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# Teachers Perceptions' of Differentiated Learning at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang in English Subject

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# Abstract

The study aims to explore the perceptions of English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang towards the implementation of differentiated learning in the context of Merdeka Curriculum. Using a qualitative approach, data was obtained through indepth interviews and classroom observations. The results show that although teachers understand the concept of differentiated learning, they face various challenges in its implementation. The main obstacles include limited time, human resources and high workloads, so differentiated learning is considered difficult to implement optimally in heterogeneous classes. Teachers also highlighted that differentiated learning, while ideal for supporting students' learning needs, is not always relevant for English subjects that require a communicative approach. This study provides new insights into the importance of tailoring learning strategies to practical needs in the class, as well as underscoring the need for institutional support to ensure more effective implementation.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning, Teachers' Perceptions, Kurikulum Merdeka, English Subject

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# **I INTRODUCTION**

The curriculum is a component of education that serves as a guide in implementing learning both in educational units and in classes. (Alawiyah, 2013). In order to achieve learning goals, education requires a system that is interconnected and well-implemented. The development of the curriculum that occurred in Indonesia, starting from the 1945 curriculum to the 2013 curriculum, is an effort to achieve national education goals until the 2013 curriculum was improved to the independent curriculum (Ansori et al., 2022). Curriculum innovation is a must that must be prepared by educational institutions to prepare for the demands and needs of society.

If compare to the previous curriculum, the 2013 (K13) it observe that teachers as the implementers. The implementers in question are teachers who are only tasked with implementing the curriculum that has been provided. As implementers, teachers can only receive various curriculum development programs. In the 2013 curriculum, teachers do not have the opportunity to determine the content of the curriculum that they want to implement or determine the curriculum target. The role of teachers is limited to implementing the curriculum that has been prepared. All curriculum content, including objectives, materials, strategies, media, learning resources, and evaluations, time, and all components have been determined by the curriculum developer.

Teachers only play a role as technical personnel who try to implement what is in the curriculum document (Alawiyah, 2013). They have different levels of readiness, interests, and learning styles according to Wulandari et al., (2024). For example, in secondary schools, which have implemented the Independent Curriculum, it is known that learning that takes into account the diversity of students is still very rarely realized in the learning process in their classes, including in English subjects, so that there is a lag in students who have minor abilities and the

potential of students' thinking patterns and creativity is hidden because they are limited by freedom to work. Apart from that, in schools there are still many teachers who are confused about how to implement differentiated learning (Halimah et al., 2023).

Differentiated learning is a teaching method that in its learning series pays attention to the needs of its students, emphasizing the student learning process in terms of learning readiness, learning profile, interests and skills (Aprima & Sari, 2022). So that students can learn according to their interests, talents, speed and abilities by experiencing a more personal, creative and relevant learning experience, so that students are more motivated in learning and we take that from the good side for student.

At SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang, the implementation of differentiated learning in English subjects is a challenge for the teachers. Students in vocational High Schools often have very diverse backgrounds and learning abilities, while the time and resources available to teachers are limited. This raises the question of whether differentiated learning can really be implemented effectively, or whether it becomes an additional burden for teachers in planning and implementing teaching.

This study is expected to provide a clearer picture of teachers' views on the impact of Differentiated Learning on teacher effectiveness, teachers' views on the problems faced. provide a picture of teachers' understanding of the context of the independent curriculum in implementing learning at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang. Based on the research background mentioned above, this study is limited to the analysis of the implementation of Differentiated Instruction at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang, by limiting the generalization of research findings to other schools that implement Differentiated Instruction as part of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, the focus of this study is specifically on the English subject.

This study aims to know the perceptions of English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang regarding the implementation of differentiated learning. Specifically based on explanation earlier, Based on the explanation provided earlier, the research formulated the following question "What are the perceptions of English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang towards the implementation of differentiated learning in *Kurikulum Merdeka*?"

# **II METHOD**

This research was conducted with descriptive qualitative research that aimed to gain understanding and insight into phenomena that described situations, such as motivation, interest, and actions related to the implementation carried out by teachers, namely differentiated learning through description.

This study aimed to understand teachers' perceptions, challenges, and behaviors, with a focus on their attitudes toward the implementation of integrated learning in teaching English at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang. This research was conducted at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang located at Jalan Pramuka No.1, Tanjungpinang Timur District, Tanjungpinang City, Riau Islands Province. This study instrument used three instrument; Observation, Interview, and Documentation.

The researcher then formulated questions to gather data about implementing differentiated learning specifically in content, process, products, learning environment, assessment, and grouping. The study explored the data analysis process for the study "Teachers' Perceptions of Differentiated Learning at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang". The data analysis was divided into three key components: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions/verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

# III RESULT

# 3.1 Observation

Observations were conducted on 26th November 2024 and 28th November 2024 in class 11 of SMK 2 Tanjungpinang. The researcher did observation in two meetings at different classes. Based on the observations, it can be seen as follows:

No.	Criteria	Valid	
		Yes	No
A. Content De	velopmentally Appropriate Practice		
1.	Does the teacher provide different reading materials based on students' readiness levels?		~
2.	Does the teacher use different strategies to teach the same content to students with different learning styles?		~
3.	Does the teacher use different multimedia resources for different groups based on students' learning profile?		~
<b>B. Process Deve</b>	elopmentally Appropriate Practice		
1.	Does the teacher using varied instructional methods to teach the same content to students with different learning styles?		~
2.	Does the teacher use different instructional to teach the same content to students with different interests?		~
3.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work in small group or pairs to support their learning?	>	
C. Product De	velopmentally Appropriate Practice		
1.	Does the teacher provide different options for students to demonstrate their understanding of		~

# Table 1 Indicator of Observation in First Class

	the content?				
2.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to create their own learning products based on their interests?		~		
D. Learnin	D. Learning Environment Developmentally Appropriate Practice				
1	Does the teacher create a classroom set up to accommodate students diversity?		~		
2.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work in different physical spaces ased on their learning needs?		~		
3.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work at their own pace?		~		

# **Table 2 Indicator of Observation in Second Class**

No.	Criteria	Valid				
		Yes	No			
A. Content	Developmentally Appropriate Practice					
1.	Does the teacher provide different reading materials based on students' readiness levels?		~			
2.	Does the teacher use different strategies to teach the same content to students with different learning styles?		~			
3.	Does the teacher use different multimedia resources for different groups based on students' learning profile?		~			
<b>B.</b> Process	B. Process Developmentally Appropriate Practice					
1.	Does the teacher using varied instructional methods to teach the same content to students with different learning styles?		~			

2.	Does the teacher use different instructional to teach the same content to students with different interests?		>
3.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work in small group or pairs to support their learning?	<	
C.Product Dev	velopmentally Appropriate Practice		
1.	Does the teacher provide different options for students to demonstrate their understanding of the content?		<ul> <li></li> </ul>
2.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to create their own learning products based on their interests?		>
	nvironment Developmentally Appropriate Pract	ice	
1	Does the teacher create a classroom set up to accommodate students diversity?		<b>&gt;</b>
2.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work in different physical spaces ased on their learning needs?		>
3.	Does the teacher provide opportunities for students to work at their own pace?		<b>&gt;</b>

# **3.2** The result of Observation in Classes

• Differentiation by Content

According to statements A1 to A3 the teachers does not consistently provide differentiated reading materials based on students' readiness levels. The materials used tend to be the same for all students regardless of their readiness levels.

• Differentiation by Process

According to statements B1 and B2, the teachers also does not use different teaching strategies to accommodate different learning styles and interests of students. This indicates that while there is potential to adapt teaching methods, this is not yet fully implemented in the classroom.

But at the statement B3 The teachers provides opportunities for students to work in small groups or pairs, which supports collaborative learning and fosters interaction between students of different abilities. This indicates that there is an effort to build a more inclusive learning environment, although this does not cover all aspects of differentiation.

• Differentiation by Product

According to statements C1 and C2, the teachers does not provide enough options for students to demonstrate their understanding in different ways, or to create learning products based on their interests. This may be one of the shortcomings in the implementation of differentiation, because students are not given the freedom to express their understanding through various forms that are more appropriate to their learning styles.

• Learning Environment Differentiation

According to satements D1 to D3, There is no strong evidence that teachers create learning environments that fully support student diversity, there is little physical space arrangement such as parallel or U-shaped seating, there is no opportunity to work at different speeds.

### **3.3 The Result of Interview**

The results of interviews with English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang on 26 & 28 November 2024 provided deeper insights into their views on the implementation of differentiated learning in the classroom. These interviews explored their experiences, challenges, and understanding of the importance of adjusting learning strategies based on the diverse needs of students. The interviews also revealed various challenges faced by teachers in implementing differentiated learning, such as limited time, resources, and differences in student abilities and interests that affected the effectiveness of learning.

Based on interview, it can be seen as follow :

# - What is your perception of the influence of the Kurikulum Merdeka on teaching practices in English subjects?

# **INFORMANT 1**

Actually, the Kurikulum Merdeka is good enough. It's just sometimes the implementation is less suitable for the classroom learning. the word "Merdeka" is a misconception. what is the meaning of "Merdeka"? actually the curriculum has been the same for a long time ago, they just changed the name, if in the class we have implemented what the curriculum is like, we already understand our students. In essence, the Kurikulum Merdeka is just a name, it has no influence on the English subject.

#### **INFORMANT 2**

The Kurikulum Merdeka gives us as teachers freedom, how we teach. As for the material, it still depends on the CP. Well, in the context of Independence, in my opinion, the teacher should determine what is needed in the classroom, even though the context is independent, but still in accordance with the CP, there are still rules that we must fulfill.

# - In your opinion, what is the concept of Differentiated Learning? INFORMANT 1

If we create differentiated learning in one class, I think it's just a fantasy (Hayalan). With only 2x45 minutes, we have to take attendance, we have gotten to know the students more, we have to talked, and so on, then we want to implement differentiation? Oh my, you're dreaming. We used that differentiated Learning from

long time ago, and in my opinion it more effective, and for the students their more comfortable, very much in line with their abilities and teachers are not stressed. If now in one class using differentiated learning It is very confusing for teachers. This student have different ability, this one have different to, it's struggle. That i said, it's just a dream, you are dreaming. So the teacher more like a robot.

#### **INFORMANT 2**

Good, the concept is good.

# - Have you/haven't used differentiated learning in class?

If so, how do you implement differentiated learning?

# If not, what causes you not to implement differentiated learning?

### **INFORMANT 1**

Yes, 2001 until now but kurikulum merdeka force us to use differentiated learning but the way of how we apply it. We used that differentiated Learning from long time ago in 2001,

#### **INFORMANT 2**

Already before, not completely yet, because there are obstacles as I explained earlier. Less effective and problem with time.

# - In your opinion, is differentiated learning effective to implement in class? If effective, why? If less effective, why?

# **INFORMANT 1**

If we just use one class and there is 3 levels of students it's not gonna be effective, it's none sense, it's not possible, we want to reach this one the other one we cannot handle, and so on. But if we use different class, it's good. It is not gonna be effective. Because it make a gap, "oh Ma'am more love smart students" Because the smart one will be proud of them self. So it's not effective at all.

#### **INFORMANT 2**

We can say it is effective if the classes are differentiated. it is not effective if teaching in the same class. I have to prepare different modules, we give different assignments. for basic and intermediate student we need easier assignments and explain the material for a longer time. while advanced ones are easy to digest.

# - What challenges or limitations do you face in implementing Differentiated Learning in English subjects?

# **INFORMANT 1**

The challenge, students will feel differentiated, if we do it ourselves we will be tired of making questions, making reading materials, making modules, it is the hardest thing, because from the module there are already reading materials, it is impossible when doing it in class we will say to the students "you should use this reading material" it is impossible, they will say "why is my reading material different". because these student have so many questions, how can we say to them "because you are not smart enough" it is impossible, they will be even sadder, the smart ones will be even prouder. who want to make 3 moduls? So if we use previous strategie it would possible and success, but if you use differentiated in one class, I just laugh. When they told us to use this Kurikulum Merdeka with differentiated learning, what merdeka is it? It makes student sad in class.

#### **INFORMANT 2**

Time, when we teach in class, if we apply differentiation is not enough. then the second, we must complete the facilities and infrastructure for basic students. we must provide teaching tools (alat peraga) that can attract their interest. the challenge is that we teachers must be more persistent in facing student diversity. there are many obstacles, first time, second teaching aids from teachers are lacking, for example each student must have different teaching aids.

# - What strategies do you use to overcome the challenges and limitations you mentioned earlier? (alternative strategies used if you have difficulty implementing differentiated learning)

# **INFORMANT 1**

If in class we do not use strategies, but we have known the smart and the not smart student, we do interviews at the beginning, we give questions to the less smart student. Then in writing, they will see the differentiation, we give writing assignments. Smart student will write well, for example we give text report assignments. But less smart student, they will write about what they see and tend to write less. The way I teach is the same, the text report is like this, this, this, this... for example this, this, we teach the same way, and from the assignments we know their differentiation, from their score.

# **INFORMANT 2**

If I don't use differentiation, I still group students into work teams, so I always combine advanced, intermediate, and basic students. What's the point? Advanced students will help intermediate and basic students, so they will collaborate and complete the tasks that I give.

# - Do you think this differentiated learning important for Vocational High School Students?

### **INFORMANT 1**

If vocational high school students, it doesn't matter! because they are already in accordance with their vocatio. I'm afraid if we differentiate later the less smart student will not be accepted in the internship (PKL).

### **INFORMANT 2**

Ya, there are students who like audio, there are those who like others. there are those who like to watch, there are those who like to listen, there are those who like to practice.

# - Have you ever participated in professional development activities or training related to Differentiated Learning? If so, what were they like, and how helpful were they?

# **INFORMANT 1**

Oh, my PMM is about differentiated learning. for example me, I use differentiated learning, there are seminars. and other teachers can use other methods, all teachers must have a platform, via email, via zoom too, there are also others. we learn it ourselves, if I choose differentiated learning. and I see it is not effective at all, it is only good at theory, but try to ask them to practice, they will definitely be confused.

## **INFORMANT 2**

If seminar no, but zoom yes, it's about differentiated learning. but more focused on students with disabilities, how do we deal with students with disabilities. but if special training for differentiated learning never.

From the interview we can admitted that English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang not only understood the concept of differentiated learning, but also recognized the importance of this approach in meeting the diverse learning needs of students. They realized that differentiated learning involved adapting methods, content, and evaluation based on students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. However, teachers also said that limited time in each learning session was a major obstacle. With a time allocation of 2x45 minutes per meeting, teachers found it difficult to effectively divide attention to groups of students with different levels of ability. Moreover, the had to also be used for routine activities such as attendance and building interaction with students. These obstacles often make the implementation of differentiated learning considered impractical, even though they fully understood how this concept can support the achievement of optimal learning outcomes.

Differentiated Instruction, English teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang had quite a long experienced with differentiated learning, which they had implemented long before the Merdeka Curriculum. They explained that in the past, this school used a

student grouping system based on the results of an initial test that measured their English ability. Students were grouped into three levels, namely basic, intermediate, and advanced. In each group, they received materials that had been adjusted to their respective ability levels. For example, students in the advanced class were given more challenging materials, while students in the basic class received more repetition to help them understand the material better.

Some of the main obstacles they highlighted were the limited classroom space and the significantly increasing number of students. Currently, grouping students into classes based on level was no longer possible due to limited facilities and the "moving class" learning system that was applied. Teachers had to teach in one heterogeneous class, consisting of students with very diverse levels of ability. In heterogeneous class conditions, teachers felt that implementing differentiated learning was very troublesome. With a teaching time of only 2x45 minutes, they had to do various routine activities such as attendance and building interactions with students. As a result, there was almost no time to implement differentiated learning strategies. One teacher even said that trying to manage a class with three levels of ability at one time is a "trick" or just a fantasy.

Challenges and Limitations

# 1. Students-related Challanges

Based on the results of interviews with English teachers, it is known that they at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang faced various obstacles in implementing Differentiated Learning in the classroom. These obstacles affected the learning process experienced by students. One of the main challenges was related to the condition of the students themselves. Teachers stated that although they had tried to adjust teaching methods and provide different assessments based on students' understanding of the material, many students have negative perceptions of English lessons. In addition, limitations in vocabulary and memorization skills, as well as low student interest and involvement, were factors that made it difficult to meet individual learning needs and create a learning atmosphere that can motivate them.

2. Teacher-related Challanges

English teachers reported that they faced significant challenges related to time constraints when trying to prepare a variety of techniques, methods, and materials that meet the diverse needs of their students. Their responsibilities in school were not limited to teaching English, as they also served as homeroom teachers and managed other tasks, making it difficult to fully implement Differentiated Learning. Teachers also experienced increased workloads due to the need to design diverse teaching approaches and create different types of assessments to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Aspect	Positive Perceptions	Negative Perceptions		
Teachers Understanding	Teachers understand	It is difficult to implement		
	that differentiated	because the variation in		
	learning can	student abilities in one		
	accommodate students'	class is too much.		
	needs.			
Benefits for Students	divide students into	Students at the "Basic"		
	groups to help each	level tend to fall behind in		

Let's look at the table that classifies this Positive V	S Negative perspective:
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	other	heterogeneous classes.		
Limited Time	This concept is ideal in theory and can improve learning outcomes if time is sufficient.			
Worked Load of Teachers	Potential to improve the	The workload increases		
keterbatasan waktu	quality of teaching if implemented properly.	because teachers have to prepare different		
		materials, methods, and assessments.		
SMK Context	Some teachers have	The increasing number of		
	divided classes based on	students and limited		
	students' previous	classroom space are the		
	ability levels.	main obstacles.		
Evaluation of Student	Teachers can more	Evaluation becomes		
Learning Outcomes	accurately assess	complicated because it		
	students' abilities at	must provide various		
	each level of	forms of assessment.		
	understanding.			

Student Engagement	Students	who	Some	students	are
	understand	more	confused	when	given
	quickly can help	other	different	material	s or
	students.		assignments.		

 Table 3 Positive Vs Negative Perceptions from Teachers at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang in English

 Subject

Based on the analysis of the positive vs negative table, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang faced major challenges. They understood the concept of DI and its benefits for adjusting learning to students' needs. However, in practice, DI is considered difficult to implement in heterogeneous classes due to time constraints, teacher workload, and the complexity of managing three levels of student ability simultaneously.

# **IV DISCUSSION**

The findings from the interviews show that English teachers at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang understand the concept of differentiated learning as a strategy to meet the needs of students with diverse backgrounds and abilities. They understand that this learning involves not only adjusting teaching strategies but also approaches to content, learning processes, and evaluation. We can measure the consistency of this understanding with the Differentiated Instruction (DI) theory pioneered by Carol Ann Tomlinson. According to (Tomlinson & Imbeau,

2023) differentiated learning aims to create learning experiences that are responsive to the needs of each student, thus providing them with opportunities to develop according to their individual potential.

Not only that, we can see further, Hall, Strangman, and Meyer (2003) stated that differentiated learning is a flexible framework that integrates student needs based on three main dimensions, namely readiness, interest, and learning profile. In this context, teachers at SMK 2 try to implement these principles by dividing students into several groups based on their ability levels—basic, intermediate, and advanced. This shows that there is alignment between DI theory and teachers' understanding of how to accommodate student diversity at SMKN 2 Tanjungpinang before class shortages occur.

However, the main obstacle faced is the application of this concept in the context of heterogeneous classes with limited teaching time. This statement is supported by research by Brighton 2005 cited by Taylor (2017), which states that one of the biggest challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction is the lack of time to design lessons that meet individual student needs. SMK 2 teachers admitted that although they understand the benefits of differentiated learning, implementation in classes with various ability levels is often considered "unrealistic" or "fantasy."

# **V CONCLUSION**

The implementation of differentiated learning at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang was initially implemented quite effectively, now this method is experiencing many difficulties in its implementation. Teachers at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang have implemented a differentiated learning model that divides students into three groups based on their abilities, namely basic, intermediate, and advanced. This model allows students to get attention and materials that are appropriate to their ability level, so that the learning process becomes more effective.

However, with the increasing number of students and limited classroom space, the implementation of effective differentiated learning becomes very difficult. The limited number of available classes causes students of various ability levels to be forced to study in the same class. This forces teachers to handle students with very different ability levels at the same time. In addition, managing different materials for each group of students is also a big challenge. Teachers must prepare different teaching materials for each level, which is very timeconsuming and energy-consuming.

Another problem is the limited number of English teachers available, making it impossible to divide classes according to student abilities. Differentiated learning that previously could be implemented effectively in several separate classes is now hampered by limited space and teaching staff. In addition, teachers also have difficulty finding reading materials that are appropriate to students' abilities, as well as preparing different assignments for each group in one class, and the lack of education from seminars or training, even though we know from Santangelo & Tomlinson, (2009) in their research that they emphasize the importance of institutional and systemic support for the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI). They note that teachers need

adequate training, resources, time, and administrative support to effectively implement this method in learning.

Overall, although teachers at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang understand the importance of differentiated learning, these obstacles make the implementation of this learning increasingly limited. Limited classroom space, increasing number of students, and shortage of teachers are the main obstacles to the implementation of effective differentiated learning. This shows that, although differentiated learning has great potential to improve the quality of education, external factors such as limited resources must be carefully considered in designing and implementing learning strategies in schools.

Based on the results of this study, there are several way that can be considered to improve the effectiveness of differentiated learning at SMK 2 Tanjungpinang, despite facing various obstacles.

# 1. Provide More Classrooms

One of the main obstacles faced by teachers in implementing differentiated learning is the limited classroom space. Therefore, it is recommended that schools try to find solutions to increase the number of classrooms. With more classrooms, students can be grouped according to their ability levels, which will help teachers focus on relevant material for each group.

2. Use Technology for Help Differentiated Learning

# HZ, Satria & Nopita: Teachers Perceptions' of ... (6)

To overcome the lack of space and limited teachers, the use of technology in learning can be a solution. For example, by utilizing online learning or blended learning, learning materials can be adjusted to the needs of each group of students. Online learning platforms can provide materials that are tailored to the level of student ability, while teachers can more easily monitor the progress of each group.

# 3. Recruit Teachers

The lack of English teachers is another challenge. Therefore, schools may consider recruiting more teachers or optimizing existing teaching hours to provide more attention to students in classes with different ability levels. With more teachers, differentiated learning can be implemented better.

# 4. Training for Teachers in Managing Differentiated Learning

Teachers need to be given further training in designing and managing differentiated learning, especially in dealing with classes with many ability levels. This training can include classroom management strategies, the use of technology, and effective ways to prepare different assignments and teaching materials for each group of students.

Differentiated learning, although effective in some contexts, is not always relevant to be applied in language learning, especially in classes with heterogeneous students in terms of ability and background. In language learning, natural interaction between students with different abilities is often an advantage because they can learn from each other. In addition, the need to group students based on ability levels in one class often creates social gaps and significantly increases the teacher's workload without guaranteeing optimal results. Therefore, if the class is still mixed with very diverse abilities and learning time is limited, forcing the implementation of differentiated learning can be counterproductive and is better replaced by more universal methods, such as collaboration-based teaching or more flexible group discussions.

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