Differentiated Instruction in *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum: Teachers' Perception in EFL Context

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Abstract
This study investigates English teachers' perceptions, challenges, and how they overcome implementing Differentiated Instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum in the EFL context. The researcher used a narrative inquiry approach, including Document, Observation class, and Interview. This research describes and explains the experiences of 2 English Teachers in applying DI to support the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Participants were purposively selected from SMA Negeri 2 Ambon, specifically those involved in the Guru Penggerak program batch 1 in 2020. The findings reveal that teachers perceive DI as a practical approach to addressing diverse student needs and enhancing engagement and achievement. They demonstrate a strong understanding of DI principles, tailoring content, processes, and products to individual students. Despite encountering significant internal challenges such as self-efficacy and external challenges like time management and resource allocation, teachers employ strategies including collaboration with colleagues, thorough preparation, effective group management, and fostering open communication. These efforts help manage the complexities of DI, ensuring a responsive and inclusive learning environment.

Keywords: *English as a Foreign Language, Differentiated Instruction, Merdeka Belajar Curriculum, Perception, Teachers*

INTRODUCTION

A curriculum is a set of plans and arrangements addressing the objectives, content, and learning resources, as well as the method used as a guide for structuring learning activities to attain specified educational goals (Law No.20 of 2003 Chapter 1 Article 1 as cited in Rahayu et al. 2022). The curriculum must be responsive and comprehensive in social life without being overburdened, relevant, and capable of balancing diversity and needs in every period (Julaeha, 2019).

However, education units have not fully developed a flexible curriculum suited to the needs of students in their respective schools. It is known that there are several types of students in schools or even classes that have different levels of learning readiness, interests, abilities, and learning styles. As a result, they need various instructional services from one another to understand learning competencies and materials based on student characteristics and uniqueness (Fadilla et al., 2021).

Starting in 2022, The Minister of Education and Culture established the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) curriculum, introduced the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum as an independent option for educational institutions based on their preparedness (Decree of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 56/M/2022 as cited in *kurikulum.kemdikbud.go.id*). This curriculum incorporates the principle of designing learning experiences tailored to student's specific needs and circumstances, as cited in (kurikulummerdeka.com).

Moreover, the MBKM curriculum emphasizes the importance of teachers being critical of students' needs to keep up with the times. According to the philosophy of Kihajar Dewantara, a teacher's role is to assist students in growing and developing according to their unique personalities to achieve happiness and safety (Fitra, 2022). This means that for students to attain their objectives, teachers should guide them according to their potential, interests, talents, and abilities (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

English as a foreign language (EFL) is frequently packed with a diverse range of students. This phenomenon may be attributed to the students' diverse backgrounds, potentially impacting their cognitive frameworks. For instance, some students may come from large cities with advanced technology expertise, while others may come from rural areas with less advanced technology knowledge. Moreover, some have well-educated parents willing to fully support their education, while others are not (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019).

The process of learning English as a foreign language can also be complicated due to the differences between the target language and the student's mother tongue (Manid & Suwastini, 2020, as cited in Suwastini, 2021). Although each student's characteristics are unique, they will impact the teaching and learning process, mainly the learning instruction teachers employ in the classroom. Before designing learning materials, teachers must first ascertain the specific needs of the students (Lekawael et al., 2021). In striving to accommodate classrooms with diverse abilities, teachers must adapt their instruction to meet the needs of all students.

One crucial approach to meeting the diverse requirements of students is using differentiated instruction in the teaching and learning process. This approach aligns with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum, which emphasizes prioritizing essential material and cultivating learners' potential at each stage (merdekabelajar.kemdikbud.go.id). Differentiated instruction allows students to learn in various ways depending on their differences (Suwastini et al., 2021; Yavuz, 2020; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). According to Heacox (2012), differentiated instruction addresses language learning effectively for various learners provides students with opportunities to learn to their full potential and develops instructional activities based on student diversity.

Differentiated instruction consists of three elements: content, process, and product. These elements are used in teaching and learning (Tomlinson, 2001). The content represents the knowledge and concepts students need to learn, while the process refers to how teachers instruct and learners comprehend the subject matter. The product is how students demonstrate their learning, and the environment is the atmosphere and tone of the classroom (Tomlinson, 2014, as cited in Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

Several studies have examined the teacher's perception and the effect of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. Yavuz (2020) found that differentiated instruction enhanced the English language competency of 9th-grade students in Turkey and increased student engagement and learning. Magableh and Abdullah (2020) revealed that differentiated instruction improves student learning, allows students to work based on their competency level, promotes motivation, and makes struggling students feel less weak.

Furthermore, Jamoliddinova and Kuchkarova (2022) showed that teachers in Uzbekistan use group work, pair work, and solo work as components of differentiated instruction. They provide materials in students' native language, allow students to specialize in topics of interest, and encourage collaboration. However, teachers reported limited experience with differentiated instruction in their training programs.

Researchers had neglected to address English teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction in EFL contexts to support the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum in Maluku, Ambon, Indonesia. A preliminary study conducted with English teachers at SMAN 2 Ambon, who joined the *Guru Penggerak* program, has implemented differentiated instruction in the EFL context to support the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. The *Guru Penggerak* program prepares Indonesia's education leaders to encourage holistic student development and implement student-centered learning using differentiated instruction.

Teachers in the *Guru Penggerak* program employed strategies to ascertain students' specific needs, including initial assessments to identify learning preferences and direct communication to assess understanding. They developed heterogeneous instructional strategies, including questioning techniques aligned with individual cognitive preparedness.

Considering the focus on detailed learning preferences, the rationale for conducting research in a high school setting, particularly in SMA, becomes evident. By examining the practices of English teachers in the *Guru Penggerak* program at SMAN 2 Ambon, The purpose of this study is to investigate how differentiated learning accommodates and fits with the varied learning preferences of students by looking at the approaches used by English teachers in the Guru Penggerak program. This approach seeks to contribute valuable knowledge to the ongoing implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum and enhance student-centered learning in Indonesia.

Although the perception and effectiveness of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms have been discussed in many contexts, it has not been examined in supporting the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum through teacher experiences. This study intends to fill this gap by investigating English teachers' experiences with differentiated instruction in the EFL context to support the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The findings provided new insights into differentiated instruction in the EFL setting for English teachers in Maluku, aiding the implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum.

The present study explored teachers' perceptions and effectiveness of differentiated instruction. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses on teachers' perceptions, obstacles, and strategies in implementing differentiated instruction in the EFL context to support the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. This research addresses two key questions: 1) What is the English teachers' perception of their experience in implementing differentiated instruction to support the Merdeka Curriculum? 2) What challenges do English teachers perceive while implementing Differentiated Instruction in the EFL context to support the Merdeka curriculum, and what do the teachers do to overcome their challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Merdeka Belajar Curriculum

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, inaugurated by Nadiem Anwar Makarim, the Minister of Education and Culture, Research and Technology, represents a significant reform in Indonesia's national education system (Yamin and Syahrir, 2020). This reform is driven by the need to adapt to societal advancements and changing circumstances, acknowledging that education reform goes beyond administrative changes and requires a cultural revolution, as emphasized by Minister Nadiem Makarim (Satriawan et al., 2021). The *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum has been designed as a flexible framework, prioritizing core content while nurturing students' individuality and capabilities. It also grants educational institutions the autonomy to operate without burdensome administrative constraints, a concept rooted in trust in educators, allowing them flexibility in facilitating the learning process (Koesoema, 2020, as cited in Rahayu et al., 2022).

According to (Permendikbud Nomor 22 Tahun 2020, p.55) said that the main foundation of Merdeka Belajar philosophy underlies educational policies, including the Merdeka Curriculum. This philosophy encourages a paradigm shift to strengthen the role of teachers, release too strict standards control, and increase student independence in learning. Supporting this philosophy, the Merdeka Belajar curriculum will be flexible, competency-based, focused on developing character and soft skills, and adaptive to world needs.

Therefore, the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum offers several advantages. These advantages primarily revolve around including essential content and cultivating student competencies at each stage of education. As a result, students can engage in more profound, meaningful, and enjoyable learning experiences without feeling pressured to rush through the material (the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021b) cited in Rahmadayanti et al. 2022).

Differentiated Instruction (DI)

The primary ideas of differentiated instruction are based on students' differences, strengths, and weaknesses. This approach is defined as a type of instruction that addresses effective learning for diverse individuals, gives students proper opportunities to learn at their full potential, develops instructional activities based on the students' diversity, and displays multiple possible ways to learn language in the classroom. Additionally, (Heacox, 2012). Additionally, Suwastini et al. (2021) stated that Differentiated instructions are general instructions developed with several modifications to tailor the teaching-learning process to the distinct features of the students.

Differentiated instruction requires the teacher to be critical of the students' need to keep up with the times and the variety of characteristics they possess, so it can be a strategy to achieve learning objectives (borja et al., 2023). Therefore, differentiated instruction is an instruction that challenges students with their diversity, is crucial for learning, allows students to pick their learning styles and learning assessments, and engages students in the subject (Heacox, 2012).

Teachers can use a variety of diverse ways to prepare for DI implementation. The main components of DI are content, procedure, and product (Tomlinson, 2014). Content involves adjusting materials based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, which can be assessed through placement tests and questionnaires. While process considers students' learning characteristics and interests, using varied activities and grouping strategies to help them engage with the material in different ways while working toward the same learning goal. Product allows students to demonstrate their understanding through various tasks that encourage critical thinking and application of knowledge, whether individually, in pairs, or in groups.

Moreover, the teacher will get some challenges in implementing DI which arise from both external and internal factors. External challenges include time constraints, student unpreparedness and lack of discipline, insufficient school administration support, inadequate facilities, a rigid curriculum, large class sizes, and limited teaching resources. Then, the Internal challenges involve teachers' lack of knowledge about DI, insufficient training, and personal characteristics such as low self-efficacy and commitment. These barriers affect teachers' ability to effectively apply DI, making its implementation complex and demanding (Lavania & Nor, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses narrative inquiry to explore English teachers' experiences with differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Through purposive sampling, two teachers from SMA Negeri 2 Ambon, CO (14 years of experience) as the first participant and MG (18 years of experience) as the second participant, were selected from the Guru Penggerak program. Both have implemented differentiated instruction since 2020, emphasizing student-centered learning and technology use. Data was collected through curriculum document analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews to understand their perceptions, challenges, and strategies.

FINDINGS

Observation Findings
During the classroom observation, the teacher implemented differentiated instruction based on the key components: content, process, and product.

I. **Content**
The teacher has done with the initial assessment of the students, such as using the "Aku Pintar" application to determine students' learning styles and conducted a readiness test using a worksheet (LKPD) to assess students' understanding of the material on 'Analytical Exposition'. Based on the students' responses to the worksheet, it was concluded that many students did not clearly understand what an Analytical Exposition is. They struggled with both the basic definition and the application of the concept. As a result of these assessments, the teacher designed differentiated activities to cater to various learning styles: audiovisual, visual, and reading preferences. Then, after knowing about the student's ability with the material, the teacher designs a lesson plan using DI and worksheets based on the student learning style.

II. **Process**
The teacher designed and delivered materials that catered to various learning styles, grouping students into seven teams of five with a mix of different learning preferences. Each group chose one of three differentiated activities: watching a video, analyzing an infographic, or reading a text. This flexible grouping allowed students to engage with the content in ways that suited their learning styles. For audiovisual learners, the task involved watching a video on Analytical Exposition and completing a worksheet. Visual learners studied an infographic outlining the text structure, while reading learners read a detailed text and answered questions. These differentiated activities ensured that all students could interact with the material effectively, enhancing their understanding and participation in learning Analytical Exposition texts.

III. **Product**
Finally, for the product phase, the teacher allowed students to choose how to demonstrate their understanding, offering multiple formats to match their strengths and learning preferences.

Students selected one of five topics and presented their arguments by writing a thesis statement with two supporting points. They could showcase their work through a video, infographic, mind map, or presentation, ensuring a personalized and engaging learning experience.

This differentiated approach encouraged students to express their ideas in ways that suited them best, promoting creativity and deeper comprehension. By providing flexible product options, the teacher enhanced student motivation, engagement, and understanding of Analytical Exposition texts.

Interview Findings

English Teachers' Perception of DI in alignment with Merdeka Curriculum.
General Understanding of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a teaching approach that tailors learning experiences to students' unique needs, ensuring inclusivity and engagement. By implementing DI, teachers create supportive classrooms where students can learn in ways that suit their abilities and interests.

CO initially found the term confusing but later understood it as a personalized teaching method. *"When I first heard the term 'differentiated instruction,' my initial thought was, 'What kind of approach is this?' However, upon further study, I realized that DI is a personalized approach to education."* MG immediately associated DI with "differences" and saw it as a way to tailor instruction. *"When I heard the term 'differentiated instruction,' what first came to mind was 'Differences' the concept that involves providing instruction tailored to each student's needs."* Her understanding deepened through training in the *Guru Penggerak* program, which emphasized inclusive learning.

Both participants highlighted DI's focus on recognizing and accommodating students' unique learning styles. CO described it as an approach that ensures students learn effectively based on their abilities. *"Differentiated instruction involves teaching that recognizes and accommodates the individual variations of each learner."* MG likened DI to a dynamic classroom where instruction is adapted based on interests and skill levels. *"Differentiated instruction is the foundation of education that emphasizes appreciating each student's individuality in the teaching and learning process."*

The participants expressed strong readiness to implement DI within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum, emphasizing continuous learning, adaptability, and technology integration. CO highlighted the importance of collaboration and flexible instruction. *"My readiness began with the Guru Penggerak program. I prepared to keep learning and understanding the Merdeka Belajar Curriculum to apply it in my instruction."* MG reinforced this by explaining how she assesses students' learning styles and adapts her methods accordingly. *"I give pre-tests to evaluate students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. Based on these, I choose suitable methods and models."*

In conclusion, DI fosters inclusive learning by addressing students' diverse needs. The participants' insights underscore the importance of adaptability, professional growth, and student-centered instruction in maximizing learning potential.

The implementation of DI

Differentiated Instruction (DI) stands as a cornerstone of the educational framework, catering to students' varied needs and abilities. English teachers CO and MG within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum exemplify this approach by adapting content, process, and product to suit each learner's unique requirements. Their structured assessments, diverse instructional methods, and flexible product differentiation underscore their commitment to implementing DI effectively.

a. Content Differentiation

CO and MG employ structured assessments to identify and address students' diverse needs and abilities within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. CO integrates initial assessments on the first day of learning to gauge students' learning styles and comprehension levels. *"I started with an initial assessment on the first day of learning. I use applications like Aku Pintar to determine students' learning styles and test their understanding of the material."* This assessment helps CO adapt content by providing materials in varied formats such as printouts for visual learners, audio for auditory learners, and videos for those who prefer audiovisual learning. *"For example, if I want to present written text to students, I will provide the option of a print-out for students who prefer to read visually, and for students who prefer to listen, I will present the text in audio form."*

Similarly, MG utilizes assessment results to differentiate learning tasks based on students' abilities. She designs Student Worksheets (LKPD) for different proficiency levels, ensuring inclusiveness. *"From the initial assessment results, I can clearly see the differences in students' ability levels to understand learning content. For lower-level students, I include more basic aids and exercises, such as understanding vocabulary and simple sentence structures."* Classroom observations and lesson plan analysis further confirm their efforts in differentiating content. MG's lesson plans include varied activities such as video presentations, infographics, and textual analysis, allowing students to explore topics in different ways. Teachers also implement flexible grouping strategies and offer choices that align with students' interests, reinforcing DI principles.

b. Process Differentiation

Both CO and MG employ various instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles and preferences. CO frequently applies Problem-Based Learning (PJBL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) techniques, offering students multiple ways to engage with the material. *"I frequently employ Problem-Based Learning (PJBL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) techniques. I provide different assignment formats, such as oral presentations, essay writing, or creating visual projects. I also actively encourage student collaboration by implementing group work or pair discussions."*

Meanwhile, MG ensures process differentiation by delivering content in multiple formats, such as oral explanations, visual materials, and videos. She incorporates question-and-answer sessions, role plays, and discussions to foster student engagement. *"I prepare learning content in various forms, such as oral delivery, use of visual material such as images, or use of videos. I implement role plays and discussions that involve interaction between students to strengthen their understanding of the material."*

By implementing diverse instructional strategies, such as PJBL, role plays, and group discussions, both teachers create a dynamic learning environment that accommodates individual learning styles and enhances student comprehension.

c. Product Differentiation

CO and MG encourage students to demonstrate their understanding through various formats that align with their abilities and interests. CO provides flexible assessment options, allowing students to create projects in forms they are most comfortable with. *"I provide detailed and supportive instructions to guide students in selecting appropriate expression formats, such as creating posters, videos, or oral presentations. For example, students might create a presentation video and upload it to their YouTube channel or create a short video explaining a particular concept and share it on TikTok."*

Similarly, MG promotes creativity by allowing students to choose their preferred mode of expression while ensuring clear guidelines and evaluation criteria. *"I provide opportunities for*

students to express their understanding creatively through various forms of products. For example, in creating a video, students may be asked to convey ideas visually and audibly, while in creating a poem, they may focus on emotional expression and creative use of language."

Both teachers integrate technology to enhance DI effectiveness, offering diverse learning materials and fostering communication between teachers and students. CO said that *"IT can be a very effective tool to provide diverse learning materials, offer additional resources, and facilitate communication between teachers and students".* While MG said *"By giving students the option to express themselves through the platforms they prefer, I hope to increase their motivation and engagement in learning".*

By implementing content, process, and product differentiation, CO and MG successfully align DI with the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. Their approach emphasizes flexibility, inclusivity, and individualized learning, creating an engaging and supportive EFL environment. This alignment underscores the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum's commitment to student-centered learning, ensuring that students receive meaningful and personalized educational experiences.

Expectations using DI

Both CO and MG have high expectations for the impact of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on student engagement and understanding in their EFL classes. CO has observed significant improvements in student participation and comprehension since implementing DI, noting that before its introduction, engagement levels varied greatly. She emphasizes the importance of tailoring assignments to different skill levels, explaining, *"Students with strong English skills may be assigned to write short narratives using newly learned vocabulary, while those needing more support can create simple sentences. This ensures that every student is motivated to learn at their own pace."* Additionally, CO highlights the value of aligning topics with students' interests to enhance engagement, stating, *"If we are learning speaking skills, offering conversation topics based on students' interests encourages them to participate more actively, as they feel a sense of ownership over their learning."*

Similarly, MG has witnessed increased enthusiasm and participation among students using DI and expects these positive trends to continue. She explains, *"Students are now more eager to complete tasks and express satisfaction in the learning process."* MG integrates various instructional strategies, such as group discussions and role assignments, to encourage active learning. She also incorporates interactive activities like English quiz games, where students collaborate in teams to answer study-related questions. *"This not only makes learning more enjoyable but also increases students' motivation,"* she adds. Both teachers believe that customizing content, processes, and products based on student needs and interests fosters greater engagement, comprehension, and academic success in EFL learning.

Challenges Faced in differentiated instruction activities and the way to overcome.
Planning Challenges

CO and MG identified both internal and external challenges in planning Differentiated Instruction (DI) for their EFL classes. Internally, CO emphasized that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in DI success, stating, *"When I doubt my teaching abilities, it negatively affects my instructional strategies."* Externally, time management and resource allocation pose significant difficulties. CO noted that balancing individual student needs while ensuring no one is left behind requires careful planning. MG highlighted the challenge of preparing materials that cater to diverse student abilities and learning styles, explaining, *"Each student has different levels of*

understanding, interests, and learning styles, so I must ensure materials are accessible and effective for all." Additionally, MG stressed the importance of aligning DI with established learning standards while still providing individualized instruction.

Implementation Challenges

During implementation, both CO and MG faced similar internal and external difficulties. Internally, CO reiterated that self-efficacy remains a challenge, as confidence directly impacts instructional effectiveness. Externally, time management was a significant concern, with CO stating, *"Providing scaffolding for students who need extra help takes time and may limit attention for others."* Managing diverse student learning styles, ability levels, and interests further complicates DI. MG emphasized the challenge of choosing the right teaching methods to actively engage students, stating, *"Selecting appropriate learning models requires considering students' readiness and learning needs."* Additionally, large class sizes made individual attention difficult, and both teachers acknowledged the need for flexible tools and resources. CO incorporated group discussions and technology to enhance DI, while MG highlighted the importance of adapting resources based on classroom dynamics. Despite these challenges, both educators remain committed to refining their strategies to maximize student learning outcomes.

Teacher ways to Overcome the challenges:
Overcoming Challenges in Planning and Implementing Differentiated Instruction

CO and MG shared various strategies to tackle both internal and external challenges in planning and implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI). Their approaches emphasize collaboration, thorough preparation, effective group management, and open communication.

1. Collaboration

Collaboration with fellow teachers plays a crucial role in overcoming challenges. By exchanging experiences and best practices, educators can enhance their self-efficacy and develop more effective ways to manage student diversity and resources. CO highlighted this by stating, *"One way to overcome this is to collaborate with colleagues. In discussion groups or team meetings, we share experiences and discuss challenges."* Through collaboration, teachers can gain valuable insights, streamline resource sharing, and build confidence in handling DI strategies.

2. Thorough Preparation and Resource Selection

Careful planning and resource selection help mitigate time constraints and accommodate diverse student needs. CO emphasized the importance of selecting appropriate reference models and instructional methods, explaining, *"I explore as many reference models and learning methods as possible to accommodate students' needs."* Meanwhile, MG discussed her approach to organizing mixed-ability groups, ensuring that *"each group has a mix of students with varying levels of ability."* These methods allow for a more structured and inclusive learning experience, making it easier to implement DI effectively.

3. Effective Group Management and Open Communication

Managing student groups strategically and fostering open communication contribute significantly to a smooth DI implementation. CO emphasized the importance of allowing students to share their perspectives and participate in problem-solving, stating, *"I provide space for students to share their perspectives and plan solutions together to resolve conflicts."* MG also underscored the role of collaborative activities in building teamwork, saying, *"I facilitate activities that encourage teamwork and strengthen relationships between students."* These practices ensure that

students support one another, making it easier to manage large class sizes and diverse learning needs.

Both CO and MG expressed confidence in these strategies. CO concluded, *"With thorough preparation, effective group management, and open communication, I am confident that every challenge can be overcome."* Similarly, MG stated, *"With a thorough approach and responsiveness to individual needs, I believe every challenge can be addressed successfully."* By adopting these strategies—collaboration, thorough preparation, resource selection, effective group management, and open communication—teachers can navigate the complexities of planning and implementing DI in EFL classrooms, ultimately improving student learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

English Teacher Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in alignment with Merdeka Curriculum.

Both participants' understanding of Differentiated Instruction (DI) aligns with theoretical perspectives, emphasizing the importance of addressing individual differences. According to Heacox (2012), DI supports diverse learners by providing varied instructional activities and multiple learning pathways. Suwastini et al. (2021) similarly highlight that DI tailors teaching to students' distinct characteristics, reflected in CO's focus on individual variations and MG's commitment to customized instruction.to meet each student's unique needs.

Basir et al. (2023) stresses the need to identify and respond to students' learning needs early to achieve educational goals. Both participants recognize this by emphasizing the importance of adapting instruction to enhance student learning outcomes. CO views DI as designing lessons that match students' abilities, while MG highlights the role of student individuality in shaping instruction. This aligns with Tomlinson (2000), who asserts that adapting teaching to students' needs maximizes their potential. Their approaches reinforce the importance of a supportive learning environment where every student feels valued.

Their readiness to implement DI within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum reflects established educational theories. Nagy (2023) underscores continuous professional development, evident in their engagement with the *"Guru Penggerak"* program. Shareefa et al. (2019) emphasize the significance of assessing individual student needs, which both participants address through pre-tests and assessments. Their use of collaboration and technology in teaching further supports Heacox's (2012) argument that leveraging technology enhances learning.

CO and MG apply DI in the Merdeka Curriculum by adapting content, process, and product to suit learners' needs. Their structured assessments, diverse instructional methods, and flexible product options align with research by Sougari & Mavroudi (2019). Jamoliddinova & Kuchkarova (2022) highlight DI's role in creating inclusive classrooms, supported by CO and MG tailoring content based on assessments of students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Process differentiation, as implemented by both participants, involves diverse strategies like PJBL, PBL, role plays, and discussions to engage students and accommodate different learning styles (Tomlinson, 2014). Product differentiation, such as CO's use of posters and presentations and MG's incorporation of videos and poems, allows students to express their understanding creatively.

The principles of DI align with the Merdeka Curriculum's goals, particularly in EFL teaching. CO notes that the curriculum promotes flexibility to meet individual student needs, resonating with the philosophy of Merdeka Belajar (Permendikbud Nomor 22 Tahun 2020, p.55). MG adds that the curriculum fosters personalized learning, supporting students' growth through

customized instruction. These approaches align with OECD (2020a), which highlights the curriculum's emphasis on flexibility, student competence, and character development.

DI supports autonomy, creativity, and adaptability by recognizing students' prior knowledge, readiness, and interests (Suprayogi & Valcke, 2016). The "Freedom of Learning" concept, granting autonomy to schools and teachers (Sherly et al., 2020), is reflected in CO and MG's strategies to accommodate diverse student needs. By prioritizing student-centered learning, DI enhances engagement and achievement. Both participants demonstrate how DI increases motivation and active participation by tailoring assignments to student needs. CO adjusts proficiency levels in vocabulary lessons, ensuring appropriate challenges for all students, while MG employs interactive activities like group discussions and quizzes. These strategies align with Maheswari et al. (2020), who highlight the role of differentiated activities in boosting student engagement.

In addition to enhancing engagement and achievement, DI plays a crucial role in fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment. Both participants highlight the importance of personalized learning materials and varied instructional techniques to accommodate each student's diverse needs, interests, and learning styles. CO offers a range of reading materials and instructional methods, allowing students to choose what best suits their preferences. At the same time, MG emphasizes assessing individual needs and providing tailored instruction to ensure equity and accessibility. These approaches reflect Tanjung & Ashadi's (2019) observation that EFL classrooms are diverse, requiring DI to address individual differences effectively. By prioritizing inclusivity and responsiveness, both teachers exemplify DI's potential to create an environment where every student feels valued and supported, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Challenges Faced in differentiated instruction activities and the way to overcome them.

In Differentiated Instruction (DI) for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), CO and MG identified challenges in both planning and implementation. These challenges fall into internal and external factors, reflecting complex interactions between personal, pedagogical, and systemic elements.

One significant internal challenge is the lack of practical DI knowledge. Despite participating in the "Guru Penggerak Program," CO and MG struggle with applying DI effectively. They find it difficult to locate and compile appropriate learning resources that cater to students' diverse needs and comprehension levels. This gap underscores the need for ongoing professional development and hands-on training to bridge the divide between theoretical understanding and classroom application (Lavania & Nor, 2020; Shareefa et al., 2019).

Personal teaching beliefs and styles also present barriers. MG, for instance, faces challenges in preparing materials that address diverse student needs and in selecting suitable instructional models. Shifting from traditional, teacher-centered approaches to student-centered DI strategies can be difficult, as entrenched teaching styles often hinder DI adoption (Wan, 2016; Jager, 2017). Addressing this requires a mindset shift among educators.

Teacher self-efficacy also plays a crucial role in implementing DI successfully. Both CO and MG express concerns about their confidence and ability to manage DI effectively, aligning with findings by Suprayogi (2017) and Merawi (2018), which emphasize self-efficacy's importance in adopting new instructional methods. Building confidence through continuous practice and reflection is essential for overcoming these internal obstacles.

Among external challenges, time constraints are a significant hurdle. Both CO and MG find managing time effectively difficult, reflecting findings by Aldossari (2018) and Jager (2017).

DI requires extra time for planning, modifying teaching aids, and organizing activities, making it more demanding than traditional methods. The time-intensive nature of DI often discourages its comprehensive implementation.

Class size further complicates DI. Managing large student numbers, as noted by MG, makes individualized attention and differentiation challenging. Research by Suprayogi (2016) and Aldossari (2018) confirms that larger classes increase DI complexity due to students' diverse needs and varying proficiency levels.

The availability of tools and resources also poses difficulties. CO and MG struggle to ensure equal access to learning materials and address students' varying language proficiency levels. This highlights the necessity for diverse instructional resources to support students at different levels of readiness and learning preferences (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Additionally, students' unpreparedness and lack of discipline hinder DI implementation. MG notes that varying levels of preparedness and discipline among students complicate instruction. Research by Aldossari (2018) and Jager (2017) suggests that effective DI requires intrinsic motivation and self-awareness, which traditional methods may not adequately cultivate.

To address these challenges, CO and MG propose several strategies. Thorough preparation and resource selection are paramount. Both emphasize meticulous planning, selecting relevant resources, and researching instructional methods to meet student needs, aligning with Boston (2017), who underscores the importance of quality training for effective DI.

Collaboration among educators is another essential strategy. CO highlights the value of sharing experiences, resources, and strategies with colleagues. Such collaborative efforts help mitigate external challenges by pooling resources and expertise (Lavania & Nor, 2020).

Effective group management and open communication are also critical. Organizing groups with mixed-ability students and fostering peer collaboration address interpersonal classroom challenges. This strategy aligns with Aldossari (2018) and Tomlinson (2005), who emphasize intrinsic motivation and cooperative learning.

Building self-efficacy through continuous practice and reflection is key to overcoming internal challenges. Both participants stress the need to improve DI strategies and build confidence through hands-on application and ongoing learning. This approach supports Suprayogi (2017) and Merawi (2018), who highlight self-efficacy's role in DI success.

By integrating these strategies—thorough preparation, collaboration, effective group management, and continuous professional development—teachers can address DI challenges effectively. This approach aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, reinforcing its goal of inclusive and student-centered education.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study investigated English teachers' perceptions, challenges, and the ways to overcome them in implementing differentiated instruction (DI) within the Merdeka Curriculum in the EFL context. The findings reveal that teachers recognize DI as a practical approach to addressing diverse student needs, exhibiting a strong understanding of DI principles by tailoring content, processes, and products to individual students. This significantly enhances student engagement and achievement. Teachers face internal challenges such as self-efficacy and external challenges like time management and resource allocation. To overcome these, they employ some methods, including collaboration with colleagues, thorough preparation and resource selection, effective group management, and fostering open communication. These efforts help them manage the complexities of DI, ensuring they provide a responsive and inclusive learning environment.

In order to customize educational materials based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, educators should routinely administer preliminary evaluations. Accessibility for all students is ensured by offering adaptable learning materials in multiple media, including text, audio, and video. Motivation and a sense of ownership are increased when students are given choices in their assignments and projects. To increase the efficacy of differentiated instruction (DI) in the classroom, future researchers can investigate how students view DI.

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