

Practices and Challenges: Riau Islands EFL Teachers' View on Differentiated Instructions in Kurikulum Merdeka

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Abstract: *Kurikulum Merdeka has been implemented since 2020; one of its characteristics is the implementation of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is an old strategy; however, it is a quite new strategy for most current teachers in Indonesia. Thus, this study aims to examine the perceptions of high school English teachers in the Riau Islands regarding the implementation of differentiated instruction within the Kurikulum Merdeka framework. This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data. The research instruments are a questionnaire and an interview to get a deeper analysis. This study found that EFL teachers in Riau Islands Province showed positive perceptions of the implementation of differentiated instruction. The teachers also admitted the importance of adapting to students' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles. However, the teachers also face several challenges during the implementation of differentiated instruction, such as limited time and resources to prepare, as well as difficulties in adapting the instruction to large class sizes. Despite those challenges, EFL teachers still perceive the usefulness and effectiveness of differentiated instruction to develop English language skills. In a nutshell, differentiated instruction can significantly improve the learning outcomes, but adequate professional training and resources are necessary for better implementation.*

Keywords: *differentiated instruction; teachers' perception*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's educational system has experienced considerable changes over the years. The curriculum has undergone nine revisions. The most recent curriculum change is



the switch from Kurikulum 2013 (K13) to Kurikulum Merdeka. The Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture introduced Kurikulum Merdeka in 2020 to promote a comprehensive and inclusive approach to education (Zidan & Qamariah, 2023). In addition, Kurikulum Merdeka also prioritizes character building, creativity, and critical thinking skills (Syaputra et al., 2023). Further, Kurikulum Merdeka also highlights flexibility and adaptability to meet the students' different needs, student-centred learning, and technology integration (Fitriyah et al., 2022). Therefore, one of Kurikulum Merdeka's essential characteristics is Differentiated Instruction (DI), which refers to taking individuals' characteristics and needs into account when designing lessons (Sarnoto, 2024). Furthermore, to improve teachers' understanding of differentiated teaching, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Badan Standar, and Curriculum, and Educational Assessment, Center for Curriculum and Learning published an Academic Paper book entitled *"Prinsip Pengembangan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Pada Kurikulum Fleksibel sebagai wujud Merdeka Belajar"*.

One of the essential characteristics of Kurikulum Merdeka is Differentiated Instruction, which refers to taking into account the individual characteristics and needs when designing lessons (Sarnoto, 2024). Nugroho & Narawaty (2022) further underline that one of the key features of this curriculum for learning recovery is the flexibility for teachers to implement differentiated instruction based on students' abilities, as well as adapting to local contexts and content. Furthermore, to improve teachers' understanding of differentiated teaching, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Badan Standar, and Curriculum, and Educational Assessment, Center for Curriculum and Learning published an Academic Paper book entitled *"Prinsip Pengembangan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Pada Kurikulum Fleksibel sebagai wujud Merdeka Belajar"*. Differentiated Instruction is an approach to teaching whereby teaching is individualized to suit the unique needs of learners (Barlian et al., 2023). The main elements that constitute DI are content (adapting the knowledge to the student's readiness level), process (using a range of teaching methods to support effective learning), product (giving a choice to students in their expression of knowledge), and learning environment (creating a learning environment to meet different learning styles).

Differentiated instruction is generally known as an instructional method to accommodate the diverse needs of students (Westbroek et al., 2020). Likewise, Fowen & Negara (2024) claimed that differentiation instruction is a teaching strategy that adjusts the curriculum, classroom environment, and assessments to meet the needs of diverse learners. In addition, Shareefa et al., (2019) identify differentiated instruction as a strategy for

accommodating diversity in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, it can be concluded that differentiated instruction aims to cater to diverse learners with different needs, abilities, and learning styles by modifying the assessment, techniques, and environments.

This research was chosen because Differentiated Instruction is very relevant to Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka. with the emphasis on flexibility that allows teachers to experiment with various innovative and adaptive teaching strategies (Zindagi Caesaria et al., 2024), and inclusivity, which refers to creating an educational environment that accommodates diverse needs and opportunities (Yusrah et al., 2023), and student-centered learning being a current national curriculum; thus, Differentiated Instruction would fall in line with these principles by responding to the diversified needs of students (Dian et al., 2023). Teachers are the leading edge in implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, considering that their perceptions and understanding of Differentiated Instruction are crucial in determining how well the curriculum will be alive in a classroom. By investigating teachers' perceptions, there would be a useful grasp of the opportunities and challenges posed in adapting the Differentiated Instruction approach, and an insight into its effects on teaching and learning outcomes.

Despite the wide-ranging research on differentiated instruction, a notable gap remains in studies focusing on EFL teachers' perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in Indonesia. Several similar and recent studies in Indonesia by Agustean et al., (2025), Sianturi (2025), (Sentia et al., 2025), (Laksono et al., 2024), and (Mutmainah et al., 2023), have explored EFL teachers' perceptions of differentiation instruction in Kurikulum Merdeka. The existing studies mostly addressed differentiation instruction in general educational contexts rather than specifically within English language teaching. This study also found that very few studies delve into English teachers' perceptions of applying differentiated instruction specifically for teaching English skills.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by examining the impact of differentiated instruction on students' English language proficiency and challenges EFL teachers may face during implementation. This study also aims to describe wider perceptions from urban (Batam and Tanjung Pinang) and rural areas (Tanjung Balai Karimun, Lingga, Anambas, and Natuna) in the Riau Islands. This study expects the results will add new perspectives on the implementation of differentiated instruction in Kurikulum Merdeka, specifically in improving students' English language proficiency. Hence, this study can provide a localized understanding that can inform better implementation strategies in the Indonesian educational context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a teaching strategy to accommodate the different needs and abilities of students in the classroom. Tomlinson (2000) explained that differentiated instruction is a way of thinking rather than a mere strategy, program, or “thing”. It is a philosophy to address students’ differences by adapting the classroom components, such as learning environment, learning styles, assessments, and teaching methods, to meet the diverse students’ needs. The ideas of DI from Tomlinson (2000) may be so conceptual that it does not provide clear practical guidelines for teachers. This study is relevant to the Indonesian contexts, especially Kurikulum Merdeka, in which teachers are expected to apply flexibility and inclusivity; however, the implementation still faces several technical challenges. This study is aligned with Tomlinson’s ideas, but it attempts to fill the void by examining how EFL teachers implement DI in their classrooms. Heacox (2017) supported the notion by asserting that differentiated instruction helps students achieve their learning goals by addressing their various learning styles in the classroom. Heacox’s ideas are essential to respect diversity; however, the use of the term ‘learning styles’ has been criticized since it tends to label the students. Heacox’s ideas of DI are also relevant to the Indonesian contexts as a reference to examine students’ learning styles, readiness, interests, etc. However, this research attempts to study how teachers adjust the teaching and learning activities to their perceptions of students’ diverse abilities in Kurikulum Merdeka. Similarly, Partami et al (2019) stated that differentiated instruction is an essential strategy in diverse classrooms to meet every student’s needs. This study resonates with the ideas of Kurikulum Merdeka that emphasize student-centred learning. In their research, Partami et al. (2019) explained that the success of DI depends on the teachers’ capacity and resources. Therefore, this study would like to focus on the extent of teachers’ readiness and schools’ support in the implementation of DI.

According to Tomlinson (2000), there are four elements of Differentiated Instruction – content, process, product, and learning environment – that are functioning as principles and guidance for effective implementation.

1. Content

‘Content’ in Differentiated Instruction refers to what will be learnt by the students, including curriculum and learning materials. Barlian et al., (2023) highlighted that content must be modified to adjust to students’ learning styles and address any possible disabilities students may have. Similarly, Suwartiningsih, (2021) added that content is related to what the students are expected to know, understand, and learn, and teachers play a crucial role in

adapting how each student approaches the topic being learnt. There are two key strategies to differentiate content in the classroom. First, teachers can adjust to what is being taught or what students are learning to align with students' readiness and interests. Second, teachers modify how they present the content or how the students access the content (Wahyudin et al., 2024)

2. Process

In Differentiated Instruction, 'process' refers to methods and strategies to get the students engaged with and understand the content in a way that aligns with their needs, skills, and learning preferences. This process includes various activities and approaches that enable students to process the information and develop their skills (Barlian et al., 2023; Suwartiningsih, 2021). Further, the learning process must have two essential functions: improving students' current skills and knowledge and varying the level of difficulty based on students' abilities. In its practice, the process of differentiated instruction can take many forms. For instance, Kusasi (2024) depicted how teachers in SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjung Pinang applied various levels of support, offered various activities, and used varied assessment formats to meet the students' diverse needs, learning styles, and readiness. Further, Lestari & Purbasari (2023) in their research showed practical application of differentiated instruction by grouping the students based on their learning styles. Visual learners were instructed to create videos, while kinesthetic learners created posters or articles.

3. Product

'Product' in Differentiated Instruction refers to tangible evidence about what students have learnt and understood. 'Product' represents the result of students' learning process, showing their knowledge, skills, and understanding on a topic or unit. Musyarrofah et al., (2024) in their research showed the practical implementations of differentiated products. For instance, teachers often tailor assignments to align with students' learning styles and preferences or encourage students to create products such as creative projects or pictures. These products were then presented by the students, fostering deeper engagement and strengthening understanding. In certain cases, the teachers implemented Discovery/Inquiry Learning, enabling the students to explore topics independently and write reports based on their findings. By differentiating the products, the teachers provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their learning in a way that suits their strengths and preferences.

4. Learning Environment

Learning environment is an element in Differentiated Instruction that directly affects the students' engagement, comfort, and motivation. Learning environments cover the personal, social, and physical settings to support students' diverse learning preferences (Wahyudin et al., 2024). For instance, teachers can set the students' sitting positions based on their readiness, interests, and learning styles. This setting can be announced on a board or adjusted regularly to allow the students to work in different settings, such as bigger groups, smaller groups, peers, or individually (Wahyudin et al., 2024)

Several studies emphasize that learning spaces must be adjusted to students' learning styles and preferences to increase students' academic performance significantly. For instance, students often value independent learning space, while a traditional classroom is often perceived differently, depending on whether the students have visual or verbal learning styles (Wang & Han, 2021). This indicates that flexible and adaptive classrooms can better meet various needs.

Consequently, differentiated instruction creates an inclusive classroom environment by facilitating various ways for students to access content, process the information, and achieve the learning goals effectively (Amalia et al., 2023; Suwartiningsih, 2021). This approach ensures that the teaching methods are adjusted to the students' readiness, learning profiles, interests, and abilities, enabling them to achieve optimal learning outcomes (Isrokatun et al., 2023). Besides, this approach emphasizes the importance of fulfilling students' unique needs by tailoring the teaching strategies to students' distinct abilities and needs, since no two students can be treated identically (MS, 2023).

Based on those definitions, differentiated instruction can be defined as a student-centred teaching philosophy that recognizes and addresses the diverse needs, interests, and learning styles of students. Differentiated instruction emphasizes the importance of adapting the teaching methods, content, and assessment to provide more meaningful and relevant learning experiences for students. This concept values the individual quality of each student and adopts the approach to address students' diversity by integrating flexibility and inclusivity in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, this study would like to highlight real implementation of EFL teachers in Riau Islands (teachers' readiness and resource limitation) to disclose the challenges the implementation of DI in Kurikulum Merdeka.

Teaching English Using Differentiated Instruction

Pozas & Schneider (2019) proposed a taxonomy consisting of six categories that are relevant to the implementation of differentiated instruction. This taxonomy offers practical guidance on how to implement differentiation instruction; thus, the teachers can manage diverse students in the classrooms. The six categories are:

1. Tiered activities: Doing assignments/tasks with different levels of complexity based on the students' background knowledge, interests, and learning styles
2. Intentional composition of student groups: Grouping the students based on their abilities or learning style preferences to create learning environments that adjust to their specific needs.
3. Tutoring systems within the learning group: Students with better abilities become tutors for their classmates who need help.
4. Staggered nonverbal learning aids: Presenting learning aids to accommodate different students' learning speeds.
5. Mastery learning: Provide more opportunities for students to learn with various teaching methods and formative assessments.
6. Open Education/Granting Autonomy to Students: Offering students autonomy and flexibility in the learning process, such as choosing topics or learning activities that interest them, to promote students' engagement and motivation.

This taxonomy offers practical guidelines for teachers to manage heterogeneous classes; however, challenges may remain when teachers need to adjust students' needs with limited time, administrative burdens, and large class sizes. In the context of Kurikulum Merdeka, this category is relevant to Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes flexibility, but this study attempts to discover how EFL teachers in Riau Islands apply those strategies in their practices.

Kariippanon et al., (2019) demonstrated that small flexible grouping based on formative assessment can significantly increase the students' academic performance and engagement. Similarly, Azizah et al., (2023) identify and group the students based on their diverse learning preferences: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. By adapting this method, students can improve their engagement and meet the students' individual needs effectively. (Syarifuddin & Nurmi, 2022) highlight the importance of heterogeneous groups, where students work together on tasks such as peer tutoring, reading illustrated materials, and using different resources to solve problems.

Similarly, Magableh & Abdullah (2020) highlighted the effectiveness of differentiated instruction for a mixed-abilities classroom. Content differentiation involves the alignment of the curriculum with the different levels of abilities by utilizing supplementary resources from teachers and the school library. Process differentiation

involves the formation of homogeneous groups based on students' levels of ability to meet the students' learning needs. Lastly, product differentiation provides students with more opportunities to demonstrate their understanding, which promotes autonomy and engagement. Consequently, these integrated strategies can significantly increase students' English language proficiency for Jordanian eighth graders, which in turn demonstrates the transformative potential of differentiated instruction to improve learning outcomes.

In a nutshell, the literature indicates that differentiated instruction potentially increases the students' engagement and learning outcomes by implementing practical strategies, such as flexible grouping, peer tutoring, tiered activities, and product differentiation. However, most studies highlight the implementation of DI with sufficient support of resources. This study investigates how the strategies are adapted in Kurikulum Merdeka, especially by EFL teachers in Riau Islands with limited time, facilities, and workload. Thus, this study not only highlights the ideal practices but also discloses the challenges in implementing DI contextually.

Benefits of Differentiated Instructions

A class with students of different learning profiles and abilities provides a significant challenge for the teachers. Suwastini et al., (2021) stated that differentiated Instruction can enhance students' engagement by tailoring teaching approaches to the interests, learning preferences, and readiness levels of every student, which will make the subject matter more interesting and relevant. For example, Arianto et al., (2023) prove that through the use of customized content, processes, and products, Differentiated Instruction leads to higher engagement and motivation when material is related to the students' unique characteristics and needs, and students become interested in their learning process. This approach enhances not only enthusiasm but also allows students to attach emotionally to the subject matter.

Differentiated Instruction addresses the natural variations among students, ensuring that learning gaps are minimized and academic performance is enhanced. Teachers can apply strategies such as Graphic Organizers, Tic Tac Toe, and Learning Interest Centers to accommodate students' various learning profiles (Satyarini et al., 2022). Further, Syarifuddin & Nurmi (2022) showed that differentiated instruction significantly improves students' learning results in Mathematics class, progressing their mastery from 62.07% in the first cycle to 89.66% in the second cycle. By facilitating activities that are suitable for students' readiness, differentiated instruction can create a more supportive learning environment that empowers every student to thrive academically.

Differentiated instruction encourages collaboration, creativity, and inclusivity. Grouping students based on their interests and learning styles (visual, auditory, and

kinesthetic) promotes their active involvement and teamwork in the classroom. For instance, Lestari & Purbasari (2023) found that differentiated instruction can allow students to create creative works, such as videos, posters, and articles that are relevant to their learning styles. This kind of activity not only helps to advance their academic achievement but also builds essential character, such as responsibility, collaboration, and empathy. Further, focusing on inclusivity, differentiated instruction will ensure all students, regardless of their background and abilities, will have equal opportunities to experience meaningful and personalized education (Satyarini et al., 2022).

Differentiated instruction boosts critical thinking and connects the learning process with real-life situations; hence, enriching students' learning experiences. Danley & Williams, (2020) highlight that differentiated instruction can potentially maximize the students' learning experiences, which in turn will lead to better comprehension and problem-solving skills. For instance, Jufrianto et al. (2023) about reading comprehension disclosed that differentiated instruction can encourage students to think analytically and creatively through role-play and other real projects to enhance their academic performance, but at the same time, it encourages students to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts. Thus, education becomes practical, fair, and realistic for students' real-life situations.

The literature shows that DI can develop students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. However, most studies emphasize ideal aspects, while the challenges when implementing DI are not explored. Thus, this study not only highlights the good practices of DI but also uncovers the practical challenges faced by EFL teachers in Riau Islands in the context of Kurikulum Merdeka.

METHOD

To further investigate English teachers' perceptions of Differentiated Instruction in developing students' English skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing), this research employed a mixed methods approach. By combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, the researchers aimed to achieve a broad understanding of the teachers' perceptions and experiences. The reason for choosing mixed methods as the approach of our research is that by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the data obtained is richer and more comprehensive. The use of a mixed-method research design aims to gather richer and more comprehensive data by combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. Creswell & Creswell (2018) explained that combining qualitative and quantitative data is a useful strategy to gather more comprehensive insights about research problems.

The quantitative data from questionnaires provided a general description of teachers' perceptions and practices across the large sample. The qualitative data from interviews provided a deeper understanding of each teacher's experience and factors affecting the perceptions and practices. This study employed an explanatory design in which the quantitative data collected were analyzed first to identify the general trend and pattern. Further, qualitative data were used to explain and elaborate on the findings to offer a deeper understanding of the trend and practices.

This study used two research instruments, namely a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire and interview questions were adapted from Griful-Freixenet et al. (2021), Talain & Mercado (2023), and Arif (2019) and focused on the teachers' perceptions of the implementation of differentiated instructions and their beliefs about whether differentiated instruction improves the students' English skills. Adapting the questionnaire from an existing study helped to maintain the reliability and validity of the instrument, ensuring that it met the objectives of the study. The instrument underwent content validation by two experts in English Language Teaching, and minor revisions were made based on their suggestions to improve item clarity and contextual appropriateness. A pilot test was conducted with five in-service English teachers to ensure the clarity and usability before full implementation. There are 22 questions for the questionnaire and 5 questions for the interview. The questionnaire includes three aspects: differentiated instruction strategies (7 questions), challenges in implementing DI (6 questions), and using DI to improve English skills (9 questions). The interview questions include: 1) describing teachers' overall experience with DI, including training and their confidence in preparing and implementing DI in English language classes; 2) teachers' perspective on the role of DI in enhancing English language learning outcomes and their belief in DI to address diverse needs of students in the classroom; 3) how teachers differentiate their teaching methods and materials for English language learners based on their readiness, interests, and comprehension levels as well as types of assessment and resources to support students' academic progress; 4) the main challenges teacher encounter in implementing DI, considering factors such as time constraints, resources availability, class size, teacher training, student motivation, and personal teaching beliefs; and 5) how the use of DI impact the students' effectiveness in learning English skills and overall understanding.

The participants in this study were English teachers from various schools across Kepulauan Riau Province. The study included teachers from a broad spectrum of educational institutions, covering five regencies (Bintan, Karimun, Anambas, Lingga, and

Natuna) and two cities (Tanjungpinang and Batam). A total of sixty-nine teachers from various schools participated in the study by completing the questionnaire.

In addition, the interview respondents were selected by using random sampling without determining specific criteria Bhardwaj (2019). However, only three teachers from three big Islands in Kepulauan Riau (Batam, Bintan, and Tanjung Balai Karimun) agreed to participate in the interview. Due to time constraints, the researcher was unable to wait for or seek additional respondents willing to be interviewed. This study admits that it is a limitation of this study since only three teachers participated in the interview; however, this study believes that the interview can provide deep insights since the interview respondents represent three big islands in the Riau Islands. The selection of participants aimed to capture a wide range of teaching backgrounds, with the schools varying in terms of size, student demographics, and resources available for English language teaching, to ensure a broad range of opinions on Differentiated Instruction from teachers from both public and private schools.

To summarize the questionnaire responses, the researcher will calculate the mean score for each item based on the Likert scale categories. The results will be presented in tabular form, showing the mean score for each item, thus indicating the overall level of agreement or disagreement among teachers and highlighting areas of consensus or divergence.

Table 1.
Teachers' Perception Criteria

NO.	MEAN	CRITERIA
1.	4.01 - 5.0	Positive Perceptions
2.	3.01 - 4.0	Positive Perceptions
3.	2.01 - 3.0	Negative Perceptions
4.	0.5 - 2.0	Negative Perceptions

Source: Pratiwi & Kurniati (2022)

The interview recordings will undergo transcription, followed by a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to teachers' perceptions, understandings, and experiences of differentiated instruction. This systematic process involves coding the transcribed data to identify meaningful units of text and organizing these codes into overarching themes that capture the essence of teachers' perspectives. The interpretation of the qualitative data will involve summarizing and synthesizing these themes to gain a deeper understanding of the depth and complexity of teachers' perceptions and experiences with differentiated instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study answered two research questions, namely, to find out the EFL teachers' perception of the use of differentiated instruction and their challenges during the implementation of differentiated instruction. Therefore, this section is going to present the results of the questionnaires regarding the teachers' perception of differentiated instruction strategies, challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, and differentiated instruction in improving English skills. Besides, to get a deeper and more elaborate analysis, this study also elaborates on the results of the interview.

Results

The result is divided into three sections, namely differentiated instruction strategies, challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, and the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in improving English skills. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms and completed by 69 high school and vocational teachers across the Riau Islands Province. The respondents were distributed as follows: 34 teachers from schools in Batam, 9 from Tanjung Pinang, 8 from Bintan, 7 from Karimun, 5 from Lingga, and 3 teachers each from Anambas and Natuna.

Differentiated Instruction Strategies

Table 2.
 Differentiated Instruction Strategies

NO.	QUESTION	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN
1.	I choose the learning content and teaching methods based on my students (e.g., interests, talents ...).	33 (47.8%)	30 (43.5%)	5 (7.2%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	4.38
2.	I adjust my assessment based on my students (or groups of students).	28 (40.6%)	31 (44.9%)	6 (8.7%)	4 (5.8%)	0 (0%)	4.2
3.	During my lessons, different students work on different tasks with different levels of difficulty.	21 (30.4%)	24 (34.8%)	17 (24.6%)	5 (7.2%)	2 (2.9%)	3.83
4.	I adjust the content to the level of every student in my class.	19 (27.5%)	30 (43.5%)	20 (29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.99
5.	Knowing my students, I select the learning content, materials, and teaching methods.	32 (46.4%)	29 (42%)	8 (11.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.35
6.	During my lessons, my students can decide with me which assignment they need to work.	19 (27.5%)	27 (39.1%)	18 (26.1%)	3 (4.3%)	2 (2.9%)	3.84
7.	Based on their learning profile, I let my students choose between learning content and teaching methods.	16 (23.2%)	23 (33.3%)	17 (24.6%)	11 (15.9%)	2 (2.9%)	3.58
ΣM							3.98

The table indicates an overall positive attitude of EFL teachers in Riau Islands toward the differentiated instruction strategies (3.98/5.00), with most respondents

agreeing on its importance in addressing diverse student needs, with a mean score of 4.38/5.00. More than 50% of the teachers perceive that it is essential to select the learning content and teaching methodology based on the students' interests and abilities when implementing differentiated instructions.

However, the teachers think that it is not necessary to provide students' autonomy to choose the learning content and teaching methods based on their learning profile, as proven by the lowest mean score of 3.58/5.00. This may indicate certain difficulties, such as limited resources, lack of flexibility in curriculum design, or other pedagogical constraints.

Two notable trends in the data are that 49 out of 69 respondents agree to adjust the content to the level of students' abilities, and 61 out of 69 respondents agree to adapt the learning content, materials, and teaching methods to students' prior knowledge and level of competencies. This underlines the teachers' commitment to adapting and adjusting lessons to the students' needs and mixed abilities. However, the relatively high proportion of neutral responses could indicate some uncertainty or inconsistency in the implementation of DI strategies. This could be due to practical difficulties, such as insufficient resources, limited professional training, or time pressure. Furthermore, the result was supported by the interviews.

To understand the trends better, the interview data provide concrete descriptions about how teachers view and implement DI in class.

Respondent A:

"I differentiate teaching methods by adjusting to students' learning. For example, the student is inclined to visuals; therefore, I use video, and if the student is kinesthetic, we can provide different levels of difficulty in teaching materials, such as texts and exercises of different levels of support for assessment".

This statement shows that teachers implement DI by adjusting the content and learning methods based on students' learning styles and readiness. This is in line with the quantitative data showing that more than 50% teachers agree on the urgency to adjust the learning content to students' prior knowledge and abilities. Hence, the interview quote from Respondent A stresses teachers' belief in their practices, though the practices require additional effort and preparation.

A similar idea is argued by Respondent B, reflecting his/her arguments about DI.

Respondent B:

"Before fully understanding differentiated instruction, I had already applied it in class, though not as clearly. Through attendance at teacher training, I came to

realize that differentiation is not just about differentiating tasks, but it is also about teaching adjusted to students' ability levels."

This interview quote from Respondent B is consistent with the quantitative data in which teachers appreciate the adjustment of content and teaching methods to students' competencies (agreed by 61 out of 69 respondents). Statements from Respondent B show that teacher training plays an essential role in deepening the understanding of DI by focusing on students' learning profiles. It proves that teachers commit to implementing differentiation in content and methods, though their practices are still developing with experience and training.

This reflects the change in their understanding of differentiated instruction from merely changing tasks to a more profound approach where the method of teaching itself becomes adjusted to each student's learning level. Additionally, the respondent highlighted the importance of giving students the freedom to choose how they complete assignments:

"Learning is tailored to students' interests; they can choose how to complete assignments, whether through poster, drama, PPT, or vlog, allowing them to express their understanding in the format they prefer".

Those reflect how teachers put differentiated instruction into practice, showing a deep recognition of the value of differentiated instruction, especially in terms of adapting teaching methods to students' needs. Teachers' views on adapting content to students' preferences and choices indicate further support for personalized learning.

This study realizes that teachers may face some challenges during the implementation of DI since DI is a relatively new method, which was first introduced in the emergence of Kurikulum Merdeka. Therefore, this study also attempts to discover teachers' challenges during the implementation of DI in Kurikulum Merdeka.

Challenges in Implementing DI

Table 3.
 Challenges in Implementing DI

N O.	QUESTION	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN
1.	English language teachers have limited time in catering to the diverse needs of English language learners.	14 (20.3%)	23 (33.3%)	19 (27.5%)	10 (14.5%)	3 (4.3%)	3.51
2.	There is a lack of available learning resources/materials, which are a necessity in facilitating learning.	11 (15.9%)	22 (31.9%)	21 (30.4%)	7 (10.1%)	8 (11.6%)	3.3
3.	English language teachers have trouble identifying the strengths and weaknesses of English language learners in large class sizes.	11 (15.9%)	25 (31.9%)	18 (30.4%)	10 (14.5%)	5 (7.2%)	3.39

N O.	QUESTION	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN
4.	English language teachers have insufficient knowledge of differentiated instruction as an instructional approach, which affects the efficiency of its implementation.	11 (15.9 %)	20 (36.2 %)	23 (26.1 %)	11 (15.9 %)	4 (5.8 %)	3.33
5.	English language learners have weak motivation for learning.	12 (17.4 %)	26 (37.7 %)	12 (17.4 %)	10 (14.5 %)	9 (13 %)	3.32
6.	Teachers' teaching beliefs/styles are not suitable for the implementation of differentiation practices.	10 (14.5 %)	14 (20.3 %)	20 (29.0 %)	15 (21.7 %)	10 (14.5 %)	2.99
ΣM							3.25

The table indicates that most of the EFL teachers in Riau Islands admitted that they still faced several challenges during the implementation of differentiation instruction. The biggest challenge they face is the limitation of time for focusing on diverse learners' needs, as proven by a mean score of 3.51/5.00 (37 out of 69 teachers). It was supported by the statements of the respondents B and C.

Respondent B

"Every time there is new material, I must conduct an initial assessment to understand the students' understanding. This process certainly takes time, which sometimes reduces the effective teaching time in the classroom".

Respondent C

"One of the biggest challenges I face is the limitation of time and resources. Managing differentiated instruction requires more preparation, especially because I must adjust the material to the diverse abilities of the students."

The teachers also found other challenges, such as the identification of students' strengths and weaknesses in large class sizes, the limitation of knowledge on differentiated instruction, the students' low motivation, and limited sources/materials about differentiated instruction. This aligns with all respondents' statements.

Respondent A

"One of our challenges as teachers is to understand the different levels of students' abilities in English skills."

Respondent B

"Every time there is new material, I must conduct an initial assessment to understand the students' understanding. This process certainly takes time, which sometimes reduces the effective teaching time in the classroom. Moreover, the number of classes I teach is five classes, some of them are 11th-grade classes, while some others are 12th-grade classes; therefore, I need to regularly review their English skills. The challenge is that they have different material levels, so I have to adjust my approach to each class properly."

Respondent C

“One of the biggest challenges I face is the limitation of time and resources. Managing differentiated instruction requires more preparation, especially because I must adjust the material to the diverse abilities of the students. Another challenge is that the number of classes I teach is five classes; some of them are 11th-grade classes, while some others are 12th-grade classes; therefore, I need to regularly review their English skills. The challenge is that they have different material levels, so I have to adjust my approach to each class properly.”

Meanwhile, this study also found that teachers believe that the principles of differentiated instruction still align with their teaching beliefs, as proven by the negative perception with a score of 2.99/5.00. It can be concluded that the challenges of differentiated instruction come from the external factors, not internal factors. Teachers have a willingness and commitment to implement differentiated instruction, but the practice may not be perfect since they may face several challenges during the implementation.

Additionally, professional training was noted as essential for effective DI implementation. Respondents B and C mentioned that they attended DI workshops, which helped them improve their understanding and application of DI. However, respondent A could not attend due to personal reasons. She explained

“I couldn’t join the workshop because I have to take care of my three children, and aligning my schedule with theirs is quite challenging.”

Typically, Training or workshop sessions often require a significant time commitment. For instance, the *Guru Penggerak training program* can last up to 6 months (Manao et al., 2022). Similarly, a shorter workshop, such as the 3-day DI workshop conducted in Gresik Regency by Rosmiati et al. (2024) also, demand dedicated time. Although such programs are beneficial for teachers’ development, they may not be feasible for all teachers, especially those with personal responsibilities.

Overall, this study concludes that time constraints, resource limitations, diverse student needs, and large class sizes remain obstacles in differentiated instruction implementation. EFL teachers have a strong commitment to implementing differentiated instruction by participating in workshops. However, some teachers also found that time constraints remain a challenge.

This study believes that DI can enhance students’ learning achievement, motivation, and engagement. This study would like to focus on whether DI can help the students to improve their English skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Improving Students' English Skills Using DI

Table 4.

DI in improving students' English skills

NO.	QUESTION	SA	A	N	D	SD	MEAN
1.	The use of DI helps my students to learn English effectively.	21 (30.4%)	33 (47.8%)	13 (18.8%)	2 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	4.06
2.	The use of DI helps my students to improve their listening skills.	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)	13 (18.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.1
3.	The use of DI helps my students to improve their reading skills.	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)	12 (17.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	4.07
4.	The use of DI helps my students to improve their speaking skills.	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)	12 (17.4%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	4.09
5.	The use of DI helps my students to improve their writing skills.	23 (33.3%)	33 (47.8%)	12 (17.4%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	4.12
6.	The use of DI helps my students acquire grammar competence.	21 (30.4%)	34 (49.3%)	13 (18.8%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0%)	4.09
7.	The use of DI helps my students to enhance their vocabulary.	22 (31.9%)	34 (49.3%)	12 (17.4%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	4.12
8.	The use of DI helps my students acquire pronunciation.	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)	11 (15.9%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	4.06
9.	The use of DI makes understanding English learning material easier for my students.	23 (33.3%)	30 (43.5%)	14 (20.3%)	1 (1.4%)	1 (1.4%)	4.06
ΣM							4.06

The table shows that differentiated instruction can enhance students' English skills, achieving the highest mean among the other two aspects (4.06/5.00). In other words, EFL teachers agree that differentiated instruction is beneficial to improve students' English language performance; listening (4.01/5.00), reading (4.07/5.00), speaking (4.09/5.00), writing (4.12/5.00), grammar (4.09/5.00), vocabulary (4.12/5.00), and pronunciation (4.06/5.00). The neutral responses for all items had an average of only 18.03%, indicating minimal skepticism about the effectiveness of differentiated instruction.

In conclusion, the results reflect that DI is perceived as an effective method in addressing diverse learning needs and enhancing various dimensions of English language proficiency: listening, reading, writing, and grammar. The results emphasized the role of DI in fostering both linguistic accuracy and communicative competence among students.

This study also notes that the use of differentiated instruction increases the students' engagement, motivation, and comprehension in the class since the students are

given autonomy to learn based on their learning styles/preferences and interests. This impact was stated by Respondent B in the interview.

Respondent B

“After implementing DI, I saw a significant change in the students. Previously, I taught using one technique for all students. For example, when teaching recount text, all students were given the same task, like making a video about daily activities. However, it turns out that not all students were comfortable with this format. Some ended up not doing the task because they didn’t like making videos. However, after understanding differentiation, I started giving them the freedom to choose the assignment format. They could express their understanding in the form of a poster or other media they preferred. As a result, more students completed the assignments compared to before, and they seemed to understand the material better.”

In a nutshell, this study indicates that EFL teachers in Riau Islands Province show a positive attitude toward differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is viewed as an effective instructional approach to boost students’ English performance as well as their engagement and motivation. However, the implementation of differentiated instruction may not be perfect, since the challenge remains. The EFL teachers admitted that time constraint is the biggest challenge since additional preparation is required. The second challenge is large class sizes, causing difficulty in addressing individual student needs. Thirdly, limited resources were one of the noted obstacles, since some teachers were unable to attend DI-related workshops due to personal responsibilities.

However, despite the challenges, DI was recorded with a positive perception in improving students’ English skills, encouraging the belief that DI positively impacts students’ learning outcomes. Overall, while challenges exist, the findings highlight a strong belief in the effectiveness of DI, both in facilitating instruction and enhancing students’ language proficiency.

Discussion

This study found that EFL teachers in the Riau Islands province exhibit a positive perception of the policy and implementation of differentiated instruction in Kurikulum Merdeka. Although differentiated instruction is an old concept Tomlinson (2000) and was reintroduced in 2020 in the Kurikulum Merdeka policy, EFL teachers have shown their commitment to implementing this concept in the classroom. Teachers’ beliefs and willingness to adapt the strategies to support diverse learners impact the successful implementation of differentiated instruction (Hasumi & Chiu, 2024, Ghufon et al., 2024, and Regan et al., 2019)

The EFL teachers acknowledge the importance of adapting teaching content and methodologies to their students' diverse needs. The EFL teachers have applied several strategies, such as selecting materials based on the students' interests and adjusting content levels, reinforcing the perception that personalized learning is an effective approach in EFL classrooms. Ojong (2023) argued that teachers must adjust the learning settings to address various learning styles and prior knowledge of the students when implementing differentiated instruction.

However, the teachers found it challenging to involve students' autonomy to choose their learning content within their current environment. This might be caused by limited resources, lack of flexibility in curriculum design, or other pedagogical constraints. This is in line with the study of Laksono et al. (2024) and Zaki et al. (2025) that limited resource is the most significant challenge for EFL teachers in rural areas due to limited access and support to materials, technology, and up-to-date educational resources. Thus, teachers need to maximize their time to utilize the local resources and community engagement to supplement the learning process.

This study proves that EFL teachers face some challenges when implementing differentiated instruction. The most challenging issues faced by EFL teachers are the time constraints to focus and accommodate the different needs/interests of the students. It is aligned with the study of Mardhatillah & Suharyadi (2023) that mixed-ability classrooms require extensive preparation to fulfill students' diverse needs, and teachers admitted that this is the most significant challenge.

It was due to the lesson length, and the time allocation for planning and preparation was insufficient (Shareefa, Moosa, et al., 2019). Ginja & Chen (2020) emphasized how often teachers found the production and planning of differentiated instruction very time-consuming. The teachers indicated feelings of apprehension with respect to juggling high academic loads against extra-academic chores such as co-curricular activities, committee work, and event organization. Heng & Song (2020) added that differentiated instruction requires much preparation, such as making diagnostic tests, different types of worksheets, sourcing materials relevant to students' interests, and providing scaffolds for various groups, giving choices in tasks, and clarity in rubrics.

Teachers also still find it challenging to assess students' strengths and weaknesses in large class sizes, research knowledge on differentiation instruction, encourage the low-motivated students, and find sources/materials about differentiated instruction. Suryati et al. (2023) also found that time constraints, limited support, inadequate resources, managing large class sizes, and ensuring student engagement significantly constrain the teachers.

Furthermore, the teachers' insufficient knowledge of differentiated instruction due to a lack of necessary professional training/workshops, and support. Professional training is essential to shape teachers' self-confidence and skill in adapting learning strategies and ensure that teachers are sufficiently prepared to implement the strategies effectively (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2001; Hero, 2019; Rintaningrum, 2023). Practical constraints often limit teachers' ability to fully integrate differentiated instruction into their instructional practices.

Although the implementation of differentiated instruction comes with some challenges, its benefits in enhancing language learning outcomes are widely acknowledged. Teachers agreed that differentiated instruction helps enhance language skills, including reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Teachers generally acknowledge the importance of differentiated instruction in developing English language skills (Suprayogi et al., 2017). Rumkoda & Alinda (2022) also share a similar insight that the use of differentiated instruction can enhance speaking skills. In addition, Magableh & Abdullah's (2020) study of eighth-grade students in Jordan also showed that differentiated instruction improved overall performance in English through strategies such as homogeneous grouping, multilevel tasks, and multilevel instruction. Their research focuses on improving all English skills, with differentiated instruction improving students' speaking, reading, and writing skills.

In a nutshell, this study found that EFL teachers in Riau Islands Province hold favorable perceptions of DI, though several challenges, including time constraints, limited resources, and student motivation, continue to affect its successful delivery into practice. This study suggests that continuous professional training and support are essential to improve the practice of differentiated instruction for EFL teachers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teachers held positive perceptions of Differentiated Instruction. The highest-rated strategy involved selecting content and methodologies tailored to students' needs. However, challenges remained in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction. Time constraints, lack of sufficient teaching resources, and difficulties in assessing students' diverse learning needs within large classroom settings were identified as significant challenges. Further, although teachers viewed Differentiated Instruction positively, some struggled with providing students autonomy in choosing materials and methods. Despite these challenges, Differentiated Instruction was perceived to contribute positively to students' English skills development.

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