

STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This study investigates students' perceptions of differentiated learning in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, focusing on four key dimensions: acceptance of differentiated learning, instructional strategies, learning environment, and learning outcomes. The research was conducted with 35 students from class XI-E at SMAN 10 Surabaya, who completed a questionnaire designed to measure their experiences and attitudes toward differentiated instruction. The findings reveal that students generally expressed positive responses to the implementation of differentiated learning. They agreed that the classroom environment and teaching approaches were supported their individual preferences and helped them achieve learning outcomes, particularly when activities were tailored to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK) learning styles. This indicates that differentiated learning has the potential to foster inclusivity by addressing diverse needs within the same classroom. Although all four dimensions received average to high scores, instructional strategies were rated somewhat lower compared to other aspects, highlighting the necessity for further refinement in the delivery of differentiated methods. The results suggest that, while differentiated learning can create a more engaging and meaningful experience for students, its success depends on the teacher's advanced skills in implementing the method and development while also the active involvement of the student itself. Overall, the study underscores differentiated learning as a promising approach in enhancing EFL learning.

Keywords: Differentiated learning, EFL classroom, students' perception

INTRODUCTION

Differentiated learning has emerged as a response to the diverse needs and characteristics of students in EFL classrooms. Students come to class with various backgrounds, interests, abilities, and learning styles. According to Tomlinson (2014), instruction becomes more effective when tailored to students' learning styles, readiness, interests, and needs. It engages the existence of learning strategy that aligns with one-size-fits all strategy, yet still adaptive to each individual needs. This perception also aligns with Vygotsky's (1980) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which highlights that students are able to perform tasks that they cannot do individually if given proper instructions and scaffolding. By recognizing that students may different in their background, motivation, and ways of processing information, differentiated learning seeks to create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

In Indonesia, the concept of differentiated learning has been widely introduced since the implementation of "Merdeka Curriculum" which was the latest curriculum developed by Indonesian Ministry of Education. It focuses on flexibility, character development, and student-centered approach which allows teachers to adapt teaching methods that suit students' need, interest, and ability in relative to promote more effective educational experience. According to Piaget (1952), students enrich their knowledge by real-life experiences, which reinforces the teachers to adjust their strategy within students' cognitive development. Thus, differentiated learning is not only a form of technical strategies, but also relevant to the

student's cognitive and social development. The theory of multiple intelligences by Gardner (1983) explains that students have diverse intelligences, such as linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, and spatial. It conforms to the principles of Merdeka Curriculum which gives the teacher the freedom to tailor their learning process to the needs and potential of their students.

According to Safrudin and Wijaya (2024), the Merdeka Curriculum offers students a feeling and opportunity to explore themselves. Through this, students are allowed to learn based on their own style. It is in line with the principles outlined in the curriculum for independent learning. Majority of teachers in Indonesia also give a positive perception of the growing of differentiated learning. They noted that such approach enables them to better address the unique learning needs of each student and help them to foster their academic and social development (Taek, 2024). This innovative approach also reflects a personalized and transformative learning experience to ensure each student receives education suited to their individual abilities (Hasnahwati et al., 2025). It is shown in the study conducted by Hidayah et al. (2023) found that there was an increase in students' scientific literacy skills through the implementation of independent differentiated instruction. In practice, however, many English language classes still rely on one-size-fits-all, teacher-centered approaches that often neglect the differences among students (Markina & Mollá, 2022). Such tradition can inhibit students from engaging in meaningful interaction. A teacher must know that some students are not comfortable in public speaking and shy away from being on the stage. Modification must be incorporated on an individual basis to encourage students, especially when they are giving the presentation or a chance to speak in front of a wider audience. They need a much more comfortable environment and encouragement to improve their language abilities (Rathore et al., 2022). It emphasizes that teachers should design an approach that is responsive to individual needs in order to develop students' potential to the fullest, especially in English language skills.

Some studies highlight differentiated learning strategies such as offering varied content, processes, and products that can improve student motivation and classroom engagement. For example, Sapan and Mede (2022), in their research, found that students responded positively to instruction that accommodated different learning needs and preferences. Its implementation shows effectiveness and flexibility within the Merdeka Curriculum, although there are adaptations needed (Agustean et al., 2025). Moallemi (2024) also noted that providing options in tasks and materials increased students' enjoyment in English learning. Furthermore, games designed with consideration to students' learning preferences have been shown to be effective tools for increasing engagement and memory retention in language classrooms (Dewi & Wahyuni, 2023; Lotnick, 2014).

Despite these findings, research that specifically investigates differentiated instruction based on the Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic (VAK) learning styles remains limited, especially in the context of practical application in EFL classrooms. Few studies have focused on how students perceive such differentiated approaches. Understanding students' perspectives can help teachers implement more responsive strategies and promote a more inclusive and effective language learning environment. Therefore, this study aims to explore: How do students perceive differentiated learning implementation in EFL classroom? It is hoped that the findings will offer valuable insights for educators to refine instructional practices and respond more effectively to the diversity in their classrooms.

Differentiated Learning in EFL Classroom

Differentiated learning is an approach that customizes instruction to fulfill students' diverse needs. According to American Psychologists, Ryan & Deci (2000), students become more motivated when their needs align with their competency goals. Most students responded positively about differentiated learning providing opportunities to learn that is in line with their strength and competence (Maulana & Oktavia, 2023; Mohamed et al., 2025; Tajik et al., 2024). Similarly, Purnamaningwulan and Purwanto (2025) in their research give insights that the implementation of differentiated instruction minimizes challenges in EFL mixed-proficiency classrooms. When classes designed to address students' different needs, it creates more opportunities for students to engage with materials and participate actively in order to achieve the learning outcomes.

Differentiated instruction is considered highly beneficial in improving students' language skills, such as speaking, writing, reading, and grammar skills. Teachers can provide opportunities for more active participation and meaningful practice to improve these skills. Previous studies showed that EFL classroom practices that tailored to students' proficiency level can improve speaking fluency, vocabulary, and writing skills (Saputra et al., 2025; Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019). It highlights that differentiation learning facilitates measurable progress in learning competences for language learning.

In the instructional strategies, most students viewed the differentiated activities as supportive of their learning process. Grouping based on visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (VAK) learning styles allowed them to study in ways that matched their strength and preferences (Palguna et al., 2024; Zulhermindra et al., 2023). Besides VAK-based grouping, differentiated instruction has also been shown to support students' process, and learning product by giving them tasks and outputs aligned with their readiness and preferences (Jufrianto et al., 2025; Sentia & Febriani, 2025; Sofiana et al., 2024). Nevertheless, some students reported that the instructions during group activities were not always clear, which sometimes led them to confusion in achieving the learning outcomes. While differentiated strategies may enhance students' engagement, they also demand careful planning and clear guidance by the teacher to make it run effectively (Saputra et al., 2025). Therefore, in order to make the implementation of differentiated learning in EFL classroom become successful, it relies not only on matching activities with students' learning preferences, but also on the teacher's ability to design a structured and well-guided task that provides clarity in the learning process.

Students' Views of Differentiated Learning

Understanding how students perceive differentiated learning is crucial to evaluate its effectiveness in the EFL classroom as their attitudes towards it strongly influence their level of motivation and willingness to participate in classroom activities. When they feel that the strategies meet their needs, they are more likely to become active which in turn enhances the overall learning process. Subban et al. (2025) emphasized that differentiation is only effective when students recognize its value in meeting their needs. Similarly, Mohamed et al., (2025) found that EFL students in Hwassa City, Ethiopia responded positively to differentiated strategies that gave them choice and flexibility in learning tasks. More recently, Maulana and Oktavia (2023) observed that differentiating content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles creates an

effective and enjoyable way to support English learning. These findings showed higher motivation and classroom participation when teachers adopted student-centered practices that resonated with their preferences. It is concluded that students' views are critical not only for refining classroom practices but also for aligning instruction with broader educational reforms such as Indonesia's *Merdeka Curriculum*.

METHOD

In this study, a quantitative approach is chosen to examine students' perceptions of differentiated learning in the EFL classroom. A descriptive survey was used as the method of analysis since this method allows the researcher to systematically collect numerical data and describe trends in attitudes and perspectives of the students. According to Creswell (2012), survey research is used when the study aims to generalize findings from a sample to a larger population. This approach is chosen to examine students' perspectives on differentiated instruction as implemented in the EFL classroom.

The population of this study was 35 students of XI-E class in the academic year 2024/2025 at SMAN 10 Surabaya. They represent a heterogeneous group in terms of academic experience and learning preferences, which is comparable with the study's objective of investigating variations in perception. The responses from the students were collected through questionnaires shared via Google Form during regular school hours and became the data of the study. The research procedure involved three main steps. Firstly, students were taught using differentiated learning strategies based on Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic (VAK) model with the help of the school's counseling guidance. The lesson was designed by dividing the students into groups that match their learning styles. This grouping is chosen in order to help students explore different approaches and highlighting how instruction can be adapted to their different needs. Secondly, students were asked to complete questionnaires designed to capture their perceptions of the learning method. Finally, the collected responses were analyzed using SPSS software. The analysis focused on descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentages for each questionnaire item to identify which aspects of differentiated learning received the highest or lowest acceptance.

The research instrument used in this study was adapted from prior research on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001). The questionnaire consists of 20 close-ended questions grouped into four main dimensions: (1) Acceptance of Differentiated Learning, (2) Instructional Strategies, (3) Learning Environment, and (4) Learning Outcomes. Each dimension included 5 items formulated to capture students' perceptions in a measurable way. All items were designed using a 4-point Likert scale to capture students' attitudes towards differentiated learning ranging from 1 to 4 including 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Agree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). This scale provided a clear range of responses and enabled a more nuanced analysis of students' perceptions. This scale was also chosen to avoid a neutral midpoint and encourage students to express clear opinions about each statement. Before the administration, the instrument was reviewed by an expert lecturer in the field, and finally the final revision was then administered to the participants. The table below presents the instrument used in the study and so on.

Table 1. Questionnaire Instrument

Dimensions	Indicator	No	Questions
Acceptance of Differentiated Learning	Student's Perception of VAK based instruction to support their learning	1	The instructions and tasks given to my group matched how I prefer to learn
		2	I feel more involved in class when the teacher adapts the lesson to my learning style. (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic)
		3	I feel more motivated to participate when the tasks are suited to me.
		4	I believe the differentiated instruction is fair and supports everyone's learning.
		5	I would like the teacher to continue using this type of instruction in future lessons.
Instructional strategies	Variety of learning method	6	I feel engaged when the teacher uses variety of teaching methods
		7	I actively participate when the lesson are taught using different formats (e.g. mind mapping, speaking-listening, arranging the jumbled words)
		8	I feel that different instructional strategies help me understand the material better
	Clear instruction and support	9	The instructions for the learning task in my group were easy to understand.
		10	I feel more confident when the instructions match how I learn.
Learning environment	Classroom atmosphere	11	I actively participate in group activities during class.
		12	I feel encouraged to share my ideas during group discussions.
	Group settings to support student's participation in learning	13	I enjoy working in a group that supports my learning style.
		14	I feel more comfortable participating when working with peers who learn like me.
		15	The learning environment helps me stay focused and involved.
Learning Outcomes (Product)	Quality of learning outcomes	16	The tasks in class help me understand the lesson better.
		17	I can complete learning tasks more effectively when they match my learning style.
		18	I am proud of the work I produce during group tasks.
	Students awareness of their own improvement	19	I notice improvement in how I learn since the differentiated instruction was used.
		20	I feel that I learn more deeply when tasks are matched to my learning preference.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

To gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions toward differentiated learning, each questionnaire item was analyzed individually. This item-level analysis allows for the identification of specific areas where students show strong agreement, hesitation, or uncertainty to provide more detailed insights into how differentiated practices are received in the EFL classroom. Similar approach have been applied in the recent study by Sari et al. (2024), who developed instrument to measure teachers' perceptions of differentiated learning instructions by examining responses across multiple dimensions and individual items. Their findings showed the value of analyzing perceptions at a more detailed level, which allows researchers or seize subtle variations in students' perceptions that might be hidden in overall

averages. Examining the percentage of responses for each statement clarifies which aspects of differentiated learning are most and least accepted by the participants. The following table presents the distribution of respondents' answers for each item across the four dimensions.

Table 2. Student's Perception of Differentiated Learning

Question No.	Responses (%)			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	0	2.9	94.3	2.9
2	0	0	82.9	17.1
3	0	2.9	85.7	11.4
4	0	8.6	77.1	14.3
5	0	11.4	77.1	11.4
6	0	5.7	82.9	11.4
7	0	11.4	82.9	5.7
8	0	2.9	88.6	8.6
9	0	2.9	94.3	2.9
10	0	2.9	71.4	25.7
11	0	5.7	77.1	17.1
12	0	11.4	71.4	17.1
13	0	2.9	80	17.1
14	0	5.7	74.3	20
15	0	2.9	85.7	11.4
16	0	2.9	22.9	74.3
17	0	8.6	71.4	20
18	0	14.3	74.3	11.4
19	0	2.9	22.9	74.3
20	0	2.9	85.7	11.4

To determine the tendency of respondents' perception towards differentiated learning, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on four main dimensions, namely Acceptance of Differentiated Learning (D1), Instructional Strategies (D2), Learning Environment (D3), and Learning Outcomes (D4). This analysis involves the minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation of each dimension.

The descriptive statistics were calculated based on the average score of each respondent within each dimension. For example, the mean score of D1 (Acceptance of Differentiated Learning) was obtained by averaging five item responses under that dimension for each student, followed by computing the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation across all respondents (N = 35). The same procedure was applied to D2, D3, and D4. The results of descriptive statistics for each dimension are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Summary of Descriptive Statistics of Each Dimensions

Dimensions	Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
D1_mean	5	35	2,6	3,8	3,063	,2263
D2_mean	5	35	2,6	4,0	3,057	,2500
D3_mean	5	35	2,6	4,0	3,149	,3302
D4_mean	5	35	2,6	4,0	3,114	,3371
Valid_N		35				

Based on the descriptive data, all dimensions show mean values above 3.00, indicating a positive tendency of respondents towards differentiated learning. The dimension with the highest mean is D3 (Learning Environment) at 3.149, while the lowest is D2 (Instructional Strategies) at 3.057. The maximum value on dimension D1 (Acceptance of Differentiated Learning) only reached 3.8, lower than the other dimensions which reached 4.0. This indicates that none of the respondents showed maximum acceptance of differentiated learning.

Compared to the 4-point Likert scale, the standard deviations (0.22–0.33) are relatively low, indicating that students' perceptions across the four dimensions did not vary widely.

Table 4. Categorized Likert Scale Ranges

Score Range	Category
1.00 - 1.75	Very Negative
1.76 - 2.50	Negative
2.51 - 3.25	Positive
3.26 - 4.00	Very Positive

This categorization helps to interpret the respondents' perceptions more meaningfully, indicating that overall, participants tended to have positive to very positive perceptions toward differentiated learning strategies and environments. The relatively consistent standard deviations across dimensions also suggest a fairly uniform agreement among respondents. For example, the results of D1 in the Table. 3 indicate that students largely accepted differentiated learning as a fair and inclusive approach. The high mean scores suggest that students valued being given opportunities to learn in ways that matched their individual strengths and preferences (Norhasanah et al., 2022; Pujiantini, 2020). They will react positively when instruction was adjusted to their needs, in this case, their learning style which made their confidence increased in studying English.

Students may be more receptive and engaged when they feel their learning space is supportive and accommodating. However, the lower mean score in D2 indicates potential gaps in how teachers implement differentiation in practice. While differentiated instructions requires significant teacher commitment and time, properly designed classes that caters students' preference may even be reused in future heterogeneous settings. This aligns with Tajik et al. (2024) who found that differentiated instruction is practical to implement in mixed-level, large, and heterogeneous classrooms when supported by careful planning and adaptive strategies. Students will feel open to differentiated learning since they may consistently experience a variety of instructional approaches that align with their individual needs.

The result of descriptive statistics for D3 implies a generally favorable student attitude toward differentiated learning, especially in terms of the learning environment. Students were happier with the strategy when group work were emphasized (Sajidin & Ashadi, 2021). Moreover when they were grouped similar learning style. They tend to actively discuss an issue with the same procedure. In this case, however, the researcher observe that students with auditory style were facing difficulty in their learning process as they need an extra-focus for their listening phase, as they may got easily distracted by the background noise that other students made (Goodarzi et al., 2024). They were the most affected with the learning environment compared to other groups.

In the learning outcomes (D4), students feel that their awareness of their learning outcome is improved. Students reported greater confidence in applying language rules and transform their ideas into structured sentences. When tasks are adapted to students' strengths, they are more likely to achieve accuracy and fluency in language skills. Prior study shown that differentiated instruction positively affect students' ability to construct grammatically correct sentences and foster their language development (Istiqomah & Apoko, 2025; Mehany, 2019). However, additional challenge shows the gap for further research on student-level ability in differentiated EFL classrooms.

Between these student perceptions and instructional delivery, teachers need to reflect on how instructional strategies can be diversified to match students' learning preferences (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic). Moreover, since the Acceptance dimension (D1) did not reach the maximum score, it highlights the need for better communication, student involvement, or scaffolding to help learners fully understand and embrace differentiated methods. These results suggest teachers should communicate a better learning activity with their students by what kind of differentiation that students are prefer to experience. These results also suggest that effective implementation of differentiated learning is not only about designing inclusive content, but also about creating an environment and strategy that students actively recognize as beneficial. Students are free to choose their preference in the process, content, product, and learning environment. Therefore, schools and teachers may

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning in the English classroom was generally well-received by students, particularly in aspects related to learning environment and learning outcomes. Students in the classroom felt that learning activities tailored to their preferred styles: visual, auditory, or kinesthetic group learning to meet their expectations and enhanced their language and comprehension. However, the slightly lower average in the instructional strategies dimension suggests that while students appreciate the concept of differentiated instruction, its practical application may still need refinement. It points to a critical need for ongoing teacher training and resource development to ensure that differentiation is not only conceptually understood but also effectively implemented within the EFL classroom.

The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on differentiated instruction by emphasizing the importance of aligning instructional strategies with students' learning preferences in a manageable and realistic classroom setting. A possible conceptual insight that emerged from the data is that effective differentiation requires not only variety in instructional delivery but also the inclusion of student agency, allowing students to feel involved in how they learn. However, this study is limited by its focus on a single grade level within one school, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Future research should consider longitudinal studies across multiple schools and incorporate observational data or teacher perspectives to gain a more holistic understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of differentiated learning.

In conclusion, while this research affirms the positive responses and potential of differentiated instruction in promoting more inclusive English learning, it also highlights the needs of strategic planning, teacher preparedness, and contextual adaptability in achieving its full impact. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore these phenomena.

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