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Exploring Differentiated Learning in Teaching Writing at a Vocational High School: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study aims to explore the implementation of differentiated learning, the challenges and solutions faced by the teacher in teaching at a vocational high school. An English language teacher participated in this study. Data were collected through observation, interview, and documentation to answer three research questions. The findings encompass four main aspects: content, process, product, and learning environment differentiation. The teacher used various strategies such as adjusting materials based on diagnostic test results, using different delivery methods and media in the writing process, allowing flexibility in final written products, and managing the classroom in an adaptive way. The challenges faced include increased workload, complexity in planning content, teaching complexity, assessment fairness challenges, and limited classroom space. To overcome these challenges, the teacher developed strategies including effective time management, planning collaboration, teaching management, clear assessment communication, and creative space management. This study shows the importance of teacher flexibility and creativity in applying differentiated learning in writing classrooms.

1. Introduction

Every student, particularly EFL students, has unique characteristics that fundamentally shape their learning experience, especially in terms of their individual learning preferences, cognitive processing styles, and academic readiness levels (Religioni et al., 2024; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). The term 'learning styles' speaks to the understanding that every student learns differently, referring to the preferential way in which students absorb, process, comprehend, and acquire information (Fitria, 2023). Mismatches often occur between students' learning styles and the teaching methods used by teachers, resulting in suboptimal learning processes (Sengsouliya et al., 2021). This heterogeneity creates complex

instructional challenges, especially in teaching writing, where students must simultaneously manage multiple writing skills (Chicho, 2022).

A brief initial interview with an English teacher at a vocational high school revealed that the students at that school had diverse levels of comprehension in completing writing tasks, interest in content, and varying degrees of motivation. These factors impact their ability to compose coherent written work (Chicho, 2022). The diversity that occurs in the class becomes a challenge for teachers in teaching English, especially in teaching writing. Therefore, the teacher as facilitator and mentor plays an important role in supporting students' writing process by implementing the appropriate teaching approach to the problem.

Based on the challenges of students' diversity level in the classroom, a differentiated learning approach can be applied by teachers. It is believed that differentiated learning can assist teachers with providing efficient instructional design that fosters student diversity in learning and keeps students at the centre of the learning process (Tomlinson, 2014). Rather than standardizing instruction for one fit class, by embracing differences, teachers can create more meaningful learning for all students. Tailored instruction to meet individual students' needs can improve learning outcomes (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

This approach has gained some researchers' attention to conduct investigations in English learning contexts. Recent studies in the Indonesian context show that differentiated learning effectively facilitates students' interest in learning English which leads in improving engagement (Heningjakti, 2023; Halim, 2022). Teachers also recognize the benefits of this approach (Nayman, 2022), specifically in the context of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, where differentiated learning is essential for accommodate students' diversity (Laksono et al., 2024).

Despite its benefits, many educators or teachers struggle to apply this method effectively. This phenomenon happens because the lack of training and administrative support, limited learning materials, lack of assistance from other educators, and differences in levels of preparedness between teachers and students (Nayman, 2022; Mairoza et al., 2024; Heningjakti, 2023; Halim, 2022). In addition, other factors such as time management constraints and large class sizes are also causing complexity for implementing differentiated learning (Suryati, et al., 2023; Laksono et al., 2024).

In the past five years, several studies have examined differentiated learning in English language teaching. Those studies mainly investigated the use of differentiated learning for English Learning and Teaching (ELT) in general English skills context, focusing on: students' interest in the content (Heningjakti, 2023), effectiveness of differentiated learning in engaging students (Halim, 2022), teachers' experience from different levels (Nayman, 2022), and challenges in higher school (Laksono et al., 2024; Mairoza et al., 2024), and middle school settings (Suryati, et al., 2023). However, research studies specifically examining differentiated learning in the context of teaching writing are still limited. Thus, this study intends to address the gap by exploring how an Indonesian EFL teacher

applied differentiated learning in teaching writing in a vocational high school. This study also attempts to explore the challenges that the teacher faces and how the teacher overcomes the obstacles. This study may contribute to provide valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers to enhance and develop the effectiveness of differentiated learning in the EFL classroom, particularly in the vocational education context.

Therefore, the research questions of this study are:

1. How does the Indonesian EFL teacher implement differentiated learning in teaching writing at a vocational high school?
2. What challenges does the teacher face in implementing differentiated learning in teaching writing in a vocational high school?
3. How does the teacher overcome the challenges in implementing differentiated learning in teaching writing in a vocational high school?

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach because it aimed to examine a phenomenon in depth to gain understanding, develop theories, and describe the experience of the research participant (Creswell, 2015). In addition, the researcher selected a case study as a research design. The main purpose of a case study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of a particular case (Yin, 2018). This study was conducted in one of the vocational high schools in Karawang. The participant of this study was an English teacher who had experience in teaching English using differentiated learning in the class.

This research used three data collection techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of this study, including observation, interview, and documentation. First, the researcher conducted an observation class with an observation checklist and field notes as instruments. During the observation class, the researcher recorded the process of teaching and learning using photographs as evidence and videos to capture the important activities. A semi-structured interview was conducted post-observation to explore the experience, challenges, and solutions of the English teacher in implementing differentiated learning in teaching writing in the class. Then, the researcher collected the learning artifacts, such as participants' lesson plans and students' products.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze data from observation, interview, and documentation. Referring to the stages by Braun and Clarke (2006), which included data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting the findings. The researcher transcribed and reviewed interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents, then coded relevant segments related to the implementation, challenges, and solutions of differentiated instruction in teaching writing. Themes were constructed and refined to reflect meaningful patterns, and the results were presented with supporting excerpts from the data. To ensure research trustworthiness, credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability were maintained based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of a study conducted at a vocational high school in Karawang that implemented Kurikulum Merdeka (Emancipated Curriculum). The school has adopted a differentiated learning approach applied in the teaching and learning process to accommodate diverse students' learning styles. The observed class, X TO I, consisting of 35 male students. The classroom represents diverse learning characteristics, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic preferences. An English teacher as the participant in this study is known for his adaptive and technology-based teaching approach. In this study, the teacher was utilizing PowerPoint, Youtube, and Mentimeter to enhance engagement and accommodate students' varied learning styles. The classroom diversity required the teacher to design learning activities that could address students' readiness levels and preferences effectively.

Before the study was conducted, English instruction in this class primarily relied on a teacher-centered approach, where all students received identical materials and assignments. However, since participating in the *Pendidikan Guru Penggerak* program, the teacher has begun to implement differentiated instruction more actively, especially in writing lessons. The classroom atmosphere was supportive, and students were encouraged to collaborate and participate actively in writing activities. Based on the result in this study, although the physical classroom was limited in space for movement, the teacher managed it efficiently by adjusting seating arrangements and organizing group activities in a way that maintained a comfortable and effective learning process.

During the research, the teaching and learning activities focused on writing narrative texts. The observation was conducted within two meetings, each lasting 3x45, minutes. The lessons were designed to apply the four key elements of differentiation, including content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). During classroom observation, the researcher noted and checked observation checklist on how the teacher adjusted materials, instructional methods, and classroom management to meet diverse student needs. After the observation sessions, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher during his available time in a relaxed and semi-formal setting. This interview aims to explore the teacher's experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing differentiated learning in writing class. The interview guide used is adapted from the research by Kotay-Nagy (2023) as shown in the Table 1. In addition, the documentation, including participant's lesson plan and student's writing products, were collected to support data from interview and observation. The findings are presented regarding how differentiated learning is implemented in teaching writing, what challenges the teacher faces, and how the challenges are solved. It is also structured using Tomlinson & Imbeau's four elements of differentiation: content, process, product, and learning environment.

Table 1. The teacher's interview guideline

Category	Question
General Question	• How long have you been teaching English? • Since when have you applied differentiated learning? • What do you know about differentiated learning? • How do you understand differentiated learning in writing instruction?
Content Differentiation	• How do you identify students' needs, interests, and readiness? • How do you adapt topics or materials to meet students' needs? • What challenges do you face in lesson planning for differentiation? • How do you do to overcome the challenges when designing the lesson plan?
Process Differentiation	• How do you vary teaching activities in writing instruction process? • When challenges arise when differentiating the writing process? • What is the solution to overcome these difficulties? • How do you determine students' final products based on differentiation?
Product Differentiation	• How do you evaluate writing assignment results that are in different forms? • What challenges do you face when evaluating varied products? • Do you have a solution for these difficulties? • How do you organize classroom space for differentiating learning?
Learning Environment	• What challenges do you face in maintaining classroom conduciveness? • How do you create a comfortable and engaging classroom atmosphere?

The Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Teaching Writing

The results show that the participant as the teacher successfully implemented differentiated learning in all four aspects, including content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Based on the observation results, the teacher implemented differentiated learning from the content aspect by conducting diagnostic tests, both academic (using stimulus questions) and non-academic (using the Mentimeter application), to understand students' readiness, interests, and learning styles. It is also shown in Excerpt 1 below.

“To understand the diverse learning needs and interests of students, I conduct diagnostic tests from both academic and non-academic aspects... Overall, to be able to determine appropriate treatment according to each of their needs.”

(Excerpt 1, P, Interview)

The teacher then adjusted narrative text teaching materials to students' comprehension level using a combination of media. It is evidenced by the teacher's lesson plan. This approach shows that the teacher modified content to meet students' learning needs, which aligns with Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2023) view that content can be modified based on characteristics of students. The teacher also provided materials that could be accessed in different ways according to students' abilities, as Hamdache (2022) suggests that the material should offer different difficulty levels of perspectives. Research by Heningjakti (2023) also reinforces

that content differentiation helps improve student engagement because students feel the material suits their interests and abilities.

Additionally, in the process aspect, it was found that materials were delivered in various ways to meet students' learning styles. Observation results showed the teacher used three learning modalities in one session. It can be seen in Figures 1, 2, and 3.



Figure 1. The teacher using PPT



Figure 2. The teacher using YouTube video



Figure 3. The teacher comparing text structure to a body analogy

For visual and audio-visual students, the teacher used PPT and YouTube videos to present narrative text concepts and examples. For auditory students, the teacher used interactive lectures. For a kinesthetic student, the teacher asked this student to demonstrate text structure using a body analogy. This supports Rafi and Pourdana (2023) view that varied delivery methods are important for understanding how students absorb information in learning English.

Before writing activities began, flexible groups were formed based on students' interest in themes (social life, school life, and youth generation), which formed three groups. At each stage of the writing process, the teacher also implemented differentiation principles based on work methods adjusted to students' readiness levels and learning style preferences, as reflected in the participant's statement in Excerpt 2.

“In brainstorming, it's not rigid, adapting to their interests... continuing to making drafts...I don't force everyone to use digital”

(Excerpt 2, P, Interview)

It reflects the application of interest principle that increases learning motivation and strengthens collaboration (Cheung, 2018; Sutarto et al., 2020; Laksono et al., 2024). The teacher gave students freedom to choose media and ways of writing according to their respective learning profiles, such as using Canva, typing in GDocs, or handwriting, which shows recognition of differences in how students process information (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Harapan et al., 2024). The teacher was also active in monitoring and assisting according to group needs, showing scaffolding practices aligned with zone of proximal development theory (Ikawati, 2020). The writing review was given by the teacher with direct feedback and notes for errors in writing, as suggested by Walling (2006) and Irons et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of adjusting feedback in the revision process.

In deciding the product of writing, the teacher also applied differentiation, which met students' learning styles, as stated in Excerpt 3.

" The product means in a form that they can and like to create. So, the formats are different."

(Excerpt 3, P, Interview)

The students' products in documentation collected data showed various product variations, including a short film, handwritten narrative text, and typed narrative text in PDF format. This approach aligns with the principle that products should be adjusted to students' strengths and preferences without lowering learning standards (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2022; Halim, 2022; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). The implementation of product differentiation was also reflected in providing different time limits for completing assignments, as indicated in the observation checklist that "The teacher provides different time limits for completing writing assignments" with the result "Yes", reflecting flexible practices according to student needs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Observation results showed that the participant adjusted submission deadlines based on the complexity level of products chosen by each group. It can be seen from the field notes observation on the second day below.

The teacher informed students that the assignment submission deadline was differentiated according to the final product. Since group one's final product was a short movie, the teacher gave a longer deadline that this group could manage, which was one week.

(Field Notes Observation, 2nd Meeting).

The participant implemented a flexible assessment system by providing additional appreciation for students who demonstrated creativity and extra effort in working on their products. This approach reflects differentiation in evaluation that not only focuses on achieving minimum standards but also appreciates variations in quality and effort shown by students according to their abilities and motivation. It highlights that a differentiated assessment approach does not only focus on final results but also considers learning processes and motivation (Chung et al., 2021; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Learning environment aspect in differentiated learning was also found in interview data, it is stated by the teacher in Excerpt 4.

"I adjust the seating arrangement based on students' needs... I try to create a learning atmosphere that is homey, that feels like at home, comfortable, and relaxed."

(Excerpt 4, P, Interview)

Based on Excerpt 4, in creating a conducive learning environment, the physical classroom arrangement and the learning atmosphere were observed in the teacher's class. The physical and psychological classroom environment should support student needs so they feel safe and engaged (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Cochran, 2021). Research by Nayman (2022) confirms that teachers who successfully create democratic and adaptive classroom climates tend to be able to implement differentiation optimally.

The Challenges in Designing Content

The teacher felt difficulty in preparing the content for teaching writing using differentiated learning, as revealed in Excerpt 5.

"The challenge is... the time I need to prepare is longer, more extended. Then finding content that suits their characteristics in class, then integrating it to students by collaborating various content so that it can be absorbed maximally by them. The difficulty challenge is there."

(Excerpt 5, P, Interview)

The interview data above indicates that the workload increased because it required more time for preparation. This result supports the principle that differentiated content requires adapting materials to match students' readiness, interests, and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2014; Hamdache, 2022). This challenge was also found by Laksono et al. (2024), who explained that teachers struggle to modify materials due to time constraints and the demanding nature of lesson planning. Second, the planning became more complex as the participant had challenges collaborating with various content in one session. Teachers experienced difficulties in aligning content with students' diverse backgrounds, preferences, and abilities (Mairoza, 2024).

The Challenge in Differentiating Process

Instructional complexity was the challenge that teacher faced in differentiating the writing learning process, as demonstrated in Excerpt 6.

"Because each group conducts their writing process differently, and it's certain that each group of students needs different assistance, I must be able to monitor all of them simultaneously. In my opinion, this is quite overwhelming."

(Excerpt 6, P, Interview)

It shows that process differentiation adds complexity to classroom management, where the participant needs to divide attention and provide specific assistance

according to each group's needs simultaneously, while the writing process is taking place. Observation results showed that the teacher monitored different process groups simultaneously, providing scaffolding for each group's writing tasks using different methods. Differentiated process requires proficient management skills (Tomlinson, 2014; Suryati et al., 2023). A study conducted by Ziernwald et al. (2022) shows that differentiated learning is implemented for mixed-ability classrooms. This indicates that there is a possibility of challenges emerging for teachers in guiding diverse student writing activities.

The Challenge in Differentiating Products

The teacher revealed experiencing a challenge in evaluating differentiated writing products. This is shown in Excerpt 7.

"...how can I give grades to each of their works fairly, not distracted by the form they create..."

(Excerpt 7, P, Interview)

This statement illustrates the teacher experience difficulties in maintaining assessment fairness due to differences in student writing product formats, from regular text to short films. This shows a dilemma in determining fair evaluation indicators for all students, whereas in differentiation, products should allow students to demonstrate understanding in their own ways (Tomlinson, 2014; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). As stated in research conducted by Rifqi (2023), where teachers need to establish product assessments that align with their assessment types.

The Challenge in Adapting Learning Environment

The class being observed had 35 students in a limited spatial classroom. This became a challenge for the participant, as stated in Excerpt 8.

"...there is one room designated for theory classes that is different from classrooms in general, this one is smaller... so it's quite limited for seating arrangements and movement is also limited."

(Excerpt 8, P, Interview)

Excerpt 8 shows that the narrow classroom space hindered flexibility in seating arrangements and limited the teacher's mobility in providing guidance. This challenge is clarified by Bhandari et al.'s (2025) research, which highlights that inadequate class size can limit teachers' ability to implement effective differentiation. In differentiation theory, flexible classroom arrangement and conducive atmosphere are important parts of environment differentiation (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Cochran, 2021).

Solutions to the Challenges of Designing Differentiated Content

The teacher had strategies in overcoming challenges such as increased workload and planning complexity. It is explained in Excerpt 9.

“I have enriched various kinds of learning materials... when there is free time...during teacher learning group sharing, we gained many things, much knowledge related to maximizing the teaching and learning process so that all students are individually served very well”

(Excerpt 9, P, Interview)

The teacher used strategic time management by preparing various learning materials during free time and utilized collaborative planning through teacher learning groups to overcome the challenges in this section. By utilizing free time to prepare various materials that align with student characteristics, this strategy aligns with Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2023) perspective that content differentiation requires flexibility and material readiness according to students' readiness and interests. Research by Suryati et al. (2023) shows that teachers struggle without colleague support, making content design difficult. Teacher learning groups provide professional collaboration that improves media selection and integration. This finding supports Laksono et al. (2024), who stressed that adequate planning time and teacher cooperation are essential for effective *Kurikulum Merdeka* implementation.

Solution to the Challenge of Differentiating Writing Process

To address the complexity of managing different writing process groups, the teacher developed a more structured monitoring system. It is shown in Excerpt 10.

“I create a more structured monitoring system. For example, I instruct from the beginning so they know what to do. If there are difficulties, they may ask friends or directly ask me, they may approach my desk. For those who are shy and passive, I go around, I ask, provide guidance directly, give positive reinforcements - positive reinforcement to increase their interest and confidence to learn more actively.”

(Excerpt 10, P, Interview)

This can be seen in the observation results, which show that the participant instructed students to ask directly and conducted monitoring on each group to provide necessary assistance. This practice reflects the teacher's role as an active facilitator, as expressed by Tomlinson and Imbeau (2023), and is supported by Ziernwald et al.'s (2022) study, which emphasizes that successful differentiation of the writing process depends on clear instruction and individual support. Thus, this monitoring solution becomes a way to reduce teachers' burden in handling diverse learning groups while increasing student participation.

Solution to the Challenge of Assessing Diverse Student Products

To overcome the challenges in evaluating different products, the teacher implemented a transparent assessment system in class. This can be seen from Excerpt 11.

"I convey to them that the assessment will include aspects of grammar, mechanics, organization, and others. I also emphasize that if there are additional efforts, I will wisely give more appreciation."

(Excerpt 11, P, Interview)

This strategy was implemented in the class being observed by the researcher, where the teacher informed group representatives about evaluating their product with ordinary writing aspects and giving additional scores for products requiring extra effort and creativity. This strategy aligns with the principles of product differentiation (Tomlinson, 2023) and is supported by Rifqi's (2023) study, which emphasize the importance of assessment rubrics that are flexible yet fair toward the diversity of student work. Through open communication from the start, teachers can create a sense of fairness in assessment despite students producing different products, such as texts, posters, or short films.

Solution to the Challenge of Adapting Learning Environment

According to interview results, in overcoming physical classroom space limitations, the participant implemented optimal space utilization strategies. This was also evidenced from the observation checklist in the category "The class has space for writing groups activities" with the result "Yes" and this section has an additional note that despite the quite narrow classroom space, the participant could still monitor each group. It proves the success of classroom space adaptation. This demonstrates the implementation of environment differentiation principles that require flexibility in spatial layout (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023; Hartikainen et al., 2023). This finding confirms the research conducted by Bhandari et al. (2025), which stated that class size often becomes a barrier to differentiation but can be overcome through adaptive teacher strategies. With effective space arrangement, teachers can still conduct active monitoring of each group despite the relatively narrow classroom space.

4. Conclusion

This research reveals that differentiated learning can be successfully implemented in English teaching writing despite various challenges. The teacher effectively applied differentiation across content, process, product, and learning environment aspects by conducting diagnostic assessments, using multiple learning modalities, providing flexible product choices, and creating adaptive classroom arrangements. While implementation faced obstacles including increased preparation time, complex group monitoring, assessment fairness concerns, and physical space constraints, these challenges were overcome through strategic time management, structured monitoring systems, transparent assessment criteria, and optimal space utilization. The findings confirm that with proper planning and adaptive strategies, teachers can implement differentiated learning optimally even under constraining classroom conditions, especially supporting diverse student needs in writing instruction. Future researcher is recommended to use mixed-method approaches to measure both implementation processes and student learning outcomes

quantitatively. In addition, research focusing on students' perspectives and experiences with differentiated learning would also provide valuable insights into its effectiveness from the learner's viewpoint.

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