



RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research At Junior High School in South Jakarta)

Fajry Raehana Syarif ¹,

Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jalan Nangka No.58C Tanjung Barat Jakarta

Hanna Sundari ²,

Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jalan Nangka No.58C Tanjung Barat Jakarta

Supadi ³,

Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jalan Nangka No.58C Tanjung Barat Jakarta

e-mail: fajryrena1@gmail.com¹

e-mail: hanna.sundari@unindra.ac.id²

e-mail: supadii@unindra.ac.id³

Abstract: This qualitative study aims to describe the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in teaching English speaking skills within the Merdeka Curriculum at the junior high school level. The research addresses the need for adaptable learning strategies that cater to diverse student abilities, interests, and needs, promoting optimal development for every learner. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data was collected through observation, interviews, and documentation at El-Syifa Junior High School and Jagakarsa Junior High School in South Jakarta. The subjects were English teachers and eighth-grade students. Inductive analysis showed that teachers implemented DI through variations in content, process, and product. Specific strategies included role-play, discussion, group presentations, and providing choices in expressing learning outcomes. Students reported that this approach boosted their speaking skills, motivation, and confidence, making previously passive students more active. However, challenges identified included time constraints, large class sizes, and wide ability gaps. Overall, the findings confirm that DI is an effective approach for supporting the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on freedom, flexibility, and the development of individual potential.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning; Speaking Skills; English; Merdeka Curriculum.

Implementasi Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Dalam Pembelajaran Kemampuan Berbicara Bahasa Inggris Pada Kurikulum Merdeka (Penelitian Kualitatif Pada SMP di Jakarta Selatan)

NonCommercial-
NoDerivatives 4.0
International License

Abstrak: Penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan Implementasi Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi (DI) dalam pengajaran keterampilan berbicara bahasa Inggris pada Kurikulum Merdeka di SMP. Studi ini mengatasi kebutuhan akan strategi belajar adaptif untuk beragam kemampuan siswa, demi mengoptimalkan potensi setiap pembelajar. Menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi di SMP El-Syifa dan SMP Jagakarsa, Jakarta Selatan. Analisis menunjukkan guru mengimplementasikan DI melalui variasi konten, proses, dan produk, seperti *role-play*, diskusi, dan pemberian pilihan tugas. Hasilnya, siswa melaporkan peningkatan signifikan pada keterampilan berbicara, motivasi, dan kepercayaan diri mereka, mengubah siswa pasif menjadi lebih aktif. Namun, tantangan yang dihadapi termasuk kendala waktu, ukuran kelas besar, dan kesenjangan kemampuan. Secara keseluruhan, temuan mengonfirmasi bahwa DI adalah pendekatan efektif untuk mendukung kebebasan, fleksibilitas, dan pengembangan potensi individu yang ditekankan oleh Kurikulum Merdeka.

Kata Kunci: Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi; Keterampilan Berbicara; Bahasa Inggris; Kurikulum Merdeka.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental necessity for human development, fostering the growth of individual potential across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains to enable fulfilling lives and contributions to society. Regulated by government and private institutions, education serves as a lifelong process that equips individuals with essential skills for personal and communal advancement. Central to this process is the curriculum, which acts as a strategic tool for achieving educational objectives, providing a structured reference for implementing learning activities in Indonesia (Angga, 2022). Far from being a static document, the curriculum outlines pathways to educational goals, embedding foundational life lessons while adapting to evolving needs. However, curricula often undergo revisions in response to global and national demands, which can sometimes disrupt implementation and challenge educators to maintain optimal learning environments.

In Indonesia, the education system is undergoing significant transformation to align with contemporary global standards, exemplified by the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum (Adam et al., 2024). Launched under the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom to Learn) policy by Minister Nadiem Makarim, this curriculum emphasizes flexibility, allowing schools to tailor programs to students' unique needs, regional characteristics, and institutional contexts (Kemendikbud, 2022). Rooted in the Latin term "currere" meaning "to run," the curriculum symbolizes a dynamic journey toward educational destinations, as reinforced by Government Regulation No. 57 of 2021 on National Education Standards, which mandates diverse, autonomous curriculum development. Within this framework, English language learning holds paramount importance as an international lingua franca, facilitating global communication, academic pursuits, and professional opportunities. The Merdeka Curriculum shifts toward student-centered approaches, honoring learners' diversity in potential, interests, and talents to make education more effective and meaningful.

A key strategy within this curriculum is differentiated instruction, which empowers teachers to adapt teaching to individual student profiles, enhancing skills such as English speaking. Defined by Tomlinson (2013) as a responsive approach that modifies content, process, product, and learning environments based on students' readiness, interests, and profiles, differentiated instruction addresses

IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research at Junior High School in South Jakarta)

Fajry Raehana Syarif, Hanna Sundari, Supadi

p-ISSN: 2615-8671

e-ISSN: 2615-868X

the heterogeneity of classrooms. In EFL contexts, it promotes equitable access to language mastery, including the four core skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—which are essential for effective communication and long-term proficiency, introduced from elementary levels onward. Research in Indonesia supports its efficacy; for instance, Santoso (2019) in *Lingua Cultura* demonstrated that differentiated instruction boosts EFL student motivation and achievement, while Pratiwi and Rini (2020) in *Studies in English Language and Education* found it particularly beneficial for developing junior high school students' speaking abilities.

Implementing differentiated instruction requires comprehensive planning: reviewing curricula to match student strengths and weaknesses, designing tailored strategies and methods, providing teacher support, and conducting periodic assessments (Marlina, 2020). Teachers must vary pacing, content, and engagement techniques—such as visual aids for visual learners—to accommodate diverse styles, fostering enjoyment and deeper understanding. This approach embodies curriculum flexibility, rejecting rigid, one-size-fits-all methods in favor of adaptive strategies that recognize varying learning timelines and needs. Yet, its success demands investment, as outcomes may not be immediate, reflecting education's role in building sustainable skills.

Despite these benefits, challenges persist in applying differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly for eighth-grade EFL learners at junior high schools like EL-SYIFA in South Jakarta. Initial observations reveal students' enthusiasm for interactive, practical activities, but interviews highlight disparities: one student (learning English as a second language) found lessons enjoyable through songs and media, while another (first-language learner) struggled with grammar, pronunciation inconsistencies, and discomfort, leading to low motivation. Broader issues include pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, shyness from low confidence, unengaging materials, teachers' incomplete grasp of the curriculum, and inadequate resources for personalization. Existing studies often overlook these implementation hurdles in Merdeka contexts, focusing on general EFL outcomes rather than speaking skills or qualitative perceptions from teachers and students (Santoso, 2019; Pratiwi & Rini, 2020). Gaps also exist in addressing institutional barriers, motivational variances, and the need for tailored assessments, such as oral presentations for stronger speakers.

Despite these benefits, challenges persist in applying differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly for eighth-grade EFL learners at junior high schools like EL-SYIFA in South Jakarta. Initial observations reveal students' enthusiasm for interactive, practical activities, but interviews highlight disparities: one student (learning English as a second language) found lessons enjoyable through songs and media, while another (first-language learner) struggled with grammar, pronunciation inconsistencies, and discomfort, leading to low motivation. Broader issues include pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, shyness from low confidence, unengaging materials, teachers' incomplete grasp of the curriculum, and inadequate resources for personalization. Existing studies often overlook these implementation hurdles in Merdeka contexts, focusing on general EFL outcomes rather than speaking skills or qualitative perceptions from teachers and students (Santoso, 2019; Pratiwi & Rini, 2020). Gaps also exist in addressing institutional barriers, motivational variances, and the need for tailored assessments, such as oral presentations for stronger speakers.

Theoretically, this research enriches the literature on differentiated instruction and EFL pedagogy under the Merdeka Curriculum, offering empirical insights into adaptive teaching in Indonesian contexts. Practically, it benefits schools by enhancing student motivation; teachers by highlighting strategies and challenges; students by promoting personalized methods aligned with their styles and abilities; and future researchers by providing foundational data for junior high English instruction. Targeting eighth-grade EFL learners in South Jakarta, this study addresses underexplored implementation gaps to support inclusive, effective education



Based on this background, the study is titled: “Implementation Of Differentiated Instruction In Teaching English Speaking Skills Within The Merdeka Curriculum (A Qualitative Research At Junior High Schools In South Jakarta).”

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, ideal for deeply exploring the implementation of differentiated instruction in enhancing English speaking skills within the Merdeka Curriculum. As outlined by Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding meanings tied to human experiences and social phenomena in natural contexts, emphasizing inductive data analysis, the researcher as the primary instrument, and multifaceted data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and documentation to produce rich, narrative descriptions. This aligns with Chali (2022), who describes qualitative descriptive methods as prioritizing word- or image-based data to systematically depict phenomena as they occur, capturing participants' experiences, views, and explanations for a holistic understanding of underlying causes and processes. Sugiyono (2016) further supports this by noting that qualitative methods yield detailed, meaningful insights into complex, dynamic issues that quantitative approaches cannot fully address, making it suitable for examining the nuanced application of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms where problems like student diversity and curriculum adaptation remain underexplored.

The study is designed as a descriptive case study across two private junior high schools in South Jakarta, Indonesia—SMP EL-SYIFA Jakarta and SMP JAGAKARSA—during the 2024-2025 academic year. These sites were purposively selected for their implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, proximity to the researcher (facilitating efficient data collection and cost savings), and relevance to the scope focusing on eighth-grade EFL speaking skills. SMP EL-SYIFA, founded on March 25, 1983, under the Yayasan Pendidikan Islam EL-SYIFA, emerged from community efforts led by figures like Latif Sulaiman, Abdul Wahab, and Drs. KH. Mas’ud Syaiful Alam to address educational gaps in Ciganjur. It has endured challenges under leaders like Drs. A. Syarif Manan (principal since 2002) and Hj. Maliha (foundation chair), maintaining routines such as daily Qur’an tadarus while pursuing ongoing professional development. Its vision emphasizes academic and non-academic excellence grounded in faith, morality, and self-improvement. SMP JAGAKARSA, originally SMP Yaperjasa and established in 1985 under Yayasan Pendidikan Al Karomah Jagakarsa (formalized via notary act No. 01/2018), draws its name from the nearby Pangeran Jagakarsa tomb and serves an Islamic-majority community in Jl. Keramat, Jagakarsa. Led by Drs. H. Agus Salim Utud, M.Si., it aims to elevate the area's educational profile nationally and internationally through continuous training and self-directed growth. Both schools (S1 and S2) provide ideal contexts for examining differentiated instruction in English speaking under the Merdeka Curriculum due to their shared focus on student-centered learning and accessible locations.

Participants include five English teachers and eighth-grade students from these schools, selected via purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth (Sugiyono, 2013; Patton, 2002). Teachers meet criteria of holding a bachelor's degree in English Education or Literature, at least one year of teaching experience, and active use of the Merdeka Curriculum. Students are those directly involved in speaking-focused EFL classes. The teacher sample comprises: T1 (female, 20 years experience, bachelor's in English Education, certified teacher, from S1); T2 (male, 10 years, bachelor's in English Education, PPG-certified, from S1); T3 (female, 7 years, bachelor's in English Education, standard teacher, from S2); T4 (female, 5 years, bachelor's in English Education, standard teacher, from S2); and T5 (male, 5 years, bachelor's in English Education, standard teacher, from S2). This selection captures diverse experiences while aligning with the study's emphasis on implementation and perceptions.

The research unfolds in four interconnected phases from proposal development through thesis completion, spanning September 2024 to August 2025: (1) instrument preparation and preliminary study (identifying issues via literature review, informal discussions with teachers/principals, and initial school

IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research at Junior High School in South Jakarta)

Fajry Raehana Syarif, Hanna Sundari, Supadi

p-ISSN: 2615-8671

e-ISSN: 2615-868X

observations); (2) classroom observations (capturing real-time differentiated instruction practices, challenges, and effectiveness in speaking activities); (3) semi-structured interviews (gathering in-depth insights from teachers and students on implementation, perceptions, and influences); and (4) data analysis and reporting (integrating findings into conclusions). A timeline outlines key activities: instrument development (December 2024); research initiation and observations (January-February 2025); interviews and questionnaires (March-April 2025); documentation and analysis (May-June 2025); and final reporting/thesis defense (July-August 2025). The researcher engages directly on-site for accurate, objective data.

Data collection draws from primary sources—classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students—to provide direct evidence of differentiated instruction's application, challenges, and impacts on speaking skills. Secondary sources include curriculum documents, syllabi, and field notes for contextual depth and triangulation, enhancing reliability by cross-verifying information across methods (Chali, 2022). Observations involve systematic, direct monitoring of teaching events in natural settings (Johni, 2003), focusing on how teachers adapt content, processes, and environments for diverse learners during English speaking lessons. Semi-structured interviews, guided by flexible protocols derived from research questions, allow probing into subjective experiences while maintaining focus; they are conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed for accuracy. Documentation reviews lesson plans, implementation steps, and student evaluations to trace differentiated practices without disrupting classroom dynamics. These techniques align with research questions: RQ1 (implementation) via observations and interviews; RQ2 (teachers' perceptions) via interviews and observations; RQ3 (students' perceptions) via student/teacher interviews and observations.

Instruments include a semi-structured interview protocol (structured for consistency per Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) with aspects like understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and differentiation (e.g., teacher questions: "What is your understanding of differentiated instruction?"; student: "Does the teacher's method match your abilities? Give an example"), implementation strategies (e.g., "What strategies do you use for speaking with differentiation?"), effectiveness (e.g., "How has it improved students' speaking confidence?"), and challenges (e.g., "What obstacles do you face in time management?"). An observation protocol uses checklists for aspects such as teacher adaptations (e.g., varying tasks by proficiency: simple questions for beginners, extended dialogues for advanced), activities (e.g., role-play, drilling), student participation (e.g., confidence levels, motivation variances), and learning environment (e.g., media like flashcards, flexible seating). These tools ensure systematic, triangulated data collection, combining with observations for contextual validation.

Data analysis follows Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) interactive model, an iterative process of reduction, presentation, and verification/conclusion drawing that evolves throughout the study. Reduction involves selecting, coding, and abstracting raw data (transcripts, notes) into meaningful categories, such as themes on differentiation strategies or perceptual shifts, discarding redundancies to focus on speaking skill enhancements. Presentation organizes findings into narratives, thematic tables, or matrices (e.g., grouping student quotes on motivation under "engagement themes") for pattern recognition and connections. Verification draws conclusions by synthesizing evidence—e.g., linking interview insights on challenges with observational examples—via triangulation across sources/methods, ensuring robust interpretations of implementation and effectiveness. This cyclical approach fosters comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adheres to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor. Credibility is achieved through triangulation (multiple data sources/methods), member checking (participant validation of findings), and prolonged participatory observation, building confidence in results like students' reported enthusiasm: "I feel more motivated to practice speaking because the materials match my level!" (Student A). Transferability is supported by thick, detailed descriptions of



the South Jakarta context, participants, and procedures, enabling readers to assess applicability elsewhere. Dependability is maintained via an audit trail, documenting all stages (e.g., interview schedules, raw transcripts) for external review and logical consistency. Confirmability ensures objectivity through reflexivity—acknowledging researcher biases—and clear linkages between data and interpretations, grounding findings in participant experiences rather than preconceptions. These strategies collectively enhance the study's authenticity and utility.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This chapter presents qualitative findings from a descriptive study on the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching English speaking skills within the Merdeka Curriculum, drawing on teachers' and students' perspectives. Data were gathered through structured interviews with five English teachers (coded T1 to T5) and eight eighth-grade students (coded S1 to S8) across two private junior high schools in South Jakarta—SMP EL-SYIFA and SMP JAGAKARSA—supplemented by classroom observations of differentiated speaking activities. Analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model, encompassing data reduction (coding transcripts for themes like adaptation and perceptions), display (narratives and matrices for patterns), and verification (triangulation across sources to ensure consistency). This approach facilitated a structured yet flexible exploration of complex classroom dynamics, yielding themes aligned with the research questions: (1) implementation of differentiated instruction in English speaking; (2) teachers' perceptions of its effectiveness; and (3) students' perceptions of its effectiveness.

Findings reveal differentiated instruction as a flexible, student-centered strategy that enhances speaking skills through tailored content, processes, and products (Tomlinson, 2013), though moderated by challenges like resource limitations and diverse proficiency levels. Teachers and students (aged 13-14) reported progressive engagement, boosted confidence, and motivational gains, underscoring its alignment with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on autonomy and inclusivity. These insights address gaps in Indonesian EFL contexts, where adaptive teaching remains underexplored for speaking proficiency (Santoso, 2019; Pratiwi & Rini, 2020).

1. Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Teaching English Speaking Skills

Implementation involved adapting content, processes, and products to students' readiness, interests, and profiles, fostering inclusive speaking practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers at both schools demonstrated understanding of differentiation as a responsive approach that honors learner diversity, avoiding one-size-fits-all methods to promote equitable growth. For instance, T4 (SMP JAGAKARSA) described it as "a way of teaching that gives space to see each child as unique, so teachers adjust methods to make all students feel capable and comfortable." Similarly, T1 (SMP EL-SYIFA) emphasized the teacher's role as a facilitator: "It's about adjusting the learning process to students' needs, interests, and abilities, giving each child a chance to develop in their own way."

Strategies included tiered activities starting with simple conversations (e.g., introductions) for beginners and advancing to complex tasks (e.g., storytelling or debates) for advanced learners, often using role-play, pair work, and group discussions to vary engagement. T3 (SMP JAGAKARSA) noted: "For speaking, I differentiate content, process, and product—tailoring conversation themes to interests, with simple dialogues for novices and discussions for fluent students." At SMP EL-SYIFA, T2 highlighted peer support: "I start with simple introductions for shy students and lead conversations for confident ones." Content adjustments featured leveled materials, such as basic vocabulary for low-proficiency students and idioms for others, while processes incorporated flexible groupings and choices in output (e.g., presentations vs. recordings). Students corroborated

IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research at Junior High School in South Jakarta)

Fajry Raehana Syarif, Hanna Sundari, Supadi

p-ISSN: 2615-8671

e-ISSN: 2615-868X

this, with S2 (SMP JAGAKARSA) stating: "Teachers give simple questions first if you're struggling, then harder topics like daily routines once you're ready."

Observations confirmed these practices: teachers grouped students by proficiency for role-plays, allowing quieter learners to practice in pairs before whole-class sharing, aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development for scaffolded skill-building. This addresses the first research question by illustrating differentiation as a practical tool for Merdeka's student-centered ethos, though consistency varied by class size.

Table 1
Key Strategies in Differentiated Instruction Implementation

School/Participant	Strategy Example	Adaptation Type	Student Choice in Output	Quote	
1	SMP JAGAKARSA/T4	Simple conversations to storytelling	Content (leveled topics)	Presentations, videos, or pairs	"For beginners, short sentences; for advanced, new vocabulary or complex topics."
2	SMP JAGAKARSA/T3	Role-play and group discussions	Process (varied methods)	Dialogues or debates	"Themes by interest; simple for novices, presentations for fluent."
3	SMP JAGAKARSA/S2	Pair questions to extended talks	Product (output flexibility)	Individual or group practice	"Simple questions first, then daily routines."
4	SMP EL-SYIFA/T1	Games to peer-led conversations	Process (grouping)	Recordings or live presentations	"Light activities like games; advanced students lead."
5	SMP EL-SYIFA/S6	Role-play and daily chats	Process (interactive)	Videos or direct speech	"Practice everyday topics; feels real."

These strategies reflect Tomlinson's (2013) framework, promoting active participation and gradual proficiency gains in EFL speaking.

2. Teachers' Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction Within the Merdeka Curriculum

Teachers perceived differentiation as highly effective for boosting speaking skills, motivation, and confidence, aligning with the Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility. T5 (SMP JAGAKARSA) affirmed: "It's quite effective; students develop at their level, so speaking improves faster." Changes in engagement were evident, with T3 noting: "Passive students become more confident; they don't fear mistakes since tasks match abilities, increasing motivation." Real examples included a shy student progressing from one-word answers to short presentations via simple role-plays (T4). At SMP EL-SYIFA, T1 observed: "It significantly helps; from single words to simple sentences, as tasks aren't overwhelming."

Challenges included diverse abilities, large classes, and time constraints, yet teachers overcame them through peer tutoring and realistic targets. T2 (SMP EL-SYIFA) shared: "Big classes and



varied skills are tough, but small groups with peer help make time efficient." Facilities were seen as adequate but limited, prompting creative adaptations like manual media (T3). Hopes centered on consistent application and school support, such as training: "More workshops and flexible time would optimize it" (T4). These perceptions address the second research question, echoing Pratiwi and Rini (2020) on differentiation's role in EFL motivation, while highlighting needs for institutional backing to sustain Merdeka's goals.

Table 2
Teachers' Perceptions of Effectiveness and Challenges

Participant	Perceived Effectiveness	Changes Observed (Motivation/Confidence)	Example of Progress	Challenges	Coping Strategies	Recommendations
T4 (JAGAKARSA)	Helps boldness without burden	Passive to participatory; more front-class talks	One-word answers to longer stories via role-play	Ability gaps; time limits	Small groups with varied targets	Consistent training; more media
T3 (JAGAKARSA)	Effective for level-matched chances	Increased bravery and motivation	Shy student to short presentations	Large classes; diverse skills	Group by level; same-theme tasks	Teacher workshops; flexible scheduling
T5 (JAGAKARSA)	Speeds skill growth	Clear shifts from passive to active	Text-reading to spontaneous talks	Student numbers; prep effort	Clear instructions; leveled groups	Ongoing training; added resources
T1 (EL-SYIFA)	Significant for non-overwhelming tasks	More enthusiasm; reduced shyness	Single words to hobby stories	Varied abilities; attention balance	Peer tutors; realistic goals	Practical training; audio facilities
T2 (EL-SYIFA)	Builds confidence gradually	Passive to hand-raising; valued efforts	One-word to full introductions	Skill disparities; time	Small groups; peer assistance	Applied workshops; flexible rooms

3. Students' Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction Within the Merdeka Curriculum

Students viewed differentiation positively, perceiving it as tailored and supportive, enhancing understanding and speaking fluency under Merdeka's flexible framework. S1 (SMP JAGAKARSA) noted: "It matches my abilities; simple sentences first, then presentations—feels gradual." Effectiveness was evident in progress, like S3's shift from short sentences to storytelling: "From one sentence to sharing experiences; it's developing." Motivation and confidence rose, with S4 stating: "I was shy, but group work makes it lighter; now I'm bolder without much embarrassment." At SMP EL-SYIFA, S5 affirmed: "Very helpful; simple tasks first so I don't fall behind advanced friends".

Challenges for students included spontaneous responses, vocabulary limits, and pronunciation, with S2 (SMP JAGAKARSA) saying: "Nervous in front; forget words." Facilities were deemed insufficient, lacking audio aids (S6, EL-SYIFA: "Limited; more apps would help home practice"). Hopes focused on varied, fun activities and better resources: "More individual practice and digital tools" (S7). Preferred methods varied—role-play for fun (S5), group discussions for support (S8)—aligning with learner profiles. Addressing the third research question, these views confirm differentiation's efficacy in building EFL confidence (Grabe, 2009), but emphasize the need for enhanced facilities to mitigate barriers in vocational-like junior high settings.

Table 3



IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research at Junior High School in South Jakarta)

Fajry Raehana Syarif, Hanna Sundari, Supadi

p-ISSN: 2615-8671

e-ISSN: 2615-868X

Students' Perceptions of Effectiveness, Challenges, and Recommendations

School/Student	Perceived Help in Understanding	Speaking Progress Example	Motivation/Confidence Changes	Challenges	Preferred Methods	Recommendations
1	JAGAKARSA/S1	Gradual tasks match level	Text-reading to note-free talks	From fearful to confident	Sudden questions; vocabulary	Individual presentations More digital apps; routine practice
2	JAGAKARSA/S2	Simple starts prevent lag	One-word to full sentences	Less lazy; bolder despite errors	Front-class nerves	Pair talks with feedback Small rooms; audio aids
3	JAGAKARSA/S3	Non-uniform approach	Short sentences to stories	More relaxed via games	Long-sentence linking	Creative storytelling Varied activities; projectors
4	JAGAKARSA/S4	Extra examples for confusion	Single sentences to fluent role-play	Supported atmosphere boosts spirit	Quick responses	Group projects Conducive classes; videos
5	EL-SYIFA/S5	Simple for beginners	Words to family/hobby intros	Valued efforts reduce fear	Word-finding; front nerves	Role-play games Audio/video; home apps
6	EL-SYIFA/S6	Guided without pressure	Grammar errors to free speech	Motivated by real-life feel	Consistency in flow	Interactive quizzes More practice time; media
7	EL-SYIFA/S7	Step-by-step guidance	Text-reading to self-stories	Appreciated progress builds boldness	Sentence building	Group discussions Full facilities; varied time
8	EL-SYIFA/S8	Level-matched explanations	Confusion to daily routine talks	From shy to trying despite stutters	Pronunciation	Light debates Audio tech; consistent practice

These reflect autonomy as evolving yet vulnerable, addressing the second research question.

Table 3
Students' Perceptions of Effectiveness, Challenges, and Recommendations

Recommendation	Rationale	Implementation
Ongoing teacher training on adaptive strategies	Builds consistency amid diverse classes	Workshops on tiering; peer-sharing sessions
Enhanced facilities (audio, apps, small rooms)	Reduces barriers to practice	School investments; digital access for home use
Flexible scheduling for extended speaking	Addresses time constraints	Merdeka-aligned blocks; group rotations
Student choice in activities (e.g., role-play vs. groups)	Boosts motivation and profiles	Pre-lesson surveys; varied outputs
Peer tutoring and monitoring	Supports inclusivity without overload	Proficiency-based pairings; progress journals

Findings imply that differentiation fosters inclusive, autonomous learning per Merdeka principles (Kemendikbud, 2022), with gradual adaptations yielding measurable speaking gains and affective benefits. However, persistent challenges like facilities and time highlight needs for blended supports (e.g., tech integration) to sustain novice progress (Marlina, 2020). Theoretically, this enriches EFL pedagogy by validating Tomlinson's (2013) model in Indonesian contexts; practically, it guides teacher training and policy for equitable curricula.

Discussion



The findings from this qualitative descriptive study affirm the introduction's emphasis on differentiated instruction's potential to address learner diversity in EFL speaking skills under the Merdeka Curriculum (Tomlinson, 2013), particularly by tailoring teaching to students' readiness, interests, and profiles in junior high contexts. Teachers and students progressed from recognizing unique needs to active engagement in adaptive practices, employing strategies such as tiered content and flexible outputs to enhance oral proficiency. For instance, T4's view of differentiation as "giving space to see each child as unique" illustrates its role in fostering equitable growth, aligning with the Merdeka Belajar policy's focus on flexibility and student-centered learning (Kemendikbud, 2022). This addresses RQ1 by demonstrating how these elements promote confidence and participation without rigid uniformity, thereby bridging the background's identified gaps in Indonesian EFL implementation where diverse abilities often hinder speaking development (Santoso, 2019).

Teachers' perceptions highlight differentiation's effectiveness in boosting speaking skills, motivation, and inclusivity, reflecting the introduction's noted challenges in curriculum adaptation for heterogeneous classrooms (Pratiwi & Rini, 2020). At both schools, educators observed tangible shifts, such as passive students becoming participatory through level-matched tasks, with T3 noting: "They gain confidence without fearing mistakes, as activities suit their abilities, raising motivation." Real progress examples—like a student advancing from one-word responses to spontaneous discussions via role-play—underscore its impact on affective and cognitive domains, consistent with self-determination theory where autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). These views support RQ2, extending Alhadi et al.'s (2025) emphasis on diagnostic assessment and ongoing feedback in differentiation, which positions teachers as facilitators rather than sole instructors. However, while effective, scalability is tempered by time and resource constraints, refining the need for Merdeka-aligned training to sustain such responsive pedagogy in EFL settings.

Overall, students' perceptions reinforce differentiation's value in cultivating speaking proficiency and self-assurance within the Merdeka framework, aligning with the introduction's call for inclusive strategies amid novice barriers like shyness and limited vocabulary (Marlina, 2020). Learners reported eased comprehension through gradual adaptations, with S3 stating: "It matches my level—from short sentences to sharing experiences—making me bolder." Effectiveness manifested in progress from hesitant replies to fluent role-plays and presentations, alongside heightened motivation, as passive participants felt valued and supported. This informs RQ3, corroborating Aini, Syahputra, and Maulizan's (2025) findings on active involvement via innovative methods like gamification, which amplify engagement and positive perceptions by honoring individual profiles. To optimize outcomes, educators should integrate diagnostic tools, varied media, and peer supports, fostering resilient speakers. Theoretically, this enriches Tomlinson's (2013) model by validating its application in Indonesian contexts; practically, it guides policy for junior high EFL, emphasizing hybrid approaches to nurture psychological ownership and oral skills in diverse environments (Barlian et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Instruction as a responsive strategy in enhancing English speaking skills within the Merdeka Curriculum at SMP JAGAKARSA and SMP EL-SYIFA, revealing that adaptive practices—such as tiered content with simple sentences for beginners and complex idioms for advanced learners, varied processes like role-play, group discussions, pair work, and short presentations, and flexible products allowing choices in outputs (e.g., live presentations, videos, or dialogues)—empower diverse junior high students to build oral proficiency through inclusive, student-centered engagement, amplified by conducive classroom environments to foster metacognitive awareness, motivational growth, and equitable development. The essence of these findings underscores differentiation not as a mere adjustment but as a dynamic interplay of readiness, interests, and profiles, enabling learners to overcome barriers like shyness and limited vocabulary toward confident, spontaneous communication—directly addressing the core research questions by affirming its alignment with Merdeka's flexibility: implementation through tailored

**IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING
SKILLS WITHIN THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM (A Qualitative Research
at Junior High School in South Jakarta)**

Fajry Raehana Syarif, Hanna Sundari, Supadi

p-ISSN: 2615-8671

e-ISSN: 2615-868X

components promotes active participation (RQ1); teachers perceive it as effective for boosting bravery, motivation, and progress from passive responses to full presentations without overload (RQ2); and students view it as highly supportive for comprehension, skill gains (e.g., from short answers to storytelling), and heightened confidence in a non-uniform setting (RQ3), ultimately bridging gaps in Indonesian EFL for practical, lifelong outcomes.

Yet, the study leaves key aspects unresolved, such as the long-term impact on speaking retention in larger, mixed-ability cohorts and the integration of digital tools for scalability in varied school contexts, warranting future mixed-methods and comparative investigations to refine Merdeka-aligned models and expand differentiation's inclusivity across broader EFL junior high settings.

REFERENCES

- Adam, et al. (2024) "The Merdeka Curriculum: Flexibility and Student-Centered Learning in Indonesia." *Journal of Educational Policy* 39.1 : 45-62. Print.
- Alhadi, et al. (2025) "Diagnostic Assessment in Differentiated Learning for Optimal Student Development." *Studies in English Language Teaching* 15.3 : 78-95. Print.
- Angga. *Curriculum as a Strategic Tool in Indonesian Education*. Jakarta: Ministry of Education Press, 2022. Print.
- Barlian, et al. (2023) "Implementation Stages of Differentiated Instruction in EFL Contexts." *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction* 10.4 : 200-218. Print.
- Chali. (2022) "Qualitative Descriptive Methods for Exploring Educational Phenomena." *Educational Research Review* 28.2 : 150-167. Print.
- Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. 8th ed. London: Routledge. Print.
- Creswell, John W. (2014) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, Print.
- Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. (2002) *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, Print.
- Grabe, William. (2009) *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press, . Print.
- Johni. (2003) "Systematic Observation in Natural Educational Settings." *Qualitative Methods in Education* 5.1 : 34-50. Print.
- Kemendikbud. (2022) *Merdeka Belajar Policy Guidelines*. Jakarta: Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Print.
- Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. (2002) *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. Rochester: U of Rochester Press, . Print.
- Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage, Print.
- Marlina. (2020) "Planning and Challenges in Differentiated Instruction for EFL." *EFL Journal* 8.2 : 90-105. Print.
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldana. (2014) *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, . Print.
- Patton, Michael Quinn. (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, Print.
- Pratiwi, and Rini. (2020) "Differentiated Instruction for Speaking Skills in Junior High EFL." *Studies in English Language and Education* 7.3 : 456-472. Print.
- Santoso. (2019) "Motivation and Achievement through Differentiated Instruction in Indonesian EFL." *Lingua Cultura* 13.1: 23-40. Print.



Sugiyono. (2013) *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: Alfabeta, Print.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann. (2013) *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. 2nd ed. Alexandria: ASCD, Print.

Vygotsky, Lev S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Print.