

**DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN TEACHING SPEAKING:  
CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research explores the challenges faced by English teacher in implementing differentiated learning methods, particularly in speaking skills and investigates the solutions toward the problems. The study uses a qualitative method with case study design. As it was employed to describe the experiences of an English teacher at a high school in Surabaya who applied the differentiation learning method. The respondent of this research is an English teacher who is employing differentiated learning. This research used interviews and observations to collect the data. The results showed that the teacher faced several challenges in using differentiated learning in teaching speaking. The challenges are selecting content that suits students' level ability, managing passive students, and dealing with students with confidence, anxiety, and vocabulary and grammar issues as a product of learning. The learning environment also presents challenges, such as noise and classroom facilities. In addition, the data also revealed that teacher found solutions toward the problems, such as providing multiple texts, allowing active students to speak in turns, offering design products based on negotiation, and calming the class to maintain concentration. These solutions have made students comfortable in learning, as they are tailored to their skills, character, learning styles, and needs.

*Keywords:* Differentiated learning, Teaching challenges, Teaching speaking

**A. INTRODUCTION**

Speaking skills play a crucial role in language teaching, thereby making them a significant object for assessment (Luoma, 2010). It is also challenging both for learning and teaching (Pakula, 2019). Besides, there is no doubt that proficiency in each skill is necessary to become a well-rounded communicator, but the ability to speak skillfully provides speakers with several distinct advantages. The main advantages of speaking skills are to participate actively in pair or group activities in the classrooms, participate actively in debates and group discussions, and develop critical thinking among the learners. Therefore, speaking skills are the most important method of communication (Oktavia, 2024). In everyday life, people who are good at speaking can get several benefits such as understanding their interlocutors' words, obtaining the information they want, explaining something easily, and even being more successful in their careers (Cole et al., 2007).

Concerning the theory about differentiated learning in speaking activities, the researchers encountered a case in one of the high schools in Surabaya, namely diverse needs and abilities to understand the material. Still, students possess various speaking abilities, so teachers must adjust their abilities to achieve maximum purpose (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013a). In the adjustment process, teacher experiences several challenges and difficulties due to these differences. The problems need to be solved so that learning goals can be achieved. Therefore, the researchers investigated this research to find out the challenges and solutions to overcome them in implementing differentiated learning and describe it.

Moreover, differentiated learning or differentiated instruction (DI) is a way of recognizing and teaching according to different student talents and learning styles. DI is based on Howard Gardner's theory that students learn through various intelligences. Smets et al (2022a) mentioned that DI is crucial for thoroughly examining the obstacles and challenges faced by teachers in meeting the diverse learning requirements of students in inclusive classrooms, thereby aiding students in reaching their maximum capabilities (Smets et al., 2022b). DI is an effective teaching method for effectively managing classes that consist of students with diverse levels of competence (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

According to the result of a previous study written by Suryati et al (2023) entitled "Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction in Teaching English at One of West Java Junior High School", the challenges in implementing DI faced by teachers and schools. The teachers encountered difficulties in terms of time and exertion required for planning and structuring the learning process, as well as a dearth of help from their colleagues. The school had difficulties mostly related to staffing and the preparedness of the students (Suryati et al., 2023). Research on differentiated learning also has been conducted by (Sulistianingrum et al., 2023) with the title "Differentiated Learning: The Implementation of Student Sensory Learning Styles in Creating Differentiated Content" The results of the study showed that: (1) students' sensory learning styles were implemented in the creation of differentiated content; (2) several factors contribute to the implementation of students' sensory learning styles in creating differentiated content, including internal factors and external factors. In 2019, an article investigated, "The Nature of Cooperative Learning and Differentiated Instruction Practices in English Classes." The findings of the study reveal that English language teachers consider cooperative learning as a valuable instructional procedure for promoting learners' engagement, classroom social interaction, cultural appreciation, and differentiated instruction (Ismail & Al Allaq, 2019).

Although various studies with different researchers about differentiated learning have been conducted, there are still several things that need to be developed, such as unspecified school level and solutions of challenges in research by Suryati et al (2023), incompleteness of aspects regarding the application of differentiated learning in the research of Sulistianingrum et al (2023) and lack of focus on skills in learning English that must be mastered in research by Ismail & Al Allaq (2019). Therefore, the researchers investigated the teacher's challenges and solutions for employing differentiated learning to adjust students' speaking ability in Senior High School hoping that other educators who are coping with teaching speaking can also obtain the benefits of employing the same method in their language classroom. The purpose of this study is to discuss the process of employing differentiated learning in the classroom, to describe the challenges in employing differentiated learning in senior high school, and to describe the solution to overcome the challenges faced in employing differentiated learning in senior high school.

## **B. METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach because it aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research participant. This includes explaining behavior, perception, motivation, behavior, etc. as a whole, in terms of language and certain natural contexts, using various natural methods (Moleong, 1993). The researchers tried to figure out what the challenges of the teacher are. Therefore, this study is categorized as a case study because it tried to observe one specific case. The steps in investigating this study were interviewing and observing. The interview was conducted with semi-structured interview questions. After conducting a semi-structured interview, the researchers conducted some observation. This study was conducted at one of the senior high schools in Surabaya which has implemented the Kurmer (Kurikulum Merdeka), especially in English lessons. There was one English teacher who was a participant in this study. She was chosen for this research because she had implemented differentiated learning in the classes. The researchers conducted observations in classes that matched the participant's recommendations. The researchers prepared open-ended questions. The question is about four aspects of differentiated learning strategy. The teacher can differentiate instruction in four ways: content, process, product, and learning environment and atmosphere. The researchers required an observation checklist. She has adapted the checklist table from the internet and book resources according to the topic needs.

To analyze the data, the researchers used stages of familiarizing and organizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. After collecting the data from the field, the researchers familiarize and organize them. According to Ary et al (2009), this stage must be done to make the data retrieved easily. First, the researchers familiarize with the data she has obtained such as video or voice recording, transcripts, and field notes. For this, the researchers re-listened to audio recordings while interviewing participant and tried to make field notes to write down the general views found. The researchers also re-read the notes during classroom observation. Listening to the voice recording several times makes it easier for researchers to get the information she is looking for. After that, the researchers organized the data into two categories, namely challenges and solutions. Coding is making concepts from bare data. A set of codes is a representative of information that the researchers wanted to find, has already figured out, or even interesting that is going to be found. In this stage, the researchers categorized the data into some codes so that the collection of the data would be brief and concise. Here the researchers presented the data from the participant based on categories and gave the description. Therefore, in this stage, the researchers represented the findings from the previous steps.

## **C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. The Challenges in Employing DI in Teaching Speaking**

Tomlinson & Moon, 2013b, cited in Kristiani et al (2021) said that differentiated learning includes aspects of content, process, product, and learning environment and atmosphere. Apart from that, the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) asked all schools to implement a differentiated learning process as a requirement of having implemented Kurmer. The research findings reveal that in implementing a differentiated learning the participant faced challenges deal with the four aspects.

### **The Problems Related to the Content**

Based on the observation results, it was showed that in implementing this differentiated teaching method, the participants were provided various exposition texts. There were 5 groups with different learning styles and levels. The participant had already classified them based on the results of the students' psychological tests and scores on the diagnostic test. The results of the diagnostic test indicated that there were students with low, medium, and high levels. It was supported by the data from interview. It can be shown from this excerpt:

*P: "I hold many classes starting from grades 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>. In each class, there are approximately 30 students. Where every student has a different character. So my challenge is how to make students comfortable with my class, provide appropriate materials, the material is delivered well, they understand the material and keep them in character from the beginning to the end of the lesson."*

The data showed that the teacher had difficulty in adjusting the teaching materials with the students' level ability. It is in line with the statement of Tomlinson & Moon (2013b) that the way to create content must be adjusting what the teacher will teach or what will be studied by students based on the student's level of readiness and interest and using varied materials.

### **The Problems Related to the Process**

According to the interview, the challenges experienced by participant are students' different talents and interests, students who are still working on assignments from previous subjects so that their focus is divided, and some of them like to work individually so when they are in a group, they will be passive or even do the task alone. It can be shown from this excerpt:

*P: "There are classes that like to be in groups because they have their circle so they are more comfortable when studying in groups, discussing, and so on. There are also competitive classes, so they tend to prefer working on assignments individually."*

The data above indicates that teachers' challenges in implementing DI is related to students' different interest and learning style. It is also supported by the data from observation. The observation results showed that in the process of learning, the participant equalized their activities by providing all groups with texts and asking them to read. However, within each group, some students have kinesthetic and auditory learning styles. Reading only supports visual-type students. During the learning process, the data from observation revealed that the teacher asks all students to read and analyze texts only. This means that students with kinesthetic and auditory learning styles do not receive suitable processes.

According to Gardner & Hatch (1989), students have different learning styles such as visual, kinesthetic, and auditory. Teachers are advised to group students based on their learning styles. The theory supports teachers' actions in forming groups based on learning styles. Groups A and B consist of kinesthetic students, groups C and D consist of auditory students, and groups E consist of a mix of auditory and visual learners. In this framework, students may excel in learning through different modalities, such as visual (using images and spatial understanding), kinesthetic (using body movement and hands-on experiences), and auditory (using sound and music) [Click or tap here to enter text..](#) This theory suggests that understanding and accommodating these diverse intelligences can enhance learning and teaching effectiveness. In addition, Noviska & Anastasia (2023) claims that kinesthetic learners, who learn best through hands-on experiences and movement, teachers might incorporate activities such as experiments,

simulations, role-plays, or physical exercises into their lessons. For auditory learners, who prefer learning through listening and speaking, teachers might include discussions, debates, oral presentations, or audio recordings as instructional strategies.

### **The Problem Related to the Product**

Concerning students' speaking product, the interview results reveal the participant found students' difficulties in speaking due to their inconfidence, anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and lack of grammar. Their self-confidence is lacking due to verbal teasing and lack of support from classmates. Their anxiety is high when they hear the words "speaking test" and two-way communication with the teacher. Their vocabulary knowledge is lacking due to a lack of reading. From middle to lower levels, students have difficulty using correct grammar when speaking.

According to Jaya et al (2022), the most common difficulties faced by students in speaking are confidence, anxiety, vocabulary, and grammar. The participant admitted that students did experience difficulties in these aspects. This discovery was also supported by Asriyani et al (2019) that improving students' speaking aspect and competency needs some treatment that the teacher understands in practice. The teacher must know what difficulties their students are experiencing. Thus, teacher can focus on overcoming these difficulties. This theory implies that improving students' competency in speaking is not as easy as we think. Generally, speaking aspects for assessment are divided into five: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension (Harris, 1969). While, according to the observation, the participant only used fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension. The participant did not use grammar as an assessment standard because it was too difficult for lower-intermediate level students.

### **The Problem Related to the Learning Environment**

Based on the researcher's observations when conducting research there, the first obstacle was that the classroom was only partitioned off by wooden walls so that the sound from the next class was noisy which would disturb students' focus, especially when students were listening. The second is the issue of air conditioning which is often problematic. The narrow space of the room causes the occupants to feel hot and stuffy, especially when the air conditioner is damaged. This disrupts students' focus. These research findings supported Sulistianingrum et al (2023) that experienced challenges with internal and external factors in teaching. Internal factors include the teacher's educational background and teaching practices in the classroom. The external factors consist of facilities infrastructure, and time. Apart from the place, based on the researcher's observations some students don't like doing assignments in class because it's too crowded. Meanwhile, it requires high concentration to complete it. Then some students lack confidence in class so when doing assignments and being seen by the teacher or friends next to them they feel uncomfortable., there are students in class who when using the online dictionary have to write down all the text, not word by word. They were embarrassed when a friend or participant saw the process because they felt they couldn't.

## **2. The Teacher's Solutions toward The Challenges**

The data from interviews and observations revealed that participant has several solutions to overcome the problems.

### **Teacher's Solution of the Problem in Content**

The solution taken by teachers when facing obstacles in making lesson plans in the form of diverse student characters is to observe the learning styles, characters, abilities, and needs of each student. One way is by learning by doing so that flying hours are very influential in getting to know the student's character. After finding out, participant began to choose the appropriate material according to the student's level. For new students, participant invited students to chat in person either during the learning process or outside, create fun quizzes, and provide daily tests.

Related to the content, this solution is dynamic so it requires the development of processes and knowledge that must be conducted by the participant. The school's planning or preparation for implementing the Kurmer is with the readiness of the teacher and the teacher's understanding of the Kurmer so that before implementing it, the teacher gets training on independence. Planning has been carried out by teachers including the preparation of learning objectives (TP) and the flow of learning goals (ATP), the creation of teaching modules, the implementation of initial assessments or diagnostic assessments, and the planning of learning steps (Wijayanti, 2023). As stated by Richards & Bohlke (2011), creating a lesson plan manifests the teacher's professional standards and values, and it aims to achieve certain learning objectives.

### **Teacher's Solution of the Problem in Process**

The observation results revealed that participant invited their students to freely choose members of the group. Findings also showed that participants invited students who could not speak actively in class because it was busy to get special treatment outside of class. This method is used by teachers so that students can speak even with two-way communication. Tomlinson & Moon (2013b) said that the activities carried out in the learning process must have criteria that use skills and information that students have and differ in terms of the level of difficulty and how to achieve it. The process will affect the resulting product. Groupings can also be created based on the interests of students of the same type and level whether the readiness is different or the same depends on learning objectives (Kristiani et al., 2021).

### **Teacher's Solution of the Problem in Product**

The research findings reveal that in that class, most of the students like to talk. Therefore, the participant hopes that the product produced will be in the form of speaking. Moreover, the material at that time is exposition text where students are expected to express opinions about an event. When students presented to show their products, the participant provided opportunities for students who received less than optimal assessments in speaking. Thus, the participant improves the lesson plan that has been created. These students are invited to create digital designs about hortatory exposition text according to their interests. Then, to achieve the learning objective that has been created, namely speaking, the teacher asks the students to explain the poster via WhatsApp voice notes. In education, product differentiation involves allowing students to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of content through varied forms of assessment or projects. Rather than all students completing the same assessment or project in the same way, teachers offer choices or options that cater to students' interests, learning styles, and strengths (Reis & Renzulli, 2018).

### **Teacher's Solution of the Learning Environment Problem**

According to the interview result, to overcome problems related to facilities and infrastructure such as air conditioning that is not cold, the participant complained to facilities

and infrastructure staff because it disrupts students' focus on learning in class. Hence, the teacher also opened the door to reduce the heat. Based on the observation, in case of crowds due to noise from the next class, the participant went to the noisy classroom and reprimanded the class so that it was not crowded because it disrupted the teaching and learning process. Participant cannot overcome challenges like this in full because they relate to school facilities. Besides, based on the observation, the participant provides special treatment such as giving them the freedom to do their assignments at home and inviting them to study outside the classroom like in the library, so the atmosphere is calm. The findings indicate that the participant provides opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom if they feel uncomfortable inside. Teachers do this to provide a comfortable learning environment for students. This is supported by the Constructivism theory written by Ertmer & Newby (1993), that allowing students to study in environments where they feel comfortable can enhance their ability to engage with learning materials and construct meaning.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings and discussions above, it is possible to conclude that the teacher has some challenges in implementing differentiated learning in teaching speaking. These challenges include four aspects such as content, process, product, and learning environment. When designing content, participant experienced difficulties when creating lesson plans. While, in the process of class activities, the challenges deal with passive students. In addition, students' self-confidence, anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and lack of grammar and an unconducive learning environment also become the challenges in implementing differentiated learning. In addition, the data also revealed that the participant proposed several solutions to overcome all of the problems such as offering appropriate content based on each student's needs, creating interesting activities or offering passive pupils the option of making digital, and having a comfortable teaching and learning process helps students concentrate in class.

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