



EFL Students' Perceptions of Differentiated Learning in English Language Learning

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Abstract. Differentiated learning is an educational approach that seeks to accommodate the different needs of students by adapting teaching materials, methods, assessments, and learning environments to create personalized learning experiences. It aims to support all students in reaching their full potential by considering their unique learning styles, interests, and abilities. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), differentiated learning is essential due to the different levels of language proficiency among students. In Indonesia, the importance of differentiated learning was highlighted in the "Merdeka Curriculum" made by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. The new curriculum promotes a flexible and student-centered approach that allows teachers to adapt their instructional strategies to the different needs, interests, and abilities of students, thus fostering a more effective learning environment. This study aims to understand how students perceive the implementation of differentiated learning in their English classes under the Merdeka Curriculum framework. This study explores the perceptions of differentiated learning among 66 ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 14 Malang using a quantitative research design with a 19-statement questionnaire. The findings show that the implementation of differentiated methods, materials, and assessments is becoming an important aspect of the success of differentiated learning strategies in English language learning. Students learn more effectively when they are allowed to engage with the materials that suit their learning styles and interests. In addition, from the findings, the research indicates that differentiated activity and differentiated learning environments play an important role in enhancing students' comfort and engagement in the English learning process. Students' also enjoy learning when they are given the freedom to learn based on their interests. In conclusion, implementing differentiating content, process, product, and learning environments are effective and engaging learning strategies for students.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Differentiated Learning, Students' Perception.

1. Introduction

Differentiated learning is an instructional approach designed to accommodate the diverse needs of students by tailoring educational content, methods, assessments, and learning environments. Recognizing that each student possesses a unique set of learning preferences, interests, and abilities, differentiated learning creates a personalized experience aimed at fostering every student's potential. An expert in differentiated

teaching, Carol Ann Tomlinson (2010), explains, "Differentiation means tailoring instruction to meet individual needs. Whether teachers differentiate content, process, product, or learning environment, the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping makes it a successful approach to teaching". In the EFL classroom, where students often demonstrate a wide range of language skills, this approach is particularly relevant. Research has shown that differentiated learning can significantly increase student motivation and engagement by providing a more personalized and relevant learning experience (Gregory & Chapman, 2013).

In Indonesia, the implementation of differentiated learning has gained significantly more emphasis, especially with the introduction of the "Merdeka Curriculum" which was the latest curriculum developed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. This curriculum focuses on providing a flexible and student-centered approach to learning, which allows teachers to adapt teaching to the needs, interests, and abilities of diverse students, thus promoting a more effective educational experience. According to Suryani et al. (2022), the curriculum encourages teachers to be more responsive to individual student needs, allowing for greater flexibility in instructional strategies and assessment methods. A differentiated learning strategy is expected to fulfill and develop student's potential more deeply. Through differentiated learning, student's are allowed to learn in their way and style. Differentiated learning has become popular in the Indonesian education system, especially with the introduction of the "Merdeka Curriculum", which emphasizes creativity and individualized learning approaches.

Many researchers in Indonesia have researched learning differentiation in the learning process. According to Fatmawati et al (2023), "The implementation of differentiated learning in Indonesian language courses is aimed at realizing freedom of learning that will allow educators to adapt their teaching to the needs and potential of different students.". Another study by Maruf (2023) highlighted that "teachers' beliefs and attitudes play an important role in the successful implementation of differentiated teaching in the EFL context in Indonesia," which emphasizes the importance of supportive professional development and adaptable teaching strategies to facilitate different learning styles. The researcher's findings emphasize the importance of differentiated learning in creating a more effective educational environment in Indonesia's diverse classrooms.

This study aims to investigate EFL students' perceptions of differentiated learning in the context of the "Merdeka Curriculum," focusing on four critical aspects: content, process, product, and learning environment. While previous studies have generally explored the benefits and challenges of differentiated learning, this research uniquely examines EFL students' perceptions within the framework of the "Merdeka Curriculum," specifically analyzing how its components promote creativity and innovation. By examining differentiated learning through the lens of this new curriculum, the study seeks to offer culturally and contextually relevant insights to inform instructional strategies that are responsive to the diverse needs of Indonesian students. Through this exploration, this study aims to contribute valuable perspectives to the ongoing discussion on differentiated learning in Indonesia, address existing knowledge gaps and provide recommendations for the evolving educational landscape in Indonesia.

2. Review of Literature

Differentiated learning is increasingly recognized as an important component of effective teaching, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This approach, which adapts teaching to suit the diverse needs of learners, aims to enhance the educational experience by dealing with individual differences in terms of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Differentiated learning involves modifying four main elements: content, process, product, and learning environment. This literature review explores how these elements affect EFL students' perceptions, engagement, and outcomes, providing insights into the effectiveness and challenges of implementing differentiated teaching in EFL settings.

2.1 Differentiation Content in EFL

Content differentiation is important because it involves customizing what is taught and the materials used based on students' learning readiness and interests. In an EFL context, content differentiation can include providing texts of varying difficulty, combining multimedia resources, and allowing students to choose what topics they are interested in. According to Tomlinson (2010), content differentiation allows teachers to meet students where they are in their learning journey thus, making the learning process more accessible and engaging.

According to researchers, EFL students' perception of differentiated content is positive as it makes learning more approachable and relevant. A study by Evanda et al. (2023) found that identifying their interest and providing relevant topics could facilitate students' to be more creative and innovative. This shows that differentiation content has a good impact on student's. Similarly, Maulana & Oktavia (2023) reported that students strongly agree about differentiated content by giving them content that fits their interests and learning styles, makes them feel joyful, and makes it easier for them to understand the material that they are learning.

2.2 Process Differentiation in EFL

Process differentiation refers to the learning methods that are applied in the classroom, and the activities used to help students understand the material. In EFL classrooms, this can involve using varied instructional strategies such as collaborative learning, self-study, and interactive activities that suit different learning styles. According to Tomlinson (2010) he argues that "process differentiation provides multiple ways for students to engage with content, deepening their understanding and retention of the material." Implementing different learning processes can provide a good perception for them by providing learning activities that suit their interests.

Larysa and Alona (2020) found that improving course design, implementing differentiated lessons, and selecting appropriate teaching methods for students significantly can increase students' motivation for foreign language acquisition and enhance their learning outcomes. Similarly, Husein and Eid (2021) reported that Differentiated Instruction (DI) strategies were effective in improving students' EFL

reading comprehension skills. Their study also found that using a variety of materials that match the needs and abilities of different students significantly improved their proficiency in reading comprehension. This proves that differentiation or instruction activities provide positive results for students in terms of increased understanding and motivation to learn.

2.3 Product Differentiation in EFL

Product differentiation is important because it allows students to demonstrate their learning in different ways, such as through written assignments, oral presentations, or projects. This approach recognizes that students are capable and have diverse strengths and preferences for expressing their understanding of the material or learning that has been delivered. According to Tomlinson (2010) a product is not something that students create in a single lesson or through just one or two activities. Instead, it serves as a comprehensive culminating assessment that requires students to apply and build upon their knowledge and skills developed over an extended period of time.

Chien (2014) found that implementing different assignments shows that students held a positive attitude toward these tiered assignments and that they learned theories and instructional strategies not only from lectures and tasks in the university classes but also from completing different choices. Similarly, Melek & Enisa (2023) show the findings from their study related to the perceptions of students and their teachers about DI-based classes revealed that participants held positive viewpoints. Other perceptions shared by the students were that they felt more motivated and had much fun during the classes due to the effective use of DI strategies.

2.4 Affect and Learning Environment in EFL Classroom

Affect differentiation emphasizes establishing a supportive learning environment that addresses students' emotional and psychological needs. This aspect is especially important in EFL settings, where factors like language anxiety and confidence challenges can greatly influence students' willingness to engage and participate. According to Mick Zais (2011), the learning environment covers the level to which the school supports students' health and safety. This includes not only the academic environment, but also the physical facilities, mental and physical health services available, and the appropriateness and fairness of disciplinary procedures, all of which are supported by relevant research.

Even though, on Adewale et al (2021) study showed that the physical components of the classroom learning environment have no direct impact on the students' academic performance. However, Adewale recommended that visual learning aid should be maximized. This contradicts the results of Okudo (2014) who reported that the learning environment plays an important role. This suggests that the conduciveness of the learning environment has a significant impact on the level of language achievement of preschool children.

3. Method

To explore EFL students' perceptions of differentiated learning in English language teaching, the writer employed a quantitative research design using the survey method. In this study, the respondents consisted of 66 ninth-grade students from SMPN 14 Malang, all of which had participated in learning English using differentiated learning. The data collection was conducted using a questionnaire via Google Forms, The questionnaire employed a close-ended question that was adapted from Tomlinson's (2014). The adapted questionnaire assesses perceptions in the five main dimensions of differentiated learning, which are general perception, content, process, product, and learning environment. The scale uses a four-point Likert scale to measure respondents' attitudes. The scale included the following options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. This scale allows for a wide range of responses, allowing for a more detailed analysis of student perceptions. The data collected was analyzed using SPSS to identify trends and relationships between different dimensions of differentiated learning and student perceptions.

4. Result and Discussion

The questionnaire was organized into five categories: General Perception, content differentiation, process, product, and learning environment, and comprised 19 statements in total. For each statement, students were provided with four response options: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Each student selected the response that most accurately reflected their perception. The responses were scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 for strongly agree, 3 for agree, 2 for disagree, and 1 for strongly disagree. Once all responses were collected, the total score was calculated, followed by the computation of the mean score. This study also adapted the Degree of perception from Dwipayana (2013) to show the category from the total score and the mean score.

Table 1. Degree of Perception

Perception	Mean Range	Degree of Perception
Very Positive	3.26 – 4	4
Positive	2.51 – 3.25	3
Negative	1.76 – 2.50	2
Very Negative	1 – 1.75	1

From this table, the author can conclude the degree of perception based on the total score and the corresponding mean range. The table indicates that a mean score of 3.26 to 4 represents a "Very Positive" perception, 2.51 to 3.25 reflects a "Positive" perception, 1.76 to 2.50 indicates a "Negative" perception, and 1 to 1.75 corresponds to a "Very Negative" perception.

Table 2. Analysis General Perception

Number	Statements	Mean	Category
1.	I find learning English using differentiation enjoyable and easy.	3.56	Very Positive
2.	In my opinion, I prefer differentiated learning to learning English rather than the usual learning methods.	3.50	Very Positive
Total		3.53	Very Positive

Table 2 shows the findings of students' general perception of differentiated learning. Item 1 ("I find learning English using differentiated learning enjoyable and easy") has the highest mean score of 3.56, based on the degree perception it's categorized as very positive and indicate that students strongly agree that learning English through differentiated methods is enjoyable and easy to understand. Item 2 ("I prefer differentiated learning to traditional methods for learning English") follows closely with a mean score of 3.50, showing a very positive agreement toward preferring differentiated learning over usual learning approaches. The data indicate that students' are prefer using differentiated learning while learning English. With an overall mean score of 3.53, categorized as "Very Positive," it is clear that the majority of students strongly agree with the use of differentiated learning in their English classes. The findings demonstrate that applying differentiated learning, tailored to students' interests and learning styles, significantly enhances their learning experience and should be emphasized in English instruction.

Table 3. Analysis Differentiating Content

Number	Statements	Mean	Category
3.	I find the English learning materials challenging but still understandable.	3.25	Positive
4.	I feel that the learning materials given are varied and interesting.	3.59	Very Positive
5.	I have the opportunity to choose topics or materials that interest me.	3.22	Positive
Total		3.35	Very Positive

Table 3 shows the findings from differentiating content, showing that students generally have a very positive perception of the learning materials provided. Item 3 ("I find the English learning materials challenging but still understandable") with the mean score 3.25, based on the degree perception it categorized as positive. This reflects students' agreement that the material was challenging but still easy to understand. Item

4 ("I feel that the learning materials given are varied and interesting") received the highest mean score of 3.59, indicating that students strongly agree that the materials are diverse and engaging. Item 5 ("I have the opportunity to choose topics or materials that interest me") had a mean score of 3.22, indicating that students agree they are given the chance to select topics or materials that align with their interests. The overall mean score of **3.35**, categorized as "Very Positive," highlights that providing students with a variety of learning materials and allowing them to choose topics that interest them, positively influences their learning experience. These findings suggest that students not only value diverse and engaging material, but also have the benefit from being able to have autonomy in choosing learning material that suits their interests.

Table 4. Analysis Differentiating Process

Number	Statements	Mean	Category
6.	I feel happy when teachers use various teaching methods (such as discussion, using games, group work, individual work, and presentations) to help me learn English.	3.65	Very Positive
7.	I feel that the English learning activities provided by the teacher match my learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.)	3.33	Very Positive
8.	I am often given the opportunity to work in different groups	3.19	Positive
9.	I feel that my teacher always helps and supports me when you have difficulties in understanding the material	3.77	Very Positive
10.	I feel happy because the learning activities in class help me understand the material better	3.60	Very Positive
Total		3.51	Very Positive

Table 4 shows the findings from the differentiated process, showing that students generally have a very positive perception on the learning process. Item 6 ("I feel happy when teachers use various teaching methods (such as discussion, using games, group work, individual work, and presentations) to help me learn English.") showed an average score of 3.65. This shows that using various teaching methods such as discussion, using games, group work, individual work, and presentations help students' learn English. Item 7 ("I feel that the English learning activities provided by the teacher match my learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.)") showed an average score 3.33 and categorized as very positive. The data indicates that the learning activities that are provided by the teacher match their learning style. Item 8 ("I am often given the

opportunity to work in different groups”) the findings shows that the mean score 3.19 categorized as positive. It shows that students’ often work in different groups during the learning process. Item 9 (“I feel that my teacher always helps and supports me when you have difficulties in understanding the material”) the data shows the mean score is 3.77 and based on the degree perception, it’s categorized as a very positive. These findings indicate that students’ feel the teacher always helps and supports them while having difficulties in understanding the material. Item 10 (“I feel happy because the learning activities in class help me understand the material better”) the data shows the mean score is 3.60 and categorized as very positive. The data indicate that students are happy because the learning activities help them to understand English better. Based on the findings, the total mean score for the differentiated process shows **3.51** which is categorized as very positive. It can be concluded that differentiating activity in the process of learning English can positively impact students'.

Table 5. Analysis Differentiating Product

Number	Statements	Mean	Category
11.	I enjoy being given the option to demonstrate my understanding in various ways (such as through presentations, writing, projects, etc.)	3.39	Very Positive
12.	I am often given the opportunity to work on projects that reflect my interests and abilities	3.25	Positive
13.	I feel that the exams or assignments reflect my true English ability	3.25	Positive
14.	I feel that the assignments given by the teacher help me to better understand and apply the English material I have learned.	3.45	Very Positive
Total		3.34	Very Positive

Based on Table 5 on differentiating products shows that students generally have very positive perceptions regarding the ways they can demonstrate their understanding in English. Item number 11 ("I enjoy being given the option to demonstrate my understanding in various ways") has a mean of 3.39 ("Very Positive"). This indicates that students highly value the opportunity to express their understanding through diverse methods such as presentations, writing, and projects. They appreciate having a choice in how they demonstrate learning. Item 12 ("I am often given the opportunity to work on projects that reflect my interests and abilities") has a mean score 3.25 which is categorized positive. The mean score data indicates that students’ are often having the opportunity to work on projects based on their interest and abilities. Item 13 ("I feel that the exams or assignments reflect my true English ability") has a mean of 3.25 which is categorized positive. These findings show that the exams or assignments for students'

reflect their English ability. Item 14 ("I feel that the assignments given by the teacher help me to better understand and apply the English material I have learned") has the highest mean score of 3.45 which is categorized as very positive. This suggests that students strongly perceive the teacher's assignments as valuable in helping them understand and apply what they've learned in English. The total mean score for analyzing different products is **3.34** which is categorized as very positive. It shows that applying differentiated instruction or product learning can help them in demonstrating their learning in English.

Table 6. Analysis Differentiating Learning Environment

Number	Statements	Mean	Category
15.	I feel that the classroom environment supports me to learn comfortably and effectively.	3.40	Very Positive
16.	I find Teachers can create a safe learning environment that doesn't make you afraid to participate	3.59	Very Positive
17.	I feel that the classroom layout is well organized in such a way as to support interaction and discussion among students	3.30	Very Positive
18.	I feel that teachers respect individual differences in the classroom	3.72	Very Positive
19.	The classroom atmosphere helps you stay focused and motivated in learning English.	3.25	Positive
Total		3.45	Very Positive

Table 6 on the differentiated learning environment shows that students generally perceive their classroom environment very positively, with the majority of items scoring in the "Very Positive" category. Item 15 ("I feel that the classroom environment supports me to learn comfortably and effectively") with the score mean 3.40, which categorized as very positive indicates that students believe their classroom environment is conducive to comfortable and effective learning. Item 16 ("I find teachers can create a safe learning environment that doesn't make you afraid to participate") with a mean score of 3.59, indicating that students feel very positively about the safe and supportive atmosphere created by their teachers, which encourages participation. Item 17 ("I feel that the classroom layout is well organized to support interaction and discussion among students") has a mean of 3.30, reflecting a strong agreement that the physical arrangement of the classroom facilitates interaction and discussion, enhancing the learning process. Item 18 ("I feel that teachers respect individual differences in the classroom") received the highest mean score of 3.72, suggesting that students strongly

agree that their teachers acknowledge and respect their individual differences, which plays a significant role in their positive learning experience. Item 19 ("The classroom atmosphere helps you stay focused and motivated in learning English") received a slightly lower score of 3.25, categorized as "Positive." The total mean score for the table analyzing differentiated learning environments shows **3.45** which is categorized as very positive. While still indicating agreement, it suggests that the classroom atmosphere is supportive but could be further improved to enhance student focus and motivation in learning English. Overall, the findings suggest that students perceive their classroom environment as highly supportive of learning, with a particular emphasis on teacher respect for individual differences and the creation of a safe space for participation.

The study's results are presented clearly and precisely, aligning with the methodologies employed. All relevant data are systematically included, with text and figures consistently reflecting the findings. The mean scores across the four dimensions of differentiated learning—content, process, product, and learning environment—reveal that students generally have a very positive perception of differentiated teaching in their English classes. In the dimension of general perception, a mean score of **3.53** (categorized as very positive) indicates that students feel comfortable and enjoy learning English through differentiated methods. The findings also suggest that students prefer using differentiated approaches in their English studies, showing appreciation for this teaching model. For the *content* dimension, the mean score is **3.35** (very positive), indicating that students find the material engaging and appropriately challenging, showing comfort with differentiated content. This suggests a strong appreciation for the varied and interesting material, although students do encounter a suitable level of challenge within this approach.

In the *process* dimension, a mean score of **3.51** (very positive) highlights students' appreciation for the diverse teaching methods, expressing a sense of support from their teachers. This feedback underscores the effectiveness of differentiated processes in making students feel guided and accommodated in their learning journeys. The *product* dimension has a mean score of **3.34** (very positive), indicating that students enjoy the flexibility to express their understanding in various ways. They feel that the assignments enhance their comprehension and application of English material, suggesting that differentiated products help cater to individual strengths and learning preferences. Lastly, for the *learning environment*, the mean score is **3.45** (very positive). While some students feel the classroom setup could better support focus, the environment is generally considered supportive, respectful of individual differences, and conducive to active participation.

In summary, the data indicates that differentiated learning significantly enhances students' positive perceptions of English learning. The findings align with current research emphasizing the value of differentiated learning in fostering an engaging and supportive educational experience. These results suggest promising implications for future research and applications, such as further exploration into optimized classroom environments and continued professional development for teachers to effectively implement differentiation strategies.

4.1 Discussion

Based on these results and data analysis, it was found that students' are more prefer using differentiated learning while learning English. In addition, it was found that students enjoy the differentiation of content, this is in line with the findings of Maulana & Hesti (2023) who discovered differentiated content. It was found that providing differentiating content to the students' based on their learning styles and the topic that they are interested in, makes students feel happy and easier to comprehend English. Therefore, using differentiated material or content in English language learning can be effective for students'. But in addition to making differentiation of learning materials or content, Teachers must also be able to give students freedom in determining the learning topics that will be given. Thus, students can be more comfortable in learning because it is in line with their interests. It was also found that the learning process is one of the differentiated learning strategies that has an important role for students' in learning English. The result of this study aligns with Husein & Saleh (2021) who discovered about learning instruction that teaching by DI or Differentiated Instruction had a positive effect on reading comprehension skills. Students' feel happy when teachers use various teaching methods. However, what teachers also need to keep in mind is that teachers should be able to provide a lot of freedom for students in group or individual tasks, so that they will feel more comfortable in learning.

It was also found that the learning environment has an important role for students' in learning English. This result aligns with Maulana (2023) who discovered differentiated learning and it was found in this study that the learning environment is crucial for the success of differentiated learning in English class. Students' are also found happy while using differentiated products to demonstrate their understanding into a project. They feel happy that they can choose how they demonstrate the material with the project based on their interest and abilities. It's to support them to be more creative and make students think critically in making projects at the end of learning. Therefore, based on this result it shows that students' are more prefer using differentiated learning. It was found that they were happy when they were given different materials, activities, assignments, and learning environments. The findings align with Tomlinson (2014) theory of differentiated learning that students' are more enjoy and motivated learning the material with the topics or the activity that is relevant to their interests. It can be concluded that students' are enjoy and motivated to learn English by using differentiated learning in their English classroom.

5. Conclusion

The study found that students generally have a positive perception of differentiated learning strategies in English language learning. Across the five categories—general perception, content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, and learning environment—differentiated learning demonstrated a positive impact. Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers adopt more creative approaches in designing materials and content to sustain students' engagement and minimize

boredom. Additionally, to ensure fairness and transparency in assessments, teachers are encouraged to use clear rubrics for differentiated processes, allowing students to understand the criteria behind evaluations.

The study suggests that differentiated learning not only enhances students' academic performance but also boosts their motivation to learn English. Thus, continued implementation of this approach in Indonesian schools is beneficial to both students and teachers. For future research, this study can serve as a valuable reference for researchers exploring differentiated learning or related areas. It is recommended that future studies expand the scope and sample size, as this research focused on students from only two classes, but including feedback from all students. Including teachers' perspectives and the challenges they face in implementing differentiated learning strategies would provide a more comprehensive view of its impact.

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