

The Differentiated Learning Strategy in Implementing “Merdeka Belajar” Curriculum of English Lesson in Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Differentiated learning represents a key aspect of the independent curriculum, granting teachers the flexibility to select appropriate teaching methods. However, many teachers face challenges in implementing differentiated learning, and some still lack a clear understanding of its concept. Therefore, effective strategies are essential to enhance the teaching and learning process. This research aimed to explore the teaching strategies employed by teachers and analyze how they implement differentiated learning in English lessons. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, the study involved two English teachers and two students as participants. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation. The findings revealed that teachers utilized strategies such as motivation, brainstorming, ice-breaking activities, games, small group discussions, LRD (Listen-Read-Discuss), vocabulary drills, and demonstrations.

Keywords: Differentiated learning, Merdeka belajar curriculum, Teachers’ strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is a fundamental element in the education system, serving as a key factor in achieving educational goals (Martin & Simanjourang, 2022). As stated in Law No. 20 of 2003, a curriculum consists of structured learning plans that outline objectives, content, instructional materials, and teaching methods, acting as a guide for educational activities to fulfill national educational objectives. The curriculum is an essential and precise framework that directs and enhances the quality of the teaching and learning process (Budiyanto, 2014).

Indonesia has undergone 11 curriculum revisions from 1947 to 2021. The latest version, the "Merdeka Belajar" (Independent Learning) curriculum, is an enhancement of the 2013 curriculum. These changes have been influenced by scientific and technological advancements, global political shifts, and demographic growth. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum emphasizes a more flexible intra-curricular learning structure, allowing students

adequate time to explore concepts and strengthen their competencies (Kemdikbud, 2022). This curriculum promotes a learning environment where students can engage in lessons in a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere while considering their natural abilities (Salim, 2023). Teachers are encouraged to use diverse teaching resources to accommodate students' unique learning needs and interests. Projects are designed to reinforce the Pancasila learner profile and are based on government-assigned themes (Barlian et al., 2022).

English language classrooms comprise diverse students with different cultural backgrounds, interests, and learning needs (de Graaf et al., 2019). Differentiated learning aims to create an educational experience that responds to students' varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Teachers must understand these differences to select appropriate teaching strategies that align with lesson objectives and students' developmental stages (Nasution, 2017). However, many teachers are still unfamiliar with the concept of differentiated learning (Usman et al., 2022).

To implement the Merdeka Belajar curriculum effectively, teachers must enhance their ability to identify and address students' learning needs through lesson planning (Sindy Dwi Jayanti et al., 2023). Since students have different learning styles—such as auditory, visual, or kinesthetic—teachers should recognize these variations to design appropriate learning experiences. Understanding multiple intelligences enables teachers to establish clear goals and develop student-centered learning activities (Şener & Çokçalışkan, 2018).

Teachers must carefully select instructional strategies that suit students' knowledge levels, the subject matter, and their stage in the learning process. Maintaining students' attention is essential, as learning cannot take place if students are disengaged. A well-chosen teaching strategy facilitates student comprehension and engagement (Purwanti et al., 2015). Teaching strategies encompass various methods that help students grasp course content and achieve long-term learning goals (Sarode, 2018). Thus, employing diverse instructional approaches is essential for sustaining student interest and fostering an effective learning experience.

Based on this discussion, the researcher is interested in exploring the implementation of differentiated learning strategies within the Merdeka Belajar curriculum in English lessons at the junior high school level. The study aims to identify the teaching strategies used in classrooms.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method, which is used to understand the meaning behind individual or group experiences and to explore social or human-related issues (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, the research follows a case study design, where the researcher examines a specific group and describes its activities to identify shared behavioral patterns within the group. The participants were two English teacher and two students at Junior High School in Yogyakarta. Data collection methods include observation, interviews, and documentation. The data analysis process follows Miles and Huberman's framework, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Trustworthiness in research ensures confidence in data through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, maintained by direct engagement and triangulation. The research follows ethical principles, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and fairness by protecting respondent identities, securing data, and treating all participants equally.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings on the implementation of differentiated learning strategy in English classes. The data collected from observations and relevant literature highlight various strategies used to accommodate students' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles.

A strategy is a set of planned actions designed to establish goals and objectives, along with the means to achieve them. Based on interviews with Teacher A and Teacher B, several strategies were identified and are described below.

a. Motivation

Motivation refers to a deliberate effort to encourage, direct, and sustain an individual's behavior, driving them to take an action to achieve specific goals. Data from the study indicates that teachers incorporate motivation at the beginning of lessons to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning. Motivation fosters an internal drive-in student, prompting behavioral changes and active participation in learning. Effective motivation enhances learning outcomes (Rahman, 2021), as the level of motivation provided by teachers can significantly impact students' academic achievements.

Teachers apply motivational strategies at the start of lessons to engage students in learning. Additionally, they offer verbal praise and positive reinforcement to boost students' confidence. One method teacher uses to motivate students is incorporating apperception at

the beginning of lessons. Apperception helps prepare students for learning by increasing their interest and attentiveness (Putri, 2019). Moreover, it supports students' motivation by sparking curiosity and demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject matter (Fauziyyah, 2012). Teachers can adopt strategies such as fostering curiosity and displaying enthusiasm to capture students' attention and encourage engagement with the lesson.

b. Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a cognitive strategy that encourages the generation and sharing of ideas. It serves as a tool to initiate the thinking process and develop creative solutions (Brown, 2004). During brainstorming, participants focus on a specific topic or problem and contribute ideas freely without immediate critique or evaluation (Saban, 2004, as cited in (Doğan & Batdı, 2021). According to (Dwi & Somantri, 2019), brainstorming enables students to actively share their opinions and thoughts.

The data indicates that teachers employ brainstorming techniques to enhance students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This aligns with (Al-khatib, 2012) who highlights that brainstorming aids students in problem-solving, benefits them through idea development, fosters collaboration, and strengthens social connections.

Teachers implement brainstorming by posing questions to students and encouraging spontaneous responses. (Alrubaie & Daniel, 2014) outline several advantages of brainstorming, including knowledge development, cognitive skill enhancement, and an open learning environment free from criticism or restrictive rules.

Teacher B emphasized that brainstorming is incorporated at the start of lessons, where students are given topics to assess their prior knowledge. This helps teachers determine the most effective instructional approach for their students. Lang and David N. Evans as cited in (Anggraini, 2020) describe brainstorming as an enjoyable and creative technique that supports problem-solving. It allows students to freely express their ideas, promotes a non-judgmental environment for idea-sharing, and fosters creative thinking.

c. Games

Educational games are interactive tools that enhance learning by making the process more engaging and enjoyable. These games serve as instructional aids that expand knowledge through dynamic and creative means (Desi Windisari et al., 2019). Based on the study's findings, teachers utilize games to reinforce lesson content, ensure student comprehension, and prevent boredom in the learning process. This aligns with (Syafii et al.,

2020), who state that incorporating games in education can significantly improve both learning experiences and outcomes.

Before implementing games, teachers assess whether the selected game aligns with the lesson content and whether students are capable and interested in participating. Commonly used games include snakes and ladders, card games, puzzles, and picture-guessing activities. According to (Novayani, 2019), games can effectively enhance student interest and facilitate knowledge acquisition when integrated with sound pedagogical practices.

Since there are numerous game variations available, teachers must observe students' characteristics and conditions before selecting an appropriate game. (Septianti & Afiani, 2020) note that various factors influence the learning process and outcomes, including intelligence, prior knowledge, cognitive styles, learning preferences, motivation, and socio-cultural backgrounds. These factors should be considered when incorporating games into lessons to maximize their effectiveness in engaging students and supporting their learning.

d. Vocabulary Drilling

According to (Richards & Schmidt, 2013), drilling is a technique frequently used in language instruction to practice pronunciation, sentence structures, and grammar patterns through repetition and guided exercises. Drills that emphasize different grammatical structures in sentence formation are often referred to as pattern drills.

The data indicates that teachers implement vocabulary drilling to enhance students' vocabulary retention, comprehension, and pronunciation. (Thornburry, 2002) describes drilling as an approach that improves pronunciation by encouraging imitation and repetition of words, phrases, and sentences. Similarly, (Andarbeni, 2010) argues that drilling helps students retain vocabulary for a longer time while also allowing for immediate correction of errors.

Before introducing the lesson material, teachers conduct vocabulary drills by individually testing students. The teacher calls out words in either Indonesian or English, and students respond accordingly. Sometimes, students are asked to identify and read English words related to objects. The objective is to help students remember, understand, and pronounce vocabulary correctly. Students possess various skills, such as memorization and problem-solving, which require structured training (drilling) to be effectively developed. A key component of vocabulary drilling is the structured and repetitive practice that strengthens the learning process (Rofi'ah et al., 2020).

Observations showed that students were highly engaged during vocabulary drilling. While some responded correctly, others made mistakes. Teachers utilize this technique to assess students' retention of previously learned vocabulary and reinforce their learning. (Fransiska & Jurianto, 2016) found that drilling techniques enhance students' vocabulary mastery, a view supported by (Halimah et al., 2022), who state that drilling serves as an effective strategy for engaging students in vocabulary acquisition.

e. Small Group Discussion

Small group discussion is a learning strategy that involves dividing students into groups of two to five members. This approach fosters teamwork and provides students with opportunities to express their opinions and ideas on a given topic (Handayani et al., 2022). Teachers employ small group discussions to encourage students to exchange thoughts on lesson materials and collaborate in solving problems. Teachers form discussion groups based on initial assessments, ensuring that each group consists of students with varying academic performance levels. By creating heterogeneous groups, students with higher proficiency can assist those who struggle, promoting peer learning

Classroom observations revealed that teachers frequently incorporate small group discussions. This approach allows all group members to actively participate and complete assignments collaboratively. Students also reported that they enjoy group discussions, particularly when their groups are formed with a balanced distribution of academic abilities. Additionally, they expressed enthusiasm for learning games, such as dice-based activities, which further enhance engagement.

f. Demonstration

The demonstration method involves presenting learning content through the display or enactment of processes, objects, or situations. Demonstrations can be conducted using real-life examples or simulations, either by the teacher or other learning resources, to enhance student comprehension (Husain & Wardana, 2021). Teacher A employed demonstration techniques to aid students in understanding and applying lesson concepts. She performed demonstrations directly in front of the class, providing concrete examples to facilitate student understanding. (Sukma Yulianti et al., 2024) emphasizes that demonstrations not only introduce theoretical concepts but also foster practical comprehension. This method is designed to deepen students' understanding through direct experience, visual representation, and active interaction with the learning material.

By using demonstrations, teachers make lessons more tangible and relatable, allowing students to better grasp key concepts (Sobon & Lumowa, 2018). This technique promotes classroom engagement and leaves a lasting impression, enhancing knowledge retention. (Gafur, 2018) highlights that demonstrations significantly contribute to interactive learning, motivating students to participate more actively in their studies. Additionally, demonstrations provide students with hands-on experiences, enabling them to refine their skills through practical application.

g. Listen, Read, Discuss (LRD) Strategy

The Listen, Read, Discuss (LRD) strategy is a reading comprehension approach designed for students who face difficulties in understanding texts. It consists of three main stages: listening, reading, and discussion (Mckenna, 2002). The data showed that teachers use the LRD strategy to assess students' reading comprehension and overall understanding of texts. (Ibrahim, 2006) supports LRD as a reading strategy that enhances students' ability to grasp textual information. Teachers implement LRD by first explaining the material, then distributing worksheets (LKPD) to students. The students listen to the teacher's instructions, ensuring they understand the task before beginning to read the text. (Prastina & Nurmanik, 2019) describe the LRD process as a structured three-step approach: students first listen to the teacher's explanation, then read the text to align their understanding with the provided information, and finally engage in a guided discussion to reinforce comprehension.

This strategy helps students process reading material more effectively by introducing content through listening before requiring them to read. This sequential approach makes comprehension easier and encourages active participation. Purnama & Subang (2024) emphasize that LRD is most effective when both teachers and students actively engage in discussions about reading comprehension, allowing for deeper understanding and collaborative learning identified and are described below.

4. CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that English teachers employ various instructional strategies, including motivation, demonstration, ice-breaking activities, games, brainstorming, vocabulary drills, LRD (Listen, Read, Discuss), and small group discussions. At the beginning of lessons, formative assessments are used to evaluate students' abilities.

Regarding product differentiation, teachers have not yet introduced video-based assignments. Instead, student output primarily consists of essays and group presentations.

These methods allow students to demonstrate their understanding and receive constructive feedback from both teachers and peers.

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