies that more focused and professional teachers training is urgently needed to clearly differentiate DI and II and provide practical strategies for teachers to implement DI effectively.

The above mentioned issues in DI practice are not exclusively found in Indonesia, but also in the ASEAN region in general. Studies report that overcrowded classrooms are a common issue in ASEAN because they often disrupt students' concentration, which makes it challenging for teachers to address the individual needs (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017). This condition significantly hampers the quality of ELT especially in large classrooms. Therefore, ASEAN education stakeholders must address these issues adequately as English proficiency is prioritized for economic growth and regional integration (Alojado, 2024; Hamied & Musthafa, 2019).

What follows is an account of struggles reported by teachers related to contextually inappropriate or culturally unresponsive teaching practices, particularly in using one-size-fits-all methods or Western-centric textbooks (Hidayati et al., 2024). It fails to address the unique linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity of ASEAN learners (Dizon & Nanquil, 2024; Emilia et al., 2025). A case in Indonesia, as reported by Purwaningrum and Yusuf (2020), shows that frequent textbook use that does not accommodate cultural contexts leads to students' poor learning engagement and outcomes. This practice only elevates the challenge of large classrooms in meeting students' diverse needs. Therefore, this study investigates teachers'

needs and challenges in implementing DI in the mainstream ELT classrooms to identify suitable teachers' training programs. Moreover, practical and context-sensitive DI strategies must be developed to help teachers improve classroom management, assessment, and student-centred learning. Consequently, it can enhance the quality and equity of ELT across ASEAN.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon DI theory proposed by Carol Ann Tomlinson, who is deeply rooted in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky. It highlights that children learn in their zone of proximal development (ZPD) and need scaffolding to achieve their maximum learning potential (Tomlinson, 2017). Even though scholars in this area of study have their own way of defining DI concept, they mainly agree upon the portrayal of DI to address students' various learning needs to facilitate their academic achievement (Ghaith & Awada, 2022; Smets et al., 2022).

In the present study, the ZPD achieved by the students may contribute to their English language acquisition and learning. It complements Vygotsky's (2012) contention that scaffolding is crucial to helping students achieve their ZPD. Along the same lines, Tomlinson (2017) subsequently argued that learners need scaffolding to support their success since optimum learning is unlikely to be attained without help. Scholars in this field of study support this idea and continuously foster the scaffolding practice to support learners' ZPD achievement. Since students possess different ZPD levels, scaffolding provides opportunities to adjust the assistance depending on their learning needs (Pourdana, 2022; Sullivan & Weeks, 2019).

Research Questions

The present study focuses on answering the following research questions:

1. What are the existing strategies used by Indonesian middle school English teachers to implement DI in their big classrooms?
2. What specific training and instructional supports do teachers need to acquire to implement the DI strategy in their big classrooms effectively?

Participants

This study was conducted in four English classes in different middle schools across the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Two were 7th-grade classes, and the others were 8th grade. In Indonesia, 7th and 8th grade students are between 12 and 14. Children this age are believed to have significantly developed individual thinking and understanding, this representing the education system's most "developmentally varied group of learners" (Babakr et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2005). While seventh graders are in their transition period and still adjusting to the increased academic demands in middle school, eighth graders are beginning to improve their learning strategies to prepare for the challenging academic demands in higher education levels. This condition justifies 7th and 8th graders as ideal groups for examining the effectiveness of DI (Tomlinson, 2015; Yu, 2020).

The schools' locations were diverse, from rural to urban areas. However, each class has a similar number of students, around 28-

34. In addition, four female English teachers also participated in this study (all assigned pseudonyms). They were full-time middle school English teachers with more than five years of teaching experience and at least one year of DI practice. One of the teachers held a master's degree in education, while the other three had a bachelor's degree in English language education.

Methodology

Research Design

The present qualitative study uses a multi-case study design to provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and a detailed depiction of the existing DI classroom strategies practiced by four teachers (Yin, 2009). This design provides rich, detailed insights into each case and enhances the generalizability of findings across similar educational settings (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, it is considered suitable for this study as it offers profound contrasts and evidence of teachers' needs for effective DI strategy in big classrooms within authentic settings.

Research Instrument

An interview guideline was prepared as an open guide to collect the data (see Appendix 1). In addition, an observation checklist was also arranged to keep the observation log (see Appendix 2). Both instruments were developed using the DI framework by Tomlinson (2017) on differentiating instruction in academically diverse classrooms. The scaffolding in the revised Bloom's taxonomy by Anderson et al. (2001) and ZPD theory from Vygotsky (1978) were also adapted as the frameworks to develop the instruments. These instruments were validated by

experts in language teaching and differentiated instruction (two associate professors and one senior teacher). In addition, pilot testing was conducted to two middle school English teachers to assess practical implementation and ensure the reliability of the instruments.

Data Collection

This study employed a semi-structured interview as it allows the researchers to explore the subjects' viewpoints and be open to new ideas about the topic discussed (Cohen et al., 2000). Interviews were conducted twice with each teacher to ensure reliability. The first interview explores teachers' initial perceptions of existing DI strategies and their perceived understanding of effective DI practice in big classrooms. Then, a follow-up interview was conducted to clarify the observation data. It aims to ensure alignment with teachers' perspectives and confirm their needs for effective DI implementation.

In addition, classroom observation was conducted to provide insights about the existing DI practice. The observation focused on how teachers adapted instruction and utilized resources in big classrooms, aiming to depict examples of DI practice in authentic settings. This study ensured a comprehensive and reliable understanding of teachers' DI practices and challenges by triangulating interview and observation data.

Data Analysis

The thematic approach was applied to analyse the data, owing to its flexibility and practicality in building a constructive and critical analysis that helps identify the concepts and ideas of the content (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It elaborates on Miles' and Huberman's (1994) concept of

qualitative data analysis, which involves data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing and validation. Frameworks related to DI were used to decide the themes to display the data.

The observation data were prepared by classifying checklist items and side notes, while interview data were transcribed intelligently, omitting irrelevant information. Both datasets underwent data reduction through coding and categorization, followed by data display to identify thematic patterns. The conclusion and validation interpreted the data to ensure consistency across datasets. This systematic approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of teachers' DI practices and perceptions, enhancing the study's credibility and depth.

In addition, member checking was also conducted to ensure the data validity and reliability. The interpreted data were returned to be verified by the participants. It is particularly beneficial for triangulation and to avoid misinterpretation of the data. This step is essential to ensure the data were interpreted accurately to present a rigorous discussion.

Findings

This study unveils unique characteristics across four cases, highlighting how varying contexts affect DI implementation and the challenges teachers face. Table 1 below summarizes the key characteristics of each case.

Table 1

Presentation of Individual Cases

Case	Context	DI implementation	Challenges	Excerpts
1. Ms. Ellin	- Urban school, 8th grade with 28 students, implementing <i>Merdeka</i> curriculum - The teacher was a member of “<i>Guru Penggerak</i>” (transformational teachers)	- Practiced DI based on its key principle of respect for students' diversity but lacked planning. - Implement flexible grouping but restrained with limited space and lack of scaffolding. - Attempted to differentiate the product, but back to standardized assessment due to students' resistance.	- Large classroom - Lack of scaffolding - Students' resistance	“Teachers need to do the steps (in DI). It will cause another problem if there is no order (scaffolding). Perhaps, teachers will only prepare several media and materials without considering the students' needs.” (Ms. Ellin, interview).
2. Ms. Wiwin	- Suburban school, 8th grade with 32 students - The teacher was an early member of “<i>Guru Penggerak</i>” - Implement <i>Merdeka</i> curriculum	- Implemented DI even before the new curriculum was enacted. - Conduct diagnostic assessment for grouping. - Use CCQs to check the background knowledge. - Practice DI only when topic allow.	- Large classrooms. - Time consuming. - Preparation, workload concerns	“Ideally, DI should be implemented in a small class as practiced by other countries, and it needs more than one teacher in one classroom.” (Ms. Wiwin, interview).

3. Ms. Selly	• Rural school, 7th grade • The only English teacher and new “<i>Guru Penggerak</i>” member	• Implement DI only for the 7th graders. • Applying flexible grouping but lacked scaffolding. • Differentiated worksheet but struggled with students’ low proficiency level.	• Students lack prior English knowledge • Low motivation • Lack of structure guidelines	“I have yet to get a guideline for DI to date, and I have yet to observe DI in practice. So far, I independently seek for the resources.” (Ms. Selly, interview).
4. Ms. Wuri	• Urban school, 7th grade with 34 students • New “<i>Guru Penggerak</i>” member	• Aware of her students’ diversity but still using one-size-fits-all instruction. • Implemented flexible grouping and benefitted from technological advancements.	• Large classroom • Early stage of DI implementation • Balance DI with curriculum demands	“It depends on what we learn in the class. Sometimes I group the same kind (learning style), sometimes I put the smarter students with less smart ones on the same group. I do it flexibly.” (Ms. Wuri, interview).

Inter-Case Presentation: Challenges and Adaptations in Implementing DI in Big Classrooms

This study offers an understanding of DI implementation complexities in diverse Indonesian classrooms. It identifies several common themes despite the individual challenges presented in each case. The themes mainly discuss teachers’ beliefs and diverse needs, as well as students’ characteristics during the DI implementation. Additionally, all cases report large classes as a challenging aspect to practice DI. This condition hinders the teachers to address diverse needs and create differentiated content and activities. In this light, teachers are highly demanding of a systemic solution to address classroom overcrowding.

Furthermore, the “*Guru Penggerak*” program, which is designed to promote innovative teaching practices, promotes DI adoption in all schools involved in this study. This program assigns teachers as agents of change by adopting DI in their classrooms. Teachers were observed to utilize flexible grouping as a key element of their DI practice. This practice indicates teachers’ adaptability and applicability of DI in addressing students’ diversity in large classes.

Finally, this study reveals teachers’ strategies in overcoming external pressures influencing DI practice in their classroom contexts. One case reported teacher’s heavy workloads that limit their DI preparation and implementation. Teachers were further

challenged with limited access to resources such as differentiated teaching materials and professional development opportunities. Interestingly, teachers were reported to show creativity and resilience in adapting DI strategies despite these challenges.

In contrast to the similar attributes, however, several discrepancies were observed from all cases. Each case reported students' distinct characteristics and diverse prior knowledge, which emphasizes the influence of sociocultural context on students' motivation and engagement in English language learning. Moreover, each case in this study offers unique context. It leads to diverse adaptation of DI strategies, which resulted in varying levels of DI implementation. Consequently, it only highlights the needs for context-specific DI strategies.

To conclude, four cases in this study represent the existing DI practice in Indonesia. While large classes become a shared challenge remain to be overcome, teachers have their own way to transform and adapt their teaching to address the students' needs and their school's specific sociocultural context. Thus, continuous professional development and stakeholders' support are important for effective DI implementation.

Discussion

The Existing DI Practice in Indonesia

Indonesia, as one of the largest multicultural countries with a diverse population of students (Muslim, 2021), recently attempted to implement DI in its context. Provided that DI practice is considered beneficial to address students' needs, especially in educational contexts with linguistic

and cultural diversity, such as Southeast Asia regions (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017).

Like Thailand and the Philippines, Indonesia encounters significant challenges in implementing DI across large, diverse classrooms (Cholsakorn & Piamsai, 2022; Suson et al., 2020; Suwastini et al., 2021). However, while Malaysian teachers focus on technology-assisted DI (Hasan & Ajmain, 2022) and Singaporeans with a systematic scaffolding approach (Heng & Song, 2020), Indonesian educators adopted flexible grouping as their primary differentiation strategy. This aligns with Sullivan and Weeks' (2019) framework but reveals a regional gap. Unlike Singapore's government-mandated DI training (Heng & Song, 2020), Indonesian teachers develop strategies independently, leading to inconsistent implementation (Satyarini et al., 2022).

Correlated to the first question, teachers mainly assume that flexible grouping is sufficient for differentiation as it offers collaboration. However, teachers need to understand that to practice DI in a big classroom, flexible grouping is fruitless without scaffolding (Pourdana, 2022). Scaffolding is needed to ensure that students are capable to collaborate effectively in each group. Therefore, offering a specific DI model comprising scaffolding will greatly aid teachers in adjusting assistance depending on the students' needs (Sullivan & Weeks, 2019). It aligns with the DI objective emphasized by Tomlinson (2017) that scaffolding is needed to help students collaborate better in their designated groups to achieve maximum learning potential.

Essential Supports for DI Implementation

With respect to the second question, this study seeks out teachers' perceived understanding

towards DI practice before mapping out their needs for an effective DI strategy. In this case, all participating teachers were found to overlook DI principles due to a lack of comprehensive knowledge and experience (Merawi, 2021). Teachers struggle to design and implement DI without a deep understanding of its principles.

This study supports evidence from previous study (Alojado, 2024) that structured training programs are significantly needed to provide teachers with skills, knowledge, and resources to implement DI in their contexts. Provided that lack of scaffolding was often overlooked by teachers, the trainings need to focus on scaffolding techniques. Additionally, providing teachers with understanding about flexible grouping is also necessary to develop culturally responsive teaching.

The need for scaffolding in Indonesian classrooms mirrors findings from Philippine studies conducted by Alojado (2024). While Singapore provides teachers with technology-based differentiation tools (Heng & Song, 2020), Indonesian schools - like Malaysia's (Hasan & Ajmain, 2022) - are challenged with resource limitations. These highlight regional variations in DI implementation: high-income nations employ advanced technological systems, while countries like Indonesia and the Philippines require more context-specific training focusing on scaffolding and group dynamics (Alojado, 2024; Suwastini et al., 2021).

Moreover, school support including resources and facilities is also a complex factor in DI practice (Merawi, 2021). School management plays important role in the success of DI practice even though limited access to technology often hinders teachers' ability to address students' diverse needs (Suwastini et al., 2021).

Implications

This study sets out valuable implications for DI practice in ASEAN, specifically in Indonesia, where big classrooms and diverse student needs challenge the implementation. Southeast Asian schools and education authorities can begin by providing structured training programs for teachers to plan and implement scaffolding strategies (Cholsakorn & Piamsai, 2022; Heng & Song, 2020). Such programs would help teachers adapt instruction to varied learning needs while managing the constraints of large classrooms.

Additionally, it provides insights into specific training and instructional support teachers need to implement DI in big classrooms typical in ASEAN countries (Hasan & Ajmain, 2022; Suwastini et al., 2021). Specifically, schools must provide structured training programs focused on DI strategies and sufficient instructional materials to facilitate DI practice.

Subsequently, policymakers should consider reducing teachers' workloads that limit the DI preparation time, allowing teachers to focus on creating organized and practical DI lessons (Satyarini et al., 2022). Finally, DI models implemented in the ASEAN context should include cultural aspects to address students' diverse learning backgrounds, experiences, and needs (Alojado, 2024; Emilia et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study aims to distinguish the Indonesian teachers' strategies in practicing DI and comprehend the training and instructional supports needed for effective DI practice in large classrooms. The findings reveal the absence of a

scaffolding-integrated DI model as a significant factor that hinders effective DI implementation in big classrooms. Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for teachers' structured training programs and solid support from stakeholders. This measure is valuable to facilitate teachers in planning context-specific differentiated instruction (DI) classrooms to be more culturally responsive.

Regarding the first research question about the strategies teachers use in big-size DI classrooms, this study reveals that teachers were practicing DI inconsistently and improvisatory, which contradicts the DI principle of being proactive and pre-planned. This inconsistency is most likely due to lack of scaffolding for teachers. As a result, the "What's next?" query is often poses by teachers after completing DI activity. This finding only emphasizes the needs for step-by-step guidelines to help teachers practice DI effectively in big classrooms. Such scaffolding will be beneficial for teachers to plan the DI strategies and meet the diverse students' needs efficiently.

With respect to the second research question, this study found that the absence of structured training and adaptive resources leads to inconsistent DI implementation. Although it is challenging for schools to provide adequate resources for teachers to practice DI in big classrooms, institution needs to take all possible means to facilitate teachers with context-specific resources. In this light, teachers are in dire need of DI trainings that focuses not only on scaffolding technique, but also culturally responsive teaching.

The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of the importance of scaffolding, structured trainings, and instructional

supports for effective DI implementation in big classrooms common in ASEAN region. The principal theoretical implication of this study is that teacher scaffolding and institutional support must be integrated into the DI framework to fill in the gap between practice and theory. Furthermore, this study practically contributes to our understanding of the needs for continuous teacher professional development. Taken together, these findings suggest that government and educational institution across Southeast Asia regions need to prioritize substantial institutional support to ensure effective DI implementation in their diverse academic contexts.

Finally, the generalisability of these findings is subject to certain limitations. For instance, the scope of this study is limited in terms of the small number of cases. Although this study involves four teachers from four schools, the divergences of those schools hardly serve a wide gap as they are in the same province. Therefore, continued efforts are needed to achieve generalization on a larger scale such as across ASEAN regions. Furthermore, a greater focus on scaffolding could produce interesting findings that account more for the development of DI strategy in a big classroom. Hence, ensuring sustainable specific training programs, adaptive DI strategies, and institutional support system should be a priority for future research in this field of study.

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Statements and Declarations

Disclosure statement: The authors report no competing interests to declare.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Teachers' interview guideline.

Date :

Teacher:

School :

No	Question items	Answer
1	Can you share your experience in implementing DI in your classroom so far?	
2	Reflecting on your experience, what is the strengths and weaknesses of DI to teach in big classrooms?	
3	To what extent do you think DI strategy influence your students' English proficiency?	
4	What do you need to support the successful implementation of DI especially in big classrooms? Why?	
5	Do you have any recommendations for future development of DI?	

Appendix 2. Observation checklist

	Checklist Items	v	Side notes
Operational Characteristics	Teacher reacts to different student characteristics depending on student's needs.		
	Teacher adapts to differences in learning profiles aiming at maximizing students' potential.		
	Teacher handles differences in a positive way.		
	Teacher handles differences in a proactive way.		
	Teacher handles differences in a planned way.		
Curriculum elements	Teacher provides different approaches for different students.		
	Teacher prepares different materials.		
	Teacher offers different learning activities for the students.		
	Teacher gradually assesses students' progress in learning.		
	Teacher groups the students flexibly during the learning process.		
Scaffolding	Teacher facilitates interactive discussion for the students.		
	Teacher regularly encourages the students to apply their language knowledge in real practice.		
	Teacher provides activities that allow students to critically assess their own learning.		
	Teacher assists students to complete different projects or products.		
Students' performance	Students are actively engaged in the classroom activities.		
	Students enjoy different instructions from the teacher.		
	Students are motivated to learn English when DI is implemented.		
	Students demonstrate their English capability confidently.		

**Adapted from Anderson and Krathwohl (2001); Gardner (2011); Smets (2017); Tomlinson (2005)*