ANALYZING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN TEACHING WRITING SKILL: A CASE STUDY ON STRATEGY AND CHALLENGES

Riski Rosnanda[1], Nur Asmawati [2], Fatima[3]
[1,2,3] UIN Datokarama Palu
Email: riskirosnanda@gmail.com[1], nurasmawati@uindatokarama.ac.id[2], fatima@uindatokarama.ac.id[3]

Journal info	Abstract.
	Differentiated Learning has emerged as an educational strategy designed to accommodate the diverse characteristics, interests, readiness, and learning styles of students. This study aimed to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning and the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching writing skills. A qualitative case study design was employed, with data collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. The research was conducted at SMPN 1 Palu, involving one English teacher and 31 eighth-grade students, with in-depth interviews conducted with three selected students and the teacher. The findings revealed that the teacher applied differentiation in four areas: content, process, product, and learning environment. Students were given varied materials tailored to their readiness levels, engaged in flexible group activities, and allowed to demonstrate understanding through multiple formats. These practices supported students' active participation, increased motivation, and fostered creativity in the writing process. Moreover, the teacher created a supportive and adaptive classroom environment that encouraged collaboration and comfort. However, the study also highlighted challenges, such as limited resources, difficulties addressing students with special needs, and the complexity of planning differentiated tasks. Despite these barriers, differentiated learning significantly enhanced the quality of English writing class in alignment with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum.

A. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a fundamental aspect of education. The quality of education is largely determined by the effectiveness of the learning process. However, success in learning cannot be generalized, as each learner possesses unique characteristics, abilities, and needs. Therefore, the role of educators in managing the classroom is crucial in creating a conducive learning environment. Educators must be able to assess classroom conditions and implement appropriate teaching strategies to ensure that the learning process runs optimally and inclusively.

Each learner has different characteristics in the classroom, which include intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, and learning style aspects. These differences affect how they

receive, process, and retain information. Students are humans who have a history, creatures with unique characteristics (individualism) (Budiningsih, 2015). The concept of learner characteristics is used in the science of learning and cognition to designate the target group of students and determine aspects of their personal, academic, social or cognitive personality that can influence how and what they learn (Drachsler & Kirschner, 2012). The learning modalities possessed by students can be the basis for determining the type of learning model carried out by educators both in groups and independent assignments (Mustafa, 2022 ;Syamsussabri et al., 2018)

One of the key responsibilities of educators is to design learning strategies that accommodate individual student needs based on their talents and interests. One instructional approach that effectively addresses student diversity is Differentiated Learning. This approach provides opportunities for learning that consider the characteristics and needs of each student, aiming to enhance the overall quality of education in Indonesia.

The effort to improve the quality of learning in differentiated learning are in line with the implementation of flexible and adaptive strategies, which are realized through independent curriculum development. This curriculum introduces innovations in instructional design with a focus on differentiation, commonly referred to as differentiated learning (Tomlinson, 2014) (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010),. The primary goal of this approach is to ensure that every student's learning needs are met by taking into account their talents and interests.

Differentiated learning encompasses four main aspects: content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and learning environment differentiation (Alamia Haque Insani, 2023). Content differentiation involves the curriculum and learning materials that students use, which are customized based on their learning styles and disabilities. Process differentiation focuses on how students interact with materials and how those interactions become part of determining students' learning choices. Given the variety of learning styles and preferences, classes should be structured in a way that effectively accommodates these differences. Product differentiation relates to the way students demonstrate their understanding, allowing teachers to assess their understanding and provide appropriate next steps. Environmental differentiation is also defined as "classroom climate". This includes the operation and tone of the classroom. Classroom rules, furniture arrangement, lighting, procedures and all processes affect the classroom atmosphere (Marlina,2020).

Differentiated learning is an effective learning process that considers the differences of each student in increasing their potential according to the readiness, interests and learning profile of students(Dalila et al., 2022; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). In differentiated learning, teachers use time flexibly, apply various instructional strategies, and become partners for students to see that everything they

learn from their learning environment can support the learning process (Tomlinson, 2017)(Dalila et al., 2022). High-quality learning is closely linked to the effectiveness of instructional processes and the achievement of predetermined learning objectives (Darling-Hammond, 2010)

The primary goal of differentiated learning is to address students' individual learning needs, allowing them to experience greater autonomy in learning by aligning instruction with their interests and preferences (Tomlinson, n.d.). Effective and efficient learning is characterized by the attainment of predefined learning objectives. When these objectives are successfully met, student learning outcomes improve. This improvement is influenced by student engagement in the learning process, as students who show interest in learning tend to grasp instructional materials more easily, positively impacting their overall performance.

Differentiated learning is rooted in Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which posits that each student learns differently based on their unique intellectual strengths (Kapusnick & Hauslein, 2001; Morgan, 2014) Differentiated learning is an instructional strategy in which educators implement various teaching methods to cater to the individual needs of students according to their distinct characteristics and abilities.

Differentiated learning involves educators delivering instructional materials by considering students' readiness, interests, and learning styles (Tomlinson et al., 2005). This approach enhances flexibility in the learning process and enables instructional adjustments based on student needs, helping them realize their full potential. By considering differences in learning readiness, interests, and profiles, educators can create a more meaningful and effective learning experience. There is ample evidence that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels (Vygotsky, 1986) (Tomlinson, 2000) Expert teachers are attentive to students' varied learning needs to differentiate instruction, then, is to become a more competent, creative, and professional educator (Shavkatovich, 2022).

It is crucial to acknowledge that students within the same classroom may have varying levels of prior knowledge on a given topic. some may already have a strong understanding, while others may be new to it. In addition, differences in learning styles also need to be considered. In a class with a variety of learning styles, language teachers must continually acknowledge, accept, and focus on the diversity of the learners' differences. (Arifin and colleagues, 2015) (Jumrah et al., 2022). as some students understand material better through direct instruction or auditory learning, while others learn more effectively through hands-on practice or independent reading. Some students also thrive better in group work, while others are more comfortable learning on their own. Therefore, the implementation of differentiated learning is important to create an inclusive, flexible and student-centered learning

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environment. By customizing teaching methods according to diverse needs, differentiated learning ensures effective achievement of educational goals while supporting student growth and success.

Previously, there have been several studies investigating the differentiated learning. A finding revealed by Pourdana that the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Language Learning can Improve Students' Listening Skills Through Graded Tasks that are Tailored to Their Readiness Level and Learning Style The advantages of this strategy include increased motivation, better engagement in learning, and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, on the other hand, challenges in implementing multilevel tasks include the complexity of customizing materials, differences in students' comprehension speed, and the need for continuous evaluation and grouping(Adar BakhshBaloch, 2017). Aprilia State That Differentiated Learning can Enhance Students' Speaking Skills by Adjusting Teaching Methods Based on Their Learning Styles. The advantages of this approach include increased motivation, better understanding of the material, reinforcement of communication skills, as well as the development of creativity and self-confidence in speaking. However, on the other hand, the challenges in differentiated learning include the complexity of implementing methods, differences in students' readiness levels, and the need for greater planning and resources (Aprilia et al., 2023). Azimah & Sujannah State That Differentiated Learning Enhances Students' Reading Skills by Helping Them Face Challenges, Expanding Their Vocabulary, Providing Enjoyable Reading Experiences, and Achieving Learning Objectives. Additionally, this strategy also encourages creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving in learning. However, on the other hand, the challenges in implementing differentiated learning include difficulties in adjusting materials, differences in learning speeds among students, and limitations in teaching resources (Azimah & Sujannah, 2024). In addition, another finding from Yusviranty showed that the use of differentiated learning strategies in English language teaching can lead to increased student engagement and achievement, there are also serious drawbacks, including a lack of planning time, issues with classroom management, a lack of teacher preparation, and difficulties identifying student differences (Yusviranty, 2023). Putri discovered that by considering each student's unique learning preferences and style, differentiated learning in Indonesian language instruction increased students' motivation and excitement (History, 2024).

Most studies have generally focused on the implementation of differentiated learning to enhance various language skills, including listening, speaking, and reading, along with the advantages and challenges associated with these strategies. However, the research specifically examining the application of differentiated learning in teaching writing skills remains limited. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by exploring the strategies and

challenges faced by the English teacher in implementing differentiated learning in writing skill.

In connection with this background, the formulation of problems in this study is important to direct the focus of the study in a systematic and directed manner. The research questions raised in this study are as follows:

1. How does the English teacher implement differentiated learning in teaching writing skills?

2. What challenges does the English teacher face during the implementation of Differentiated Learning in teaching writing skills?

Based on the formulation of the problem, the objective of this study is to examine the strategies and challenges of the English teacher at SMPN 1 Palu in implementing differentiated learning in teaching writing skills.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative case study design. According to John W. Creswell Qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or human problem. While a case study is a research strategy in which researchers closely investigate a program, event, activity, process, or group of individuals (John Creswell et al., 2017).

With a field research approach, this research aims to examine and narrate data related to the implementation of differentiated learning at SMPN 1 Palu that focus on the English teacher's strategy and challenges in teaching writing skills. This research uses direct observation, interviews, and documentation to collect data related to issues and practices of differentiated based learning in the classroom. In this study, observation was conducted in the classroom with a non-participatory approach four times a month to systematically document the implementation of differentiated learning. This process used checklists and field notes to ensure the data obtained was structured and accurate. Apart from observation, interviews are also the main technique in data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three students and one teacher, allowing the researcher to dig deeper for information and develop additional questions according to the participants' responses. To maintain data accuracy, the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and then transcribed for further analysis. As a complement, documentation was used to strengthen the findings from observations and interviews. The documentation includes official school documents, such as student grades, teaching modules, and teaching aids used in the learning process. This technique was chosen due to its stable nature as well as its ability to provide concrete evidence that can support the research results.

With the combination of these three techniques, the data obtained becomes richer, valid and can provide a comprehensive understanding of differentiation-based learning. Data collection is done through a process of conceptualization and observation of

various phenomena in the implementation of differentiated learning. The collected data were then mapped, analyzed, and triangulated interactively. This technique is used to ensure the relevance and validity of the data in order to answer the research questions properly.

The sample in this study consisted of one class with 31 students and one teacher. The sampling technique used purposive sampling, where the researcher selected three students and one teacher as the main participants. The sample selection criteria were based on their direct involvement in differentiation-based learning in the eighth grade of SMPN 1 Palu.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results

Differentiated learning is learning that is designed, implemented and assessed to meet the individual needs of students by taking into account learning readiness, learning interests, and learning profiles. With the findings obtained by the researchers during this research, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated learning in the independent curriculum in English subjects has been done well.

Based on the observation, interviews, and documentation that were conducted at SMPN 1 Palu, the results of this study show that differentiated learning strategies in English subjects have been implemented systematically and consistently at SMPN 1 Palu, although there are still some challenges. This study focuses on how English teacher use differentiated learning strategies in teaching writing skills and the challenges they face in the process.

The result of the observation shows: First, in the aspect of content differentiation, the teacher has provided varied teaching materials such as textbooks, pictures, and digital media such as Canva. The materials provided have also been adjusted to the level of students' readiness, especially in accommodating differences between students classified as having high and middle abilities.

Second, the implementation of process differentiation can be seen from the way teacher form learning groups based on students' abilities. Students are given the freedom to choose their materials and ways of learning. Learning activities are characterized by discussions, group presentations, educational games, and ice breaking sessions. This approach allows students to learn in a fun atmosphere and is relevant to their learning style; visual, auditory or kinesthetic. Teacher also prepared triggering questions that aim to explore students' initial understanding before starting the core learning, which shows an effort to identify students' readiness in a genuine way.

In the aspect of product differentiation, teacher provide opportunities for students to choose how to convey their learning outcomes. Some students chose to present their results both orally and written, while others presented the result through written and made visualization of it. Giving this flexibility not only increases students' creativity, but also increases their responsibility for their learning

outcomes. The result of the observation also shows that teacher provide feedback based on students' characteristics, not merely the final product, which shows a character-based authentic assessment approach.

Furthermore, in terms of differentiation of the learning environment, teacher create flexible and collaborative classrooms. Students are allowed to choose their learning partner or group, as well as arrange the learning space in a way that makes them comfortable. This can foster a good learning environment.

Besides the observation, the researcher interviewed the English teacher and the students at SMPN 1 Palu in gaining the data. The interview with the students showed a very positive response. Students stated that learning became more enjoyable because their learning styles were identified by the teacher before the class start. Two out of three students stated that they preferred learning in groups because they felt it helped them understand the material, while one student preferred to learn individually. The students' variety of learning styles is accommodated by the teacher in writing class is reflected in students' statement in the interview session: some students like reading the texts before they start to write, some students understand new vocabulary from teacher's movement in the explanation, and some of them understand the material and vocabulary with a combination of reading, listening, and moving. This proves that the diversity of students in one class can be accommodated effectively through the differentiation approach.

Students demonstrated a notable improvement in their motivation to learn. They felt more enthusiastic and motivated because the learning methods used are more varied, not monotonous like lectures alone. Teacher also plays an important role in guiding struggling students. When there are students who do not understand the material, the teacher provides re-explanation with simple language and concrete examples. This practice reflects the application of appropriate scaffolding and is responsive to students' needs.

However, in implementing Differentiated Learning in writing class, the teacher faced some challenges. According to the teacher interview result, the teacher faced challenges in accommodating inclusive students who have special needs. In addition, there are some students who do not bring dictionaries or other aids needed in writing, so they have difficulty in understanding the material. Teacher work around this by combining students in heterogeneous groups to help each other. This approach not only solves academic problems but also builds students' social skills, such as empathy and cooperation.

In general, the implementation of differentiated learning at SMPN 1 Palu has led to a humanistic learning approach, humanizing the learning process, and providing ample space for students' active participation. This learning model is very relevant to be applied in the era of *Merdeka Belajar*, where flexibility and meeting students' individual needs.

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Discussion

Based on the research results, it is identified that the implementation of differentiated learning in English subject, especially in writing class at SMPN 1 Palu has been done systematically and reflects the main principles of the differentiation approach. Teacher not only adjusts learning materials based on students' readiness, but also accommodate their interests and learning styles through variations in content, process, product and learning environment.

The results of this study show that the implementation of differentiated learning in teaching writing skills at SMPN 1 Palu has been done systematically and consistently. The strategies used include differentiation of content, process, product and learning environment, which directly respond to students' learning readiness, interest and learning profile. This finding supports (Tomlinson, n.d.) theory that differentiated learning aims to meet students' individual learning needs.

In terms of content, the variety of teaching materials used by teacher, such as textbooks, pictures, and digital media, provides flexibility for students to learn according to their level of readiness. This is consistent with the research results of (Adar BakhshBaloch, 2017) and (Aprilia et al., 2023), which showed that customized materials can increase student motivation and understanding.

On the process aspect, grouping by ability and active learning methods such as discussions and educational games prove that differentiated learning can create a pleasant learning atmosphere and suit students' learning styles. This is in line with (Syamsussabri et al., 2018) view on the importance of tailoring teaching strategies to students' learning modalities.

Meanwhile, providing choices in how to deliver learning outcomes (product differentiation) encourages student creativity and responsibility. This practice reflects the principles of authentic learning and character-based assessment, which is in line with the views of (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Similarly, the flexible arrangement of the learning environment shows that a comfortable classroom atmosphere that supports collaboration can increase students' active participation.

The findings also highlight that differentiated learning can increase students' motivation and provide responsive support to their difficulties, reflecting effective scaffolding practices (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, challenges such as limited learning aids, the needs of inclusive students and the burden of complex planning are still obstacles to the maximum implementation of this strategy.

Thus, the implementation of differentiated learning is proven to be effective in improving the quality of students' writing learning and providing a more personalized, adaptive and humanistic learning experience. This strengthens the relevance of the differentiation approach in the context of *Merdeka* Curriculum, which emphasizes

flexibility and meeting the individual needs of learners.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the results, it can be concluded that SMPN 1 Palu has successfully implemented differentiated learning in English writing class in alignment with the *Merdeka Belajar* curriculum. The teacher's ability in adapting materials, methods, products, and classroom settings to students' varying needs has fostered an inclusive and student-centered environment. This approach has positively influenced students' engagement, motivation, and writing skills, as seen in their increased enthusiasm and confidence. However, challenges remain, such as limited support for students with special needs and lack of access to learning tools. Therefore, ongoing teacher training, better resource availability, and strong support from schools and parents are essential to optimize the impact of differentiated learning in achieving educational equity and quality.

Based on the conclusions reached, this study serves as a final contribution from the researcher, which is expected to be utilized by others as a foundation for developing and implementing differentiated learning, particularly in broader educational contexts and with more diverse student populations. For readers, especially educators and policymakers, the findings offer valuable insights into practical strategies for creating inclusive and responsive classrooms. For fellow authors and researchers, this study encourages continued investigation into differentiated instruction,

particularly in areas that remain under-researched, such as writing skills. Finally, for schools, it is recommended to strengthen institutional support through teacher training, adequate resource provision, and the development of a collaborative culture that prioritizes student diversity and active participation in learning.

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