

Navigating Challenges and Strategies: Malaysian ESL Secondary School Teachers in Differentiated Reading Instruction

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Abstract

This study examines differentiated instruction (DI) practices in Malaysian ESL secondary school reading classrooms, focusing on strategies and challenges. With the integration of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) into Malaysia's English curriculum and the adoption of mixed-ability classrooms under the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), differentiated instruction has become essential for addressing diverse student needs. The research draws on Tomlinson's DI framework, emphasizing content, process, and product differentiation tailored to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. A qualitative case study design explores how three ESL teachers in the Petaling Perdana district implement DI strategies, using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis reveals impending strategies such as collaborative learning, tiered assignments, and digital tools integration to enhance engagement and comprehension. However, potential significant challenges include time constraints, insufficient resources, and inadequate professional training pose threats to effective implementation. The findings aim to inform professional development initiatives, addressing the practical barriers to DI and fostering more inclusive and effective teaching practices. By addressing these challenges, the study contributes to enhancing English reading literacy in mixed-ability Malaysian ESL classrooms, aligning with national educational goals and global educational equity standards.

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Reading Instruction, Mixed-Ability Classrooms

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Introduction

The Malaysian English language curriculum, transformed with the full implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2021, aims to enhance students' English communication skills. The Ministry of Education has revamped the English program, emphasizing reading as a fundamental skill. Effective reading instruction is crucial for language acquisition, with approaches like top-down and bottom-up instruction highlighted (Ismail et al., 2022). Mixed-ability classrooms have been introduced under the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), fostering inclusivity in education, which aligns with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4. Therefore, differentiated instruction is essential for addressing the diverse proficiency levels in these classrooms, allowing teachers to meet varying student needs. Tomlinson's model includes three components: content, process, and product, adapting lessons to students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles, ensuring equitable learning opportunities (Tomlinson, 2001).

Malaysian students' reading literacy has declined since 2015, with PISA 2022 scores indicating a significant gap compared to OECD averages. A notable issue is the ineffective one-size-fits-all teaching method prevalent in classrooms. In mixed-ability settings, proficient students can become disengaged while struggling students may feel overwhelmed. Research suggests that differentiated instruction can meet the diverse needs of these learners (Ismail et al., 2022). Teachers have employed various strategies to address differences, such as tiered assignments and peer tutoring. However, significant challenges remain for effective implementation, including limited training and resources, time constraints, and the complexities of managing diverse instruction simultaneously.

The study aims to analyse differentiated instruction practices among Malaysian ESL secondary school teachers, specifically focusing on 1) types of tasks used in reading lessons considering content, process, and product, 2) implementation of differentiated strategies based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles and 3) challenges faced in accommodating varied reading abilities. The findings will enhance understanding of Malaysian ESL teachers' challenges and strategies in differentiated instruction, contributing to more equitable reading education. Identifying effective strategies offers insights for professional development and aligns with national educational goals. Limitations include a small sample size, potentially affecting the generalizability of findings and the risk of response bias during interviews. Observational limitations may also occur if participants are uncooperative. Additionally, context-specific findings may not apply universally across Malaysia.

Theoretical Background of the Study

This study is based on social constructivism theory, emphasizing collaborative learning and the role of teachers as facilitators. The theory intersects with Tomlinson's differentiated instruction model, focusing on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and tailoring instruction to meet students at their knowledge levels. Tomlinson's differentiated instruction model addresses diversity in mixed-ability classrooms through differentiation in content, process, and product. This study will analyze how teachers apply these components and explore strategies to accommodate students' readiness, interests, and profiles.

Overview of Differentiated Instruction Practices in ESL

Differentiated instruction, designed for mixed-ability classrooms, allows teachers to adjust their methods according to students' varying needs. Strategies include collaborative learning, tiered assignments, varied materials, and integrating digital technology (Alghonaim, 2020; Allison, 2022; Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020; Clark, 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Labordo, 2024). Research indicates that differentiated instruction can positively impact student proficiency levels (Smith et al., 2023; Sun, 2023; Tajik et al., 2024; White & Vibulphol, 2020).

Differentiated Instruction Practices in ESL Reading Classrooms

In ESL reading classrooms, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are employed (Amini et al., 2020). The bottom-up approach focuses on decoding linguistic units, while the top-down method utilizes prior knowledge and context to derive meaning from texts. Effective reading instruction requires systematic teaching of both approaches (Moats, 2020). However, studies often overlook student variances in reading abilities and the necessity for equal learning opportunities.

Differentiation of Content, Product, and Process

Teachers differentiate content by providing reading texts of varying difficulty levels, aiding engagement and understanding (Moats, 2020). For example, studies by Sun (2023) and Saleh (2021) show that allowing students to choose appropriate reading texts boosts confidence and participation. Magableh and Abdullah (2020) found increased engagement and improved reading performance when materials were differentiated. To differentiate the learning process, collaborative strategies, such as group discussions, are effective. Clark (2023) notes that grouping students with mixed proficiency fosters collaboration and support. Additionally, differing time allocations based on reading capabilities can enhance student opportunities to complete tasks (Ismail et al., 2022). Differentiating products involves varied demonstration tasks, such as using digital tools or creative assignments, which allow students to exhibit their understanding in various formats (Sun, 2023; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

Differentiation According to Students' Readiness, Interests, and Learning Profiles

Teachers differentiate reading tasks based on students' readiness by evaluating their proficiency through activities like read-aloud sessions (Clark, 2023). Identifying reading levels enables tailored task assignments. Addressing students' interests is crucial for motivation; studies show that providing varied genres increases engagement (Moats, 2020; Sun, 2023). Accommodating diverse interests keeps students willing to read instead of seeing it as a chore. Differentiating based on learning profiles caters to students' varied learning styles, such as using technology to enhance understanding (Smith et al., 2023). Studies indicate that integrating digital tools can improve student engagement and receptivity in reading activities (Mifsud, 2021).

Impacts of Differentiated Instruction on Reading Skills

Research shows that differentiated instruction positively impacts ESL reading skills. Labordo (2024) reported increased interest and critical thinking through collaborative learning environments. Similarly, Silva-Maceda and Camarillo-Salazar (2021) found experimental groups demonstrating improved reading comprehension performance compared to controls.

While these studies highlighted positive educational outcomes, they often occurred outside natural classroom settings, which may not fully represent actual educational complexities. Despite the benefits, numerous challenges hinder effective implementation, including limited knowledge and resources.

Challenges to Effective Differentiated Instruction Implementation

General Challenges in ESL Contexts

While many studies recognize the advantages of differentiated instruction, numerous implementation challenges persist. Significant challenges include teacher workload and time constraints (Akhmetova et al., 2023; Endeshaw, 2021; Karimi & Nazari, 2021). Akhmetova et al. noted that preparing differentiated lessons requires considerable time and effort, which can overwhelm teachers. Large classroom sizes exacerbate these challenges. Teachers struggle with classroom management and providing individualized support, making differentiation more challenging (Akhmetova et al., 2023; Endeshaw, 2023). Insufficient resources further complicate implementation (Hatmanto & Rahmawati, 2023). Educational facilities like reliable internet, photocopying services, and projectors are necessary for effective differentiated instruction, yet many teachers report a lack of funding for these essentials (Idrus et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers' knowledge gaps hinder effective differentiation. While some teachers have theoretical knowledge of differentiated instruction, they may lack practical experience or proper attitudes towards its implementation (Endeshaw, 2023). Students' diverse needs also present significant challenges. Catering to individual learning styles can complicate lesson delivery in mixed-ability classrooms (Hatmanto & Rahmawati, 2023). Non-cooperative students can diminish the effectiveness of differentiation strategies (Idrus et al., 2021).

Specific Challenges in Malaysia

Malaysian ESL teachers encounter similar challenges. Limited knowledge and training in differentiated instruction impede its effective implementation (Lavania & Nor, 2021). The introduction of the KSSM curriculum in 2018 did not provide adequate training for teachers on differentiated practices. As a result, many teachers revert to traditional, teacher-centered approaches amid increasing class sizes. Time constraints are prevalent in Malaysian classrooms, where teachers struggle to plan and execute differentiated lessons alongside heavy workloads (Ismail & Aziz, 2019; Lavania & Nor, 2021). Moreover, Malaysian classrooms are often overcrowded, which exacerbates the challenges of differentiation (Umar & Aziz, 2024). Further complicating matters, teachers may lack the understanding needed to identify students' diverse needs effectively (Khairina Ismail et al., 2022). Recent studies have indicated that curriculum-related issues, including textbook difficulty and insufficient support for differentiation, hinder effective instruction (Lavania & Nor, 2021; Umar & Aziz, 2024).

If these issues remain unaddressed, teachers may revert to traditional methods, undermining the goal of differentiated instruction in fostering student learning in mixed-ability environments. Overall, substantial challenges impede the effective implementation of differentiated instruction in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Addressing these obstacles is crucial for enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes.

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative case study design, focusing on three Malaysian ESL secondary school teachers with experience teaching mixed-proficiency students. According to Cresswell (2017), qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of human experiences, making it suitable for understanding differentiated instruction in ESL reading classrooms. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (e.g., lesson plans) will be used. Data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis to address the research questions. A case study approach is appropriate for investigating differentiated instruction practices, challenges, and strategies, as it allows in-depth examination of specific instances (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While prior studies largely used quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, this research fills a gap by providing deep qualitative insights into the unique individual challenges faced by teachers.

Sampling Procedure

The study will focus on three ESL teachers from secondary schools in the Petaling Perdana district, an urban area with diverse student demographics. Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who meet the following criteria: at least three years of ESL teaching experience, current experience teaching mixed-ability classrooms, and familiarity with differentiated instruction methods. This method ensures the inclusion of participants with rich, relevant insights (Cresswell, 2017).

The selection process involves consultation with the Petaling Perdana District Office for recommendations, followed by contact through school principals. Participation is voluntary, and informed consent will be obtained. Participants will be briefed on the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time.

Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods will be employed to enhance trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015):

Semi-Structured Interviews.

Interviews will explore teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction and their strategies for accommodating student diversity. Questions will be pre-approved by an expert and piloted with a non-participating teacher. Interviews will take place at participants' schools, with additional questions asked as needed.

Classroom Observations.

Observations will examine reading instruction practices in real-time. An observation checklist will systematically document strategies and challenges, providing corroborative data for interviews and documents.

Document Analysis.

Lesson plans and teacher reflections will be analysed to supplement interview and observation findings. These documents provide evidence of instructional strategies and challenges, enhancing data validity.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic analysis framework with following order; familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns and themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and interpreting and reporting findings. Atlas.ti software will aid in coding and organising data. Validity will be ensured through expert review and member checking. Themes will align with Tomlinson's differentiated instruction framework, addressing research questions on strategies and challenges.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical standards by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Participants will be fully informed about the research purpose and procedures, and their participation will be voluntary. Ethical approval from the university will be obtained, and informed consent will be secured from participants and their schools.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness will be ensured through triangulation by using multiple data sources (interviews, observations, documents), expert validation in reviewing interview questions, member checking by allowing participants to verify data accuracy and dependability in ensuring consistent analysis through independent review.

Expected Findings

Teachers are expected to use strategies such as collaborative learning, varied materials, and digital integration to address diverse student needs. Collaborative learning involves high-proficiency students assisting peers, fostering a supportive learning environment. Digital tools align with the Ministry of Education's Digital Education Policy. Anticipated challenges include time constraints, limited resources, and insufficient professional training. Teachers may struggle with preparing differentiated materials due to heavy workloads and lack of support.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies of Malaysian ESL teachers in implementing differentiated reading instruction. Findings will inform professional development programs and provide insights for other educators managing mixed-ability classrooms. By addressing current gaps, the research seeks to contribute to more effective teaching practices in Malaysian ESL contexts.

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