

The Impact of Differentiated Learning in Improving Student Ability at SMKN 10 Jeneponto

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of differentiated learning is a new breakthrough in Indonesia through the Merdeka curriculum. This study aims to determine the impact of the implementation of differentiated learning at SMKN 10 Jeneponto. The subjects in this study were English teachers and grade X students at SMKN 10 Jeneponto. The samples in this study were 3 English teachers and 24 students of class X.TKJ. In collecting data, the researcher used two data collection techniques, namely observation and interview. The results of research through observations using five indicators, namely learning implementation management, communicative process, student response, learning activity, and learning outcomes. All aspects of these indicators are well achieved, so it can be understood that differentiated learning has a good impact on students. In addition, the interview results also support this. After conducting interviews with teachers and students, teachers explained that differentiated learning is effectively implemented in the classroom. In addition, differentiated learning is useful in understanding students' characteristics and increasing their confidence. However, teachers are still adapting to differentiated learning which is a challenge in its application. Meanwhile, according to students, through differentiated learning their needs are met, and their abilities are improved. Therefore, differentiated learning has an impact in improving students' abilities.

Key Words: Differentiated Learning; Impact; Student Need; Student Ability

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Merdeka curriculum aims to improve the quality of education which is expected to be student-centered, considering the diverse potential, interests, and talents of each student so that learning is effective and meaningful for students (Barlian, Yuni, Ramadhanty, & Suhaeni, 2023). Differentiated learning is a new breakthrough in the world of education in Indonesia through the establishment of

the Merdeka curriculum as the national curriculum. Differentiated learning is the implementation of meaningful learning for students in developing student potential, creating stability in the learning process and exploring differences in the potential of each student (Hasanah, Suyatno, Maryani, Badar, Fitria, & Patmasari, 2022). Differentiated learning is a learning process where the teacher looks and listens to the diversity of students on what will strengthen and hinder each student in effective learning (Bondie & Zusho, 2018).

One of the schools that implement the Merdeka curriculum is SMKN 10 Jeneponto. The Merdeka curriculum currently implemented is related to the educator's strategy in delivering learning according to student characteristics or student learning styles (Cahya, Pamungkas, & Faiqoh, 2023). The different characteristics of each student in the school make differentiated learning good to implement. Student characteristics are the most influential variable in developing learning management strategies (Septianti & Afiani, 2020). Different learning styles, interests, and abilities make differentiated learning a solution to meet the needs of students in the school. However, it is also a challenge for teachers in teaching. One of the challenges that is often encountered in the classroom is the different abilities of students. The ability of each student is diverse or heterogeneous (Prafitasari, 2015). Therefore, through differentiated learning different student characteristics can be met by the teacher.

Differentiated learning is important to implement in learning because it looks at the needs of each student. In differentiated learning teachers can choose what aspects students need in learning (Insani & Munandar, 2023). According to (Robinson, Maldonado, & Whaley, 2014), differentiated learning provides opportunities for students to understand or receive material based on their characteristics, skills, styles, and talents. One important aspect that teachers should pay attention to in learning is students' learning styles. According to (Porter & Hernacki, 2007), learning style is a process of how students absorb then organize and process information. Thus, paying attention to students' learning style in the learning process is important to know how they manage the material. Therefore, differentiated learning is important to be implemented so that teachers pay attention to students' learning styles in learning and improve the abilities of each student.

One of the goals of differentiated learning is to improve students' abilities. Differentiated learning creates a diverse classroom by giving each student the opportunity to acquire content and process ideas to improve each student's learning outcomes (Kamal, 2021). Since students learn in different ways, matching learning strategies that suit students has been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement, interest, and motivation, (Smith & Renzulli; 1984, Leksono, Matin, & Rahmawati, 2024). Through the implementation of differentiated learning, different student characteristics with different needs can also be met by teachers which will have an impact on improving student abilities. In seeing the impact of differentiated learning,

researchers use five indicators to determine the effectiveness and impact of differentiated learning. According to Yusuf (2018), there are five that determine the effectiveness of the learning process, namely 1) Learning implementation management, 2) communicative process, 3) student response, 4) learning activity, 5) and learning outcomes. Through these five indicators of effectiveness, researchers will see the impact of differentiated learning followed by interviews with teachers and students. In this research, the researcher focuses on knowing the impact of the implementation of differentiated learning at SMKN 10 Jeneponto. Therefore, this research is expected to provide data related to the impact of the implementation of differentiated learning.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This research employed a qualitative case study method. A case study is characterized by an in-depth exploration of individuals or groups to understand the variables, structures, forms, and patterns of interaction within a particular context (Starman, 2013). The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of differentiated learning on students' abilities. The research was conducted at SMKN 10 Jeneponto, with the subjects comprising English teachers and students from class X.TKJ. For the teacher sample, total sampling was applied, involving all three English teachers at the school. However, only one teacher was selected for classroom observation to specifically examine the implementation of differentiated instruction. As for the student sample, random sampling was used to select 24 students from class X.TKJ. These students were both interviewed and observed during the study. Consequently, the English teacher responsible for teaching this class was also observed to ensure alignment between teaching practices and student experiences.

Instrument and Procedures

The instruments used in this research consisted of an observation sheet and an interview guide. The observation sheet was utilized to document classroom practices related to the implementation of differentiated learning. It focused on key aspects such as the effectiveness of the learning process and its impact on students' abilities. Meanwhile, the interview guide was designed in a semi-structured format, containing a set of prepared questions aimed at exploring the participants' perceptions regarding the implementation and impact of differentiated instruction. The procedures for data collection involved two main stages: observation and interview. The observation was carried out during classroom sessions to examine how differentiated instruction was applied in practice. During this phase, the researcher systematically recorded the learning activities, particularly emphasizing the teaching strategies used and the students' responses. Following the observation, interviews were conducted with both

teachers and students. These interviews aimed to gather more in-depth insights into how differentiated learning influenced students' engagement and academic development.

Data Analysis

The data in this research were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher summarized and selected relevant data by applying coding techniques, taking notes, and organizing key themes. This stage focused on identifying how teachers recognized and responded to students' diverse learning styles in the context of differentiated instruction. Following data reduction, the data display stage involved presenting the processed information in the form of descriptive text, categories, and tables to highlight significant findings and patterns. This method of organizing data was essential in supporting the research objectives by making complex information easier to interpret. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, required the researcher to interpret the results and draw conclusions regarding the impact of differentiated learning on student outcomes. These conclusions were presented in a concise and clear manner to enhance the transparency and comprehensibility of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Observation Result

a. Learning implementation management

Based on classroom observations, differentiated learning was successfully implemented across key learning management aspects. Learning objectives were aligned with student needs and the Merdeka Curriculum, accommodating various learning styles. Pre-assessment activities were used to gauge prior understanding. The use of varied media, such as videos and online resources, supported diverse learners. Time was efficiently managed through structured lesson phases. Lastly, the teacher consistently reflected on learning materials at the beginning and end of lessons to reinforce student understanding.

b. Communicative process

Classroom observations revealed that all aspects of the communicative process were implemented effectively in the differentiated learning environment. Students communicated clearly in context; for instance, during task presentations, they opened

with greetings, explained their work, and invited peer questions. They also expressed ideas and posed questions related to descriptive texts, such as, “Can a family be described in a descriptive text?” and “What can be explained when describing a person?”. Students actively responded to both teacher and peer input. After viewing a narrative video of the story "Sura and Baya," they discussed worksheet answers and shared moral lessons like, “Don’t easily believe what others say,” and “Witnesses are needed when making agreements.” Communicative media—particularly the animated video of "Sura and Baya" shown via LCD—supported the teacher’s delivery and students’ understanding. In addition to verbal exchanges, students used non-verbal communication, such as nodding in agreement or shaking their heads in disagreement during group discussions.

c. Student response

Observation revealed that student responses in the differentiated learning classroom were active and meaningful. Students showed enthusiasm, especially during the narrative text lesson featuring the video “Sura & Baya.” They actively participated in discussions, such as when creating descriptive texts about their families, by collaborating on which members to describe. Students responded to teacher prompts with relevant input—for instance, describing Sura as “clever but cunning” and Baya as “stubborn” during character analysis. They also demonstrated critical thinking by discussing moral messages like “Don’t easily trust others” and “Agreements need witnesses.” Assignments were completed in varied formats (written or video), indicating their ability to apply what they had learned.

d. Learning activity

Observation showed that learning activities in the differentiated classroom were well implemented. Students participated actively across all lesson stages—engaging in warm-up questions about descriptive texts, discussing the story “Sura & Baya” during core activities, and reflecting on narrative texts during the closing. Independent learning was evident as students searched for descriptive text materials online via phones, using platforms like Google and YouTube, allowing them to match content with their preferred learning styles. The teacher sustained students' focus through creative strategies—starting with icebreakers and inserting jokes, such as asking students to share stories about their crushes, to create a relaxed atmosphere. A supportive classroom climate was built through humor and open-ended questions like, “I’m not looking for the right answer; just share your ideas,” which encouraged participation without pressure. The teacher also motivated students by emphasizing discipline, confidence, and honesty at the start of lessons, promoting active and responsible learning behavior.

e. Learning outcomes

Observation revealed that learning outcomes in the differentiated classroom were successfully achieved. Learning objectives—such as understanding descriptive texts based on students' learning styles—were clearly communicated and met, as shown by students' group presentations at the end of the lesson. Students' skills improved through active participation in discussions and task completion, particularly when producing descriptive texts about their families. They also demonstrated accuracy in answering questions related to the animated video “Sura & Baya,” which satisfied the teacher's expectations. Problem-solving abilities emerged as students collaborated to address tasks and finalize their group products. Most students scored above the minimum mastery standard, with all groups successfully completing their descriptive text assignments, reflecting both comprehension and learning progress.

After making observations about the impact of differentiated learning, the researcher had conducted interviews to support the observations. The researcher interviewed teachers and students to find out their views on differentiated learning and how it impacted students' abilities.

Interview with Teachers and Students

The following were the answers given by the participants regarding differentiated learning:

a. Teacher's view

Benefits of Understanding Student Characteristics

All three teachers agreed that understanding students' individual characteristics brought significant benefits. Teacher 1 stated:

“Oh, it made things easier, and actually, it wasn't me who made it easier for myself, but the students found it easier. That's why I said earlier that 'Merdeka Belajar' favored the teachers... The teachers only facilitated during 'Merdeka Belajar' or differentiated learning”.

This shows that Teacher 1 viewed her role as a facilitator who supported students in grasping the material based on their needs. Teacher 2 added:

“It helped me understand the students. I knew that children preferred and understood more quickly when watching videos. These children had to be told what to do.”

This highlights the importance of knowing student preferences, such as visual learning. Meanwhile, Teacher 3 observed a growth in students' confidence:

“I felt that the students were more confident. For example, if they were kinesthetic learners, I let them go out, search, and ask anyone they wanted...”

Each teacher saw differentiated learning as a way to increase comprehension, match learning preferences, and boost student confidence.

Differentiating Content and Process According to Students' Different Learning Styles

Teacher 1 explained the approach of adjusting both content and learning process to suit students' preferred learning styles:

“For example, if someone preferred visual learning, if I provided it myself, I could offer a video, or the students were directed to find a video related to the material. For audio, maybe they listened to me... As for kinesthetic learners, their peers helped each other, or they often asked their teacher, saying, ‘Sir, what is this? What does this mean?’ They practiced directly... I focused more on kinesthetic learning at that time, but I didn’t neglect audio-visual either.”

This shows that visual learners were supported with videos, auditory learners received direct explanations, and kinesthetic learners engaged actively by asking questions and practicing. While Teacher 1 emphasized kinesthetic learners, she also responded to audio-visual learners’ needs. Interviews with the other two teachers revealed similar methods of differentiating content and process, adapting materials and activities based on student learning preferences.

Evaluating Products Based on Students’ Learning Styles

Teacher 1 highlighted that the evaluation of students’ work should prioritize understanding rather than the aesthetic or technical quality of the product. She stated:

“We were no longer focusing on the product, but rather on the students' level of understanding... Whether the product was good or not, if they had already understood, the product was just the final result... As for grading, I didn’t care much about the score; I focused more on the students’ level of understanding.”

She further explained that kinesthetic learners were typically assessed through presentations, while audio and visual learners were encouraged to create videos. The central focus was ensuring that students comprehended the material through products suited to their learning styles. Meanwhile, Teachers 2 and 3 acknowledged that although they had not fully implemented differentiated product evaluation, they were willing to adapt their approach to better accommodate students’ varied learning preferences.

The Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning

Teacher 1 said in the following extract:

“Actually, differentiated learning was the most effective teaching method in Indonesia at that time... Students who had previously been inactive became very active, and students who once claimed they couldn’t learn turned out to just have different learning styles and processes.”

Teacher 1 believed that differentiated learning was a highly effective teaching method because it allowed all students to participate actively, especially those who previously appeared disengaged. By acknowledging and addressing varied learning styles, students became more involved and confident in their learning process. Teacher 2 said:

“Actually, it was effective, but again, the students here whom I taught, only a few of them had a high interest in learning. The rest still lacked interest... I was still trying to figure it out because their interest in learning was still low.”

Teacher 2 noted that the effectiveness of differentiated learning depended on students’ interest and motivation. While the method had potential, its success was limited in her classroom due to low student engagement. Therefore, the effectiveness of differentiated learning was influenced by both its application and students’ willingness to participate actively.

Challenges in the Implementation of Differentiated Learning

All three teachers faced distinct challenges when implementing differentiated learning, largely due to the diverse characteristics and readiness levels of their students. Teacher 1 highlighted students’ lack of confidence in asking questions, especially kinesthetic learners dealing with subjects perceived as difficult, such as mathematics and English:

“The challenge earlier was at the beginning, especially for kinesthetic learners... the subjects considered intimidating at school were English and mathematics, and the students were afraid to ask questions.”

Teacher 2 described difficulties stemming from low student interest and limited vocabulary in English classes. Many students struggled to follow tasks due to gaps in prior knowledge:

“Often, the kids didn’t understand... the problem was that they didn’t know enough vocabulary yet and still needed the help of Google Translate or a dictionary... I asked them to memorize vocabulary words in every meeting.”

Teacher 3 pointed out systemic challenges, including administrative workload and lack of time to implement differentiation properly. She expressed that many teachers struggled to apply it consistently:

“I didn’t think it was effective... maybe their workload involved more administration than teaching... Many complained when differentiation was applied.”

In summary, the key obstacles to differentiated learning included student confidence, limited vocabulary and prior knowledge, lack of student motivation, and teacher workload. Each teacher responded to these challenges with their own strategies, such as vocabulary reinforcement or fostering questioning behavior, but broader structural issues also impacted implementation.

b. Student’s view

Students generally responded positively to differentiated learning. They appreciated being given the freedom to choose learning materials and assignment formats that suited their individual preferences and learning styles. This flexibility was seen to enhance understanding, engagement, and motivation. Student 1 noted the benefit of receiving additional explanations that helped clarify material:

“When I read the material, I usually did not understand, and the teacher gave additional explanations that made me understand better. With differentiated learning, my needs were also met.”

Student 2 emphasized the effectiveness of being able to choose material and the form of assignments:

“The product was also good because we were given freedom, so it could align with our abilities and desires.”

Student 3 appreciated the option to select an assignment format that matched personal strengths:

“For the assignment, it was also good because we were free to choose the form of the assignment... I preferred it in the form of writing.”

Student 4 mentioned that differentiated learning helped meet individual needs and ensured understanding before assignments were given:

“In learning, my needs were also met, and the teacher made sure everyone understood before giving assignments.”

In conclusion, students recognized differentiated learning as effective because it provided autonomy, accommodated different learning preferences, and was supported by responsive teaching. This approach fostered greater understanding and allowed learners to engage more meaningfully with the material.

The impact of differentiated learning in the classroom is shaped by various interrelated factors. This research adopted five key indicators of learning effectiveness—drawn from Yusuf's (2018) framework—to examine how differentiated instruction influences students' learning experiences and outcomes. These indicators include learning implementation management, communicative process, student response, learning activities, and learning outcomes.

The findings revealed that all components under the management of learning implementation were effectively realized. Teachers successfully utilized various strategies to meet diverse student needs, such as incorporating multimedia tools to support visual and auditory learners, and managing classroom time efficiently. These practices reflect strong instructional leadership, which is consistent with the findings of Gamnafle and Batlolona (2021), who assert that effective managerial skills among teachers significantly enhance student outcomes. Furthermore, the teachers regularly engaged in reflective practices by reviewing learning materials and assessing student comprehension, a process emphasized by Yusuf (2018) as critical to streamlining instruction and reinforcing learning objectives.

The communicative process in the classroom also showed high levels of effectiveness. The study found that students were able to engage in meaningful verbal and non-verbal communication during learning activities. Rather than focusing solely on rote memorization, instruction emphasized the development of communication strategies—an approach supported by Muchlish (1991) and Wahyuningsih (2019). Students confidently expressed their thoughts, asked and answered questions, and responded to peers and teachers both verbally and through gestures like nodding or shaking their heads. The use of visual aids, including videos and images, further enhanced the clarity of material presentation, aligning with Yusuf's (2018) assertion that effective communication is facilitated by clear and well-structured delivery of content.

Students' responses during the learning process were positive and enthusiastic. The findings indicated active participation in discussions and a strong willingness to engage with the material. Students not only responded to questions but also gave feedback to their peers, creating a collaborative and dynamic learning environment. This interaction boosted students' motivation, confidence, and engagement—factors identified by Maharani and Widhiasih (2016) as central to enhancing learning effectiveness. According to Yusuf (2018), one of the key drivers of active learning is teacher motivation, and this study confirmed that teachers played a significant role in encouraging student participation.

The study also found that students were highly engaged in learning activities. They worked independently and collaboratively, and their participation was consistently active throughout the instructional sessions. To sustain engagement and prevent fatigue, teachers incorporated ice-breaker activities and cultivated a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Pujiarti (2022) emphasized that such activities could foster a positive learning environment and improve student attitudes toward learning. Additionally, the provision of pre-lesson motivation helped set a constructive tone, in line with Nugroho and Shodikin's (2018) findings that active student participation contributes to continual skill development and academic improvement.

The analysis of learning outcomes revealed that students achieved the instructional goals set at the beginning of the lessons. These outcomes reflect students' ability to apply what they learned through differentiated instruction. Teachers expressed satisfaction with students' responses and their ability to complete tasks effectively. Learning outcomes serve as a critical measure of educational success, defined by Santoso et al. (2015) as the competencies students are expected to demonstrate after instruction. As confirmed by Yusuf (2018), learning outcomes are a clear representation of the abilities that students acquire during the learning process.

Based on interviews with teachers and students regarding the implementation of differentiated learning and its impact on students' abilities, differentiated learning was beneficial for teachers in recognizing students' characteristics, making it easier for students to understand the material, and increasing students' confidence (Marzoan, 2023). Differentiated learning recognized students' characteristics, allowing students to learn in an effective way (Prihatini, 2023). In the implementation of differentiated learning, which included content, process, and product, teachers adapted to students' learning styles, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Learning styles were grouped into visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, which influenced students' learning outcomes (Latifah, 2023). However, in the implementation of differentiated learning, teachers encountered several challenges. Teachers faced their own challenges in implementing differentiated learning. Teachers were still adapting and learning about differentiated learning, especially in understanding the different characteristics of each student and adjusting them to the teaching media. Another challenge in the implementation of differentiated learning was that teachers needed to prepare multimethods, multimedia, and multisource materials to vary the learning process to accommodate various student learning styles (Hermansyah, 2023).

In addition, the majority of teachers stated that differentiated learning was effective in the classroom. Differentiated learning was considered the most effective at that time because it took into account the characteristics of students. In a study conducted by Herlambang, Muhtar, and Sutrisno (2023), it was revealed that through differentiated learning, students could learn in the most effective way for them. Although there was one participant who felt that differentiated learning was less effective, it was due to his

busyness with administrative tasks. Teachers in schools were more preoccupied with administration than preparing for classroom learning. Sipahutar (2024) conducted case study research related to the problems of the independent curriculum at SMP Negeri 2 Sipoholon. The study revealed that teachers were busy with administrative and technical tasks, which caused them to have limited time and attention. As a result, individual guidance and attention to the characteristics of each student were less effective and limited.

Meanwhile, based on students' opinions, all said that differentiated learning was good and effective. Through differentiated learning, students were freed to choose the materials they learned and the products they made. This learning also had an impact on improving students' abilities because their learning style needs were met, such as by providing additional explanations. Research conducted by Widyawati and Rachmadyanti (2023) explained that teachers met students' learning needs through differentiated learning because they understood the differences of each student. In addition, with the selection of liberated products, students could be creative and work according to their abilities. Research conducted by Lestari, Hadarah, and Soleha (2023) explained that students made products according to their individual talents, and teachers let them choose based on their interests and talents. Through this approach, students utilized their abilities in learning and remained focused on the material they were learning.

CONCLUSION

The differentiated learning proved to be effective and had an impact on improving students' abilities and the quality of the learning process in the classroom. With good implementation management, effective communication, and positive responses from students, a supportive atmosphere was created that encouraged active student engagement and understanding of the material. Additionally, differentiated learning allowed students to learn according to their learning styles and interests, which significantly contributed to improved learning outcomes. Although teachers faced some administrative challenges, overall, this approach successfully facilitated students' needs and encouraged creativity and independence in learning. Furthermore, based on the interview results, differentiated learning was beneficial in helping teachers recognize students' characteristics, enabling students to quickly understand the material, and boosting students' confidence. Differentiated learning was also effective in its implementation. However, there were various challenges in applying differentiated learning, such as teachers still adapting to the independent curriculum, especially differentiated learning, and teachers having difficulty aligning the material with students' learning styles and abilities. In addition, students also said that differentiated learning was effective and helped them meet their learning needs. Therefore, differentiated learning had an impact on improving students' abilities.

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