

## TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL IN PALEMBANG

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges an English teacher faces in implementing differentiated learning within the framework of the Emancipated Curriculum in a junior high school in Palembang. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were gathered through interview and observation. The findings identified five main problems: difficulties in assessing students; limited planning time; large class sizes; technical disruptions during lessons; and the need for ongoing professional development. Although the teacher demonstrated a strong understanding of differentiation, enhanced through the Teacher Mover program, implementation remained difficult without sufficient support. This study highlights the importance of institutional support, reliable infrastructure, and effective assessment tools to ensure meaningful and sustainable application of differentiated learning. The findings suggest that while teacher commitment and training are crucial, systemic support plays an equally vital role. Further research involving more participants or schools is recommended to deepen understanding and broaden perspectives on differentiated learning practices in Indonesian EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** *Differentiated Learning, EFL Classroom, Emancipated Curriculum, Teacher Challenges.*

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### INTRODUCTION

As education systems continue to evolve, teachers are increasingly confronted with the reality that no students learn in exactly the same way. Within a single classroom, learners bring a wide range of backgrounds, abilities, interests, and motivations that shape how they engage with instruction and process information (Felder & Brent, 2005; Fleming & Bonwell, 2019). While some students may excel through visuals or hands-on tasks, others may find greater success through discussion, reading, or writing (Tomlinson, 2014). These differences go beyond academic ability and extend to emotional readiness, cultural identity, and personal learning preferences (Tomlinson, 2014). For teachers, this means that one-size-fits-all approaches often fall short of meeting the needs of every student. Teachers must

therefore explore approaches that allow greater flexibility in planning and delivering instruction.

Differentiated learning has emerged as one of the most widely recommended strategies for addressing student diversity in the classroom. This approach encourages teachers to modify instructional content, learning processes, and assessment products based on individual students' readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests (Tomlinson, 2014). Instead of expecting all students to learn the same material in the same way, differentiation invites teachers to provide multiple pathways to understanding, allowing each student to access learning in a manner that is both challenging and achievable. This flexibility is not about lowering standards, rather, it ensures that all students, regardless of background or ability, can meaningfully engage with the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2014). When used effectively, differentiated learning has been linked to higher student engagement, greater motivation, and improved academic outcomes (Chien, 2012; Zulaikha & Laeli, 2023). These positive outcomes demonstrate that differentiated learning is not merely a theoretical ideal but a practical tool that supports both equity and academic growth in diverse educational settings.

In Indonesia, differentiated learning has become an important part of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Emancipated Curriculum), a national initiative aimed at making education more inclusive and flexible. This curriculum gives schools more autonomy to design learning programs and encourages teachers to tailor both content and instructional methods according to students' varying needs and abilities (KEMENDIKDASMEN, 2022). Such flexibility is especially crucial in a country as culturally and geographically diverse as Indonesia, with over 1,300 ethnic groups and wide disparities in school infrastructure, language backgrounds, and levels of student readiness (Indonesia.go.id, 2017). Differentiated learning is not merely an add-on; it is positioned as a central strategy in everyday teaching practice. By allowing teachers to modify instruction, the curriculum seeks to make learning more meaningful, equitable, and accessible to all students. Moreover, this approach not only supports academic differentiation but also promotes holistic development, especially in language learning contexts. Teaching English within the Kurikulum Merdeka, for instance, provides young learners with broader opportunities to build a range of competencies, academic, personal, and social by connecting language instruction with real-life skills and experiences (Falah et al., 2024). In this way, the Indonesian government demonstrates its commitment to addressing classroom diversity by placing differentiated learning at the core of national educational reform.

To help implement the Emancipated Curriculum more effectively, the Ministry of Education launched *Sekolah Penggerak* (School Mover) and *Guru Penggerak* (Teacher Mover). School Movers are selected schools tasked with leading educational transformation by applying innovative strategies like differentiated learning. These schools are expected to serve as models of best practices, promoting a student-centred learning culture and effective use of resources and technology (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, n.d.). Supporting these schools are Teacher Movers who have completed specialized training to lead change in their classrooms and school

communities. Their training includes modules on how to differentiate learning based on readiness, interest, and learning profile, preparing them to meet students' individual learning needs more thoughtfully. These initiatives show that the government not only supports the idea of differentiation in theory but is also working to build the capacity of schools and teachers to carry it out. By placing trained and reflective teachers at the centre of curriculum implementation, these programs aim to turn educational reform into meaningful classroom practice.

When implemented effectively, differentiated learning brings meaningful benefits for both students and teachers. For students, instruction that matches their individual readiness, interests, and learning styles helps increase engagement, boost motivation, and improve academic outcomes (Chien, 2012; Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023; Zulaikha & Laeli, 2023). Instead of feeling left behind or bored, students are more likely to participate when lessons connect with their personal learning needs. For teachers, differentiation opens up opportunities to connect more personally with students and to track their progress in a way that feels more authentic and rewarding (Triyanti et al., 2024). Teachers can also design more creative and flexible lessons, which not only benefit students but also increase professional satisfaction. Overall, differentiation creates a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment where all students feel seen, valued, and empowered to learn at their own pace.

Despite its potential, the implementation of differentiated learning is often met with significant challenges, especially in diverse and resource-limited classroom settings. Teachers frequently report struggling with limited time for lesson preparation, which is often filled with additional administrative duties and non-instructional responsibilities (Ahmed, 2022; Anggraeni & Yusviranty, 2024). Designing materials and planning lessons that address students' varied readiness levels, interests, and learning styles requires considerable effort and mental load, something that can become overwhelming without adequate support. In addition, large class sizes often make it difficult to give individual attention, and the lack of infrastructure or teaching aids further complicates instructional delivery (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Sofiana et al., 2024). These constraints highlight that the success of differentiated learning depends not only on teacher commitment but also on systemic support, adequate resources, and time allocation that allow teachers to implement the approach meaningfully and sustainably.

In Indonesia, differentiated learning has become a central feature of the Emancipated Curriculum. This policy was introduced to respond to the country's vast educational diversity, ranging from cultural and linguistic differences to variations in school resources and student backgrounds (Direktorat Sekolah Dasar, n.d.). The curriculum provides greater flexibility for teachers and schools to design instruction that aligns with student needs. Teachers are encouraged to modify content, learning processes, and assessments based on their students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, principles that mirror the core ideas of differentiated learning (KEMENDIKDASMEN, 2022). The Emancipated Curriculum not only gives teachers autonomy to adapt instruction but also institutionalizes inclusive and student-centered practices through policies such as School Mover and Teacher Mover. These programs aim to cultivate teacher leadership and innovation,

especially in the application of strategies like differentiated learning. The Emancipated Curriculum establishes the foundation for more fair and responsive education throughout Indonesia's heterogeneous educational landscape by incorporating differentiation into policy.

A growing body of research has examined the application of differentiated learning across various levels of education in Indonesia, reflecting increasing attention to the country's rich diversity in student backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. Many of these studies have focused on early childhood and elementary education, where differentiated learning is often introduced as a foundation for inclusive learning. For example, Nafisa and Fitri (2023) explored how the Emancipated Curriculum supports differentiated learning in early childhood institutions, while Setyaningrum et al. (2023) investigated its implementation in elementary classrooms. These studies consistently report both the advantages and persistent challenges of differentiation, including teachers' limited capacity to personalize instruction, a lack of adequate resources, and uneven implementation across school contexts. Similar findings are echoed in studies at the senior high school and university levels. Researchers such as Maulana and Oktavia (2023) and Rahmani and Riyanti (2022) confirm that differentiated strategies can enhance student engagement and academic outcomes in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Yet, while this growing body of literature strengthens the evidence base for differentiation's potential benefits, it has not sufficiently addressed how differentiation functions or struggles to function in junior high school classes, especially under the Emancipated Curriculum, where such approaches are actively promoted.

Recognizing this gap, the present study seeks to investigate the concrete challenges faced by an English teacher in a junior high school located in Palembang, one of Indonesia's diverse urban centres. This school has been designated as a Sekolah Penggerak (School Mover), a flagship initiative under the Emancipated Curriculum aimed at promoting innovative, student-centred practices like differentiated learning. While policy emphasizes the importance of differentiation as a means to accommodate student diversity, little empirical research has explored how teachers navigate the practical realities of applying these approaches in Indonesian junior high EFL classrooms. Teachers are not only responsible for addressing varied student readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, but they must also do so within the constraints of their school's time, resources, infrastructure, and administrative demands. This study aims to offer a closer look at how these multiple factors interact to either support or complicate the teacher's ability to implement differentiation in real-world classroom settings. In doing so, it highlights the gap that often exists between policy ambitions and on-the-ground practice.

This study carries both academic and practical value. On the academic side, it adds to the existing body of research on differentiated learning by focusing on a setting that is often overlooked, junior high school classrooms within Indonesia's Emancipated Curriculum. Instead of looking at how differentiation should work in theory, this research takes a closer look at how it actually plays out in the hands of a teacher. Specifically, it explores a key question: What problems did an English

teacher at SMP LTI IGM Palembang face when trying to implement differentiated learning? By focusing on the teacher's own experiences, the study brings a more grounded and relatable perspective to ongoing discussions about education reform. Practically, the findings offer useful takeaways for those designing school policies or training programs. Understanding the kinds of difficulties teachers face, whether it's not having enough time, dealing with limited classroom resources, or needing more support, can help shape better solutions.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the challenges teachers face in implementing differentiated learning in the context of junior high school English classrooms in Palembang. A qualitative case study design was selected to allow for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and teaching realities in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is suitable for uncovering practical challenges that arise from implementing educational reforms, such as the Emancipated Curriculum, in real classroom environments.

### **Setting and Participant**

The research was conducted at a private junior high school in Palembang that has been designated as a *School Mover* under the Ministry of Education's Emancipated Curriculum initiative. The school was selected because of its active role in promoting inclusive and innovative teaching strategies, including differentiated learning. The participant was an English teacher chosen through purposive sampling, specifically typical case sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Selection criteria included: a minimum of two years of teaching experience, formal teaching certification, and participation in professional training related to differentiated learning

### **Data Collection**

Two data collection techniques were employed: interview and observation. The interview was conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 30 minutes. It followed a semi-structured format. The session was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure transcription accuracy. Then, a non-participant classroom observation was also conducted. This technique provided contextual data to support and validate the interview findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The observation focused on three indicators: (1) the influence of class size on interaction and classroom management, (2) the use and availability of teaching aids or infrastructure, and (3) how the teacher identified and addressed individual student differences. The session was video recorded to ensure that the data could be reviewed in detail.

### **Trustworthiness**

To enhance data credibility, the methodological triangulation was used by combining interview and observation data. This helped confirm whether the teacher's reported challenges were observable in actual teaching practice (Bhandari, 2024). Member checking was also conducted, where the interview transcript was shared with the teacher to verify its accuracy, and the participant

approved the final version by signing a confirmation form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed thematically for identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview transcript was read multiple times to generate initial codes, which were then grouped into themes. Observation notes were used to enrich and validate these themes, offering behavioural evidence of the teacher's reported experiences. This combination of interview and observational data allowed the researcher to interpret the challenges of implementing differentiated learning with both depth and contextual awareness.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **Finding**

#### *Difficulty in Assessing Student Differences*

One of the main problems highlighted by the teacher was the difficulty of accurately assessing student differences. To determine readiness levels, the teacher used tools like pre-tests on Quizizz, questionnaires, and written questions. However, these tools did not always reflect students' actual abilities. As the teacher explained, "I usually assess them using instruments such as pre-tests, through questionnaires, written questions, or engaging educational apps like Quizizz. Although it's not always accurate, it gives us an idea of their prior knowledge." (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The teacher also pointed out inconsistencies in student performance, with some excelling in one topic and struggling in another:

Sometimes, they do well in one topic; they understand and can follow along easily. But with another topic, they struggle. And that's completely normal, considering they're still in middle school, still going through adolescence, with all the emotional ups and downs that come with it (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

This variability made it difficult to create fair and inclusive assessments. The teacher added, "Some students grasp things quickly, while others need more time and support. That's where the real problem lies. How do I ensure that the assessments are fair and inclusive, while still accommodating each student's unique learning style and pace?" (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

In classroom observation, this challenge was evident when certain students hesitated to participate or showed disengagement, especially at the beginning of the lesson. To address this, the teacher made an effort to check in with students emotionally:

I start by asking how they're feeling at the beginning of a lesson. I try to get a sense of their psychological or emotional state for that day. Even if a student is academically ready to learn, they may not be emotionally prepared (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

### *Time Constraints in Planning*

The second major issue was the amount of time required to plan differentiated learning. The teacher explained that lesson planning involved not only preparing materials but also anticipating different classroom scenarios. “The process takes time, and I also need to prepare a scenario in advance. Sometimes, I have to visualize how the lesson will flow. Ideally, I can’t treat every class the same.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

The problem was compounded by the teacher’s additional role as Deputy Head of Facilities and Infrastructure. “This is because there are other activities that are also my responsibility, especially as the Deputy Head of facilities and infrastructure, which of course requires extra time and energy.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

Despite the demands, the teacher emphasized that planning was part of their professional responsibility:

I don’t really see it as a burden, because it’s already part of a teacher’s main responsibilities... Honestly, if I manage my time well, everything is still manageable. So, I see it more as a challenge rather than a burden.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

### *Challenges of Large Class Sizes*

A third challenge involved managing a relatively large class. While class sizes at SMP LTI IGM typically ranged from 20 to 22 students, the teacher noted that one class had 25 students this year: “This year feels a bit different. With up to 25 students in one class, it’s definitely more crowded and livelier than usual.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Limited classroom space made movement during group work difficult:

Ideally, 20 students would be a more comfortable number, especially considering the size of the classrooms. [...] When the class gets too full, there’s less room to move around, which becomes an issue, especially when I want to do activities that require students to be more physically engaged (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

During observation, the classroom became cramped during group tasks. The teacher had to navigate carefully between students, and some groups, especially those seated in the back, were less focused and needed frequent reminders to stay on task.

### *Classroom Infrastructure Limitations*

Another issue reported was technical difficulties related to classroom infrastructure. While tools like projectors were available, they were not always in good working condition. The teacher shared:

“Ideally, the classroom should already be equipped with a projector that’s directly connected to a laptop, so I can just plug in and go. But in reality, I have to set up the projector manually because the cable is having issues.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

This problem disrupted the flow of learning:

“I already planned the lesson to be as effective as possible, but due to technical problems, time was wasted. It definitely affected the learning flow.” (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

The observation confirmed this, as the teacher spent several minutes setting up equipment before the lesson could begin. Although the delay was handled calmly, it reduced time for learning and affected the lesson's momentum.

#### *Professional Development*

Lastly, the teacher had received relevant and practical professional development through the Teacher Mover program. This training helped deepen their understanding of differentiated learning:

The training was highly effective; not only did I gain new knowledge, but I was also encouraged to engage in independent reading of the modules and take part in collaborative discussions with fellow future teacher leaders. I also received a great deal of insight from experienced instructors who specialize in this area (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Initially, the teacher saw differentiation only in terms of learning styles, but later realized it also involved readiness, interests, and learning profiles: "At first, I assumed differentiation was only about catering to students' learning styles, such as visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic. But it turns out, the learning environment itself is also part of differentiated learning." (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

The teacher concluded that providing students with space and choice made learning more meaningful: "From this experience, I become more aware of the importance of giving students space and choices, so that their learning process can be more meaningful and enjoyable according to their personal needs." (D. A, personal communication, March 5, 2025)

#### **Discussion**

This study set out to explore the challenges an English teacher faced in implementing differentiated learning under the Emancipated Curriculum in a junior high school setting in Palembang. Drawing from a combination of interviews and classroom observation, the findings revealed five central problems that reflect broader issues many teachers may experience in similar contexts: 1) difficulty in assessing student differences; 2) limited time for planning; 3) managing large class sizes; and 4) infrastructure limitations, and professional development. Taken together, these findings offer a practical lens through which to examine the realities of applying differentiated learning in Indonesian classrooms.

One of the most remarkable findings from the study is about the challenge of analysing students' unique differences. While the teacher utilized tools such as pre-tests administered through digital platforms like Quizizz, the teacher acknowledged that these methods were not always effective in capturing the full scope of students' readiness and learning needs. Academic readiness was often inconsistent across topics, making it hard to form stable student profiles. Moreover, emotional readiness emerged as an equally important, yet often overlooked, factor. The teacher made deliberate efforts to start lessons by checking in on students' emotional states, recognizing that no matter how well-prepared a lesson might be, emotional disengagement could hinder learning. This insight echoes Tomlinson's (2014) and Smets et al. (2022) argument that readiness is not solely academic; it encompasses psychological and motivational dimensions. Yet, most traditional

tools fall short in capturing these layers, leaving teachers to rely on instinct and classroom familiarity. Without reliable and nuanced instruments to assess students holistically, differentiated learning becomes more of an aspirational goal than a consistent practice.

Closely tied to the issue of assessment is the challenge of time. The teacher emphasized that planning for differentiated learning required not only preparing varied materials but also anticipating multiple learning paths for different student groups. This meant visualizing how the lesson would unfold depending on the readiness, interest, or learning style of each group, an inherently time-consuming process. The teacher's additional administrative duties, especially as Deputy Head of Facilities and Infrastructure, further limited the time available for lesson design. Despite their commitment to the teaching role, the workload placed significant demands on energy and focus. These align with earlier studies that highlight the time-intensive nature of differentiated planning (Ahmed, 2022; de Jager, 2017; Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023). Moreover, the findings reaffirm what Suwastini et al. (2021) and Anggraeni and Yusviranty (2024) suggest: teacher commitment alone is insufficient for sustainable implementation. Supportive structures, such as collaborative planning time, reduced non-instructional tasks, and access to planning resources, are critical in transforming differentiated learning from theory to daily practice.

Another layer of complexity arose from the realities of managing a large classroom. While 25 students may not sound overwhelming by general standards, the teacher observed that even this number posed significant challenges in a confined classroom space. During group activities, the teacher struggled to circulate effectively, and students at the back were visibly less engaged, a finding also supported by classroom observation. Physical constraints limited movement, and the teacher found it difficult to offer personalized support to all groups. Grouping students, a commonly recommended strategy for differentiation (Haelermans, 2022), was applied, but it could not fully mitigate the issue. These findings reflect prior research suggesting that large class sizes, especially in resource-constrained environments, often undermine the potential of differentiated learning (Ahmed, 2022; Sofiana et al., 2024; Suprayogi et al., 2017). When class sizes grow, the ability to provide responsive and personalized instruction diminishes, often forcing teachers to revert to one-size-fits-all methods that run counter to the core values of differentiation.

The limitations of classroom infrastructure further added to the challenge. Although tools like projectors were technically available, technical issues, such as faulty cables, frequently disrupted the teaching flow. These interruptions not only reduced instructional time but also affected student engagement and the overall classroom atmosphere. Observational data captured this disruption, as the teacher had to spend additional minutes troubleshooting equipment while students waited. The experience echoes what Magableh and Abdullah (2020) describe as infrastructural barriers that erode the effectiveness of instructional delivery. Similarly, Kótay-Nagy (2023) and Mardhatillah and Suharyadi (2023) have highlighted that when schools lack reliable teaching tools, teachers are not only limited in their ability to differentiate but also in their ability to innovate. Even if

the teacher was flexible and calm, the fact that technical problems were happening reminded everyone that good teaching plans need to be backed up by a working infrastructure if they are to have any real effect.

Interestingly, the study's findings around professional development offered a more optimistic counterpoint. Unlike much of the literature, which identifies lack of training as a major barrier to differentiation (Gaitas et al., 2017; Suwastini et al., 2021), the teacher in this study had participated in the Teacher Mover program, a government-sponsored initiative that included modules on differentiated learning. Through this program, the teacher gained a more holistic understanding of differentiation, extending beyond the surface level of learning styles to include readiness, interest, and learning profiles. The training was described as practical, reflective, and enriched with collaborative discussions and mentorship. This experience reflects the importance of well-structured professional development in translating theory into classroom practice (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023). However, the positive outcome here also underscores a broader systemic concern: if such training is not uniformly accessible, then the capacity to implement differentiated learning will remain uneven across schools. The success of one teacher, while encouraging, raises the question of equity, whether all teachers have the same opportunities to access high-quality training that empowers them to address diverse learner needs.

What emerges from this study is a nuanced understanding of the interplay between individual teacher effort and systemic support. The teacher demonstrated a deep awareness of student needs, a proactive attitude toward professional growth, and a commitment to inclusive teaching. Yet, these personal strengths were constantly challenged by institutional limitations, from time constraints and classroom technical issues, and the availability of support structures. The findings affirm that successful differentiation is not simply a matter of teacher competence, but also of institutional readiness. It requires alignment between policy and practice, training and application, resources and expectations.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the challenges faced by an English teacher in implementing differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework in a junior high school in Palembang. The findings revealed five major problems: (1) difficulty in accurately assessing student differences, especially emotional and motivational readiness (2) limited time for lesson planning due to administrative responsibilities (3) managing large class sizes with constrained space (4) technical issues that disrupted learning flow and (5) the need for ongoing professional development. Despite these challenges, the teacher demonstrated a strong understanding of differentiated learning, supported by meaningful training through the Teacher Mover program.

The findings highlight that while professional competence and training are critical, successful implementation of differentiated learning also relies heavily on systemic and institutional conditions. Adequate infrastructure, collaborative planning time, reliable assessment tools, and manageable class sizes are all essential

to enable inclusive and student-centred teaching practices. Therefore, differentiated learning cannot rest solely on individual teacher effort; it requires a supportive school environment and policy-level backing to be sustainable and impactful.

### **Suggestion**

To address these issues, schools are encouraged to adopt more comprehensive assessment strategies that go beyond academic readiness and consider students' emotional and motivational needs. Allocating sufficient time for planning, reducing administrative burdens, and providing structured collaboration opportunities among teachers would support more effective lesson design. Improving classroom infrastructure and ensuring the availability of functional teaching tools can also enhance the delivery of differentiated learning. The professional development program in this study proved effective, indicating that similar training should be expanded to benefit more teachers. Policymakers should ensure that such systemic support is in place, so that differentiated learning becomes a practical, accessible approach for all educators.

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