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DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN INCLUSIVE EFL CLASSROOMS: A TWO-CYCLE CASE STUDY FROM INDONESIA

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Abstract: The implementation of inclusive classrooms is a mandated educational policy in Indonesia, requiring schools to accommodate students with diverse learning needs, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Within this framework, this study investigates how differentiated instruction (DI) is enacted in an inclusive junior high school EFL classroom in Cirebon and examines its influence on students' academic engagement and affective experiences. This study provides the first systematic documentation of all four DI components, including content, process, product, and learning environment, across two instructional cycles in an Indonesian inclusive EFL classroom, with disaggregated analysis of student responses by learning profile. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, formative assessments, teacher reflections, and semi structured interviews, enabling methodological triangulation across the two cycles. The findings show that the teacher implemented multiple forms of differentiation, particularly in content and process, through strategies such as recorded word lists, peer assisted learning, group discussions, visual scaffolds, and tiered tasks. As instruction progressed, these strategies were refined to respond more consistently to students' diverse readiness levels and learning challenges. Student experiences varied by learning profile: auditory learners showed strong academic engagement but limited affective involvement; kinesthetic learners demonstrated balanced participation; and verbal social learners benefited most from collaborative activities. Students with SEN were supported through extended time, visual aids, and peer mentoring, while independent learners responded positively to opportunities for creative autonomy. Overall, the study shows that differentiated instruction enhances equitable access to EFL learning while fostering motivation, confidence, and belonging in heterogeneous classrooms.

Keywords: *differentiated instruction; Special Educational Needs/SEN; inclusive EFL classroom.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, education systems worldwide have progressively embraced the principle of inclusion, which emphasizes that all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), deserve equitable access to meaningful educational experiences in mainstream classrooms. This paradigm shift underscores the importance of integrating students with diverse physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs into regular schools, thereby fostering environments where diversity is not only present but also valued. In the Indonesian context, the move toward inclusion has been reinforced through national regulation, particularly Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 70 of 2009, which guarantees that students with SEN, including those with disabilities as well as those identified as gifted or talented, hold the legal right to participate in inclusive education programs tailored to their individual abilities and needs (Goldan et al., 2022; Masturdin, 2025; Olanrewaju Adebisi, 2024; Pozas et al., 2021; Şaban & Atay, 2023). However, despite robust policy foundations, implementation challenges remain stark.

According to a 2018 Indonesian household survey (SUSENAS) (Badan Pusat Statistik

Indonesia, 2018; UNESCO, 2017), nearly three in ten children with disabilities have never attended school, and many who are enrolled face insufficient support to follow through with their education. It is also highlighted that of approximately 330,764 children with special needs aged 5–18 years, only about 85,737 are currently enrolled in school (Raza, 2018; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022). Evidence from systematic reviews shows that regular classroom teachers frequently face challenges in meeting the diverse learning needs of SEN students, compounded by the limited availability of specialist support and insufficient infrastructure for full inclusion (Hermawan, 2025; Padmadewi et al., 2020; Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). These findings collectively demonstrate serious gaps between policy and practice and reinforce the urgency for pedagogical innovation, strengthened teacher training, and institutional support to ensure meaningful inclusion in EFL classrooms as well as in broader education settings (Goldan et al., 2022; Källkvist et al., 2024; Pozas et al., 2021).

While inclusive education and differentiated instruction (DI) represent distinct concepts within pedagogical discourse, they are fundamentally intertwined in practice. Inclusive education promotes the participation of all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), regardless of their physical, intellectual, or socio-cultural backgrounds, within the same learning environment (Khiadthong & Jansem, 2025; Padauleng et al., 2025; Ramadhiyah & Lengkanawati, 2019; Ramaila, 2025; Tajik et al., 2024). Differentiated instruction, on the other hand, provides the methodological tools necessary to make inclusion meaningful by enabling teachers to tailor learning experiences to the varying needs of students. This connection is especially crucial in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, where learners not only come from diverse socio-cultural and cognitive backgrounds but also face the additional challenge of mastering a language not used in daily communication.

Global academic discourse highlights differentiated instruction (DI) as a critical pedagogical framework for addressing learner diversity and ensuring equitable participation in inclusive education. Several Studies showed that students' perceptions of DI practice are positively associated with their school well-being, sense of social inclusion, and academic self-concept, particularly in secondary school inclusive and regular classrooms (Montalbano et al., 2024; Pozas et al., 2021). In China, during COVID-19, two extensive reading programs implemented DI in online EFL classes using tiered materials, flexible pacing, and varied product forms, although the online modality limited collaborative affective interaction and learning environment factors (Ma et al., 2022). Moreover, a meta-analysis of professional development in differentiated instruction across many countries found that PDs can significantly improve teacher knowledge, attitudes, and implementation practices of DI, though the effect on student learning outcomes was less consistent (Bhandari et al., 2025; Bleukx et al., 2024; Gheyssens et al., 2023; Kahmann et al., 2022). In the Indonesian EFL inclusive context, DI emerges as a practical necessity, not a luxury, for meaningful inclusion of SEN students. Local case studies show that DI is being applied (e.g. through differentiated content, process, product, and assessments) to support SEN learners, but implementation challenges remain significant: limitations in teacher training, resource allocation, infrastructure, large class sizes, and lack of consistent institutional support (Hermawan, 2025; Liang & Zou, 2025; Rafi & Pourdana, 2023). These findings, combined with the international evidence, emphasize that policy alone is insufficient; what is needed is robust teacher professional development, effective adaptations in learning environment, and an instructional design that is responsive to learner readiness, interest, and profile.

Creating a truly inclusive classroom requires more than placing students with diverse needs in the same physical space; it demands intentional instructional strategies that recognize and respond to learner variability. In this regard, differentiated instruction (DI) plays a pivotal role in actualizing the ideals of inclusive education. While inclusion emphasizes equal participation for all learners, DI provides the pedagogical mechanisms to accommodate different readiness levels, learning styles, and interests (Tomlinson, et al. 2013). This is particularly significant in the Indonesian context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), where students encounter the dual challenge of limited exposure to English outside the classroom and diverse linguistic, cultural, and cognitive backgrounds (Aprianti & Winarto, 2021; Roiha et al., 2025; Sun, 2023; Terletska, 2024). Rather than treating all students the same, DI promotes fairness by allowing flexible approaches to teaching and assessment, such as scaffolding reading tasks, using multimodal materials, or providing alternative ways to demonstrate understanding. Recent studies affirm that integrating DI within

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inclusive EFL settings enables educators to maintain a unified curriculum while offering multiple entry points and learning pathways (Aprianti, 2017; Chen, 2016; Ghavamnia, 2020; Roiha et al., 2025; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019; Tajik et al., 2024). In such environments, students with special needs and their peers engage collaboratively in shared English learning processes, supported by responsive instruction that affirms their unique potentials and fosters meaningful language acquisition.

Differentiated Instruction (DI), as theorized by Tomlinson, underscores a proactive and responsive pedagogical orientation that systematically attends to the heterogeneous profiles of learners through the differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment. These dimensions are especially salient in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy within the Indonesian context, where disparities in linguistic exposure, proficiency trajectories, and sociocultural learning backgrounds are particularly pronounced (Fantaye Kocha & Senapathy, 2022; Gheyssens et al., 2023; Lintangsari & Emaliana, 2020; Mansoor et al., 2025; Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). In terms of content, EFL educators are often required to recalibrate reading passages or auditory texts to accommodate varying lexical repertoires and levels of interpretive competence. Regarding process, the deployment of scaffolding techniques, peer-mediated dialogic tasks, and tiered grammatical exercises allows learners to engage with English in alignment with their cognitive readiness and affective dispositions (Chan, 2022; Hilal et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). With respect to product, the provision of multimodal assessment avenues such as oral expositions, reflective writing, and semiotic-rich visual artifacts legitimizes diverse learner strengths while reinforcing target language production. Finally, the orchestration of the learning environment necessitates a balance between collaborative knowledge construction and individualized instructional scaffolds, cultivating an inclusive ecology wherein students across ability spectra, including those with special educational needs, are empowered to participate meaningfully (Climaco et al., 2025). Consequently, Tomlinson's DI framework not only advances equity and inclusivity but also augments the pedagogical efficacy of EFL instruction by safeguarding equitable access to rigorous curricular objectives without compromising academic integrity.

A substantial body of scholarship has increasingly examined the pedagogical utility of Differentiated Instruction (DI) within inclusive education, underscoring its capacity to accommodate learner diversity, particularly for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Thomlinson, 2014; Thomlinson, 2017). Research demonstrates that Indonesian teachers employing DI exhibit heightened sensitivity to learners' readiness levels and preferences, though their practices are frequently constrained by insufficient institutional scaffolding (Carvalho et al., 2023; Mansoor et al., 2025; Pinweha, 2025; Yuen et al., 2023). It is also highlighted taht the pivotal role of teacher beliefs and sustained professional development in mediating the fidelity and effectiveness of DI implementation in inclusive classrooms. Within broader comparative scholarship, evidence affirms that DI contributes positively to SEN students' academic self-concept, social participation, and school well-being when enacted with contextual appropriateness (Montalbano et al., 2024; Olanrewaju Adebisi, 2024; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Collectively, these studies consolidate both the theoretical salience and practical indispensability of DI for fostering equitable educational opportunities across SEN and non-SEN populations.

Nevertheless, a critical gap persists in the literature: much of the extant research privileges general education or subject domains beyond English language instruction. In the EFL context, inquiries into DI remain relatively underdeveloped, particularly within inclusive settings. While studies such as Alhameedyeen (2023), Gourvennec (202), and Korotkov and Yarrow, (2022) have investigated differentiated strategies in English classrooms, they seldom interrogate the pedagogical complexities inherent in environments where SEN learners and their mainstream peers co-construct knowledge. Furthermore, the preponderance of available research gravitates toward teacher perceptions and theoretical expositions, with comparatively fewer classroom-based, practice-oriented investigations into how DI is operationalized in authentic EFL teaching ecologies.

More specifically, prior research has examined differentiated instruction in Indonesian inclusive classrooms primarily through teacher perceptions. For example, Hermawan (2025) focused on teachers' perceptions of the challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, while Padmadewi and Artini (2017) examined the experience of teaching a single student with autism in a regular classroom. International scholarship

has likewise explored DI in EFL contexts, yet much of this work relies predominantly on teacher self-reports rather than systematic classroom observation (Tajik et al., 2024). Consequently, empirical accounts of how differentiated instruction unfolds in inclusive EFL classrooms remain limited, particularly in relation to how diverse learner profiles respond to differentiated pedagogical practices. Moreover, few studies triangulate classroom observations with students' perspectives to illuminate how differentiated practices are experienced by learners themselves.

To address these limitations, this study makes three contributions to the literature on differentiated instruction in inclusive EFL classrooms. (1) It provides the first systematic documentation of the implementation of the four core components of differentiated instruction including content, process, product, and learning environment, across two instructional cycles in an Indonesian junior high school inclusive EFL classroom. (2) It offers a disaggregated analysis of how diverse learner profiles, including auditory, kinesthetic, verbal-social, independent, and students with special educational needs (SEN), respond differently to differentiated instructional practices. (3) It triangulates classroom observational data with student voice, thereby providing emic insights into how learners experience differentiated instruction in authentic instructional contexts.

Despite growing policy support for inclusive education in Indonesia, the scarcity of empirical research on the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in inclusive EFL classrooms, particularly at the junior high school level in Indonesia, signals a pressing need for more context-specific inquiry. While national policies mandate inclusive education, little is known about how EFL teachers systematically design, adapt, and enact DI to accommodate students' diverse linguistic abilities, learning preferences, and cognitive readiness. Existing studies often stop at policy analysis or teacher perceptions, leaving classroom realities underexplored. This underscores the importance of examining how DI is operationalized in practice and how teachers negotiate the pedagogical, institutional, and logistical constraints inherent in inclusive settings.

In response, the present study investigates the enactment of DI in an inclusive EFL classroom with a focus on four core dimensions including content, process, product, and learning environment. Particular attention is given to how teachers scaffold tasks, manage heterogeneous groups, and integrate adaptive strategies to ensure equitable participation of both students with and without special educational needs (Abdulpatta, 2025; Upa et al., 2024). Furthermore, the study explores enabling factors, such as collaborative practices and student agency, alongside challenges related to material design, assessment, and workload. By anchoring the analysis in actual classroom implementation, this study contributes empirically grounded insights that extend beyond theory, offering practical implications for teacher professional development, curriculum planning, and policy refinement. Ultimately, the findings aim to strengthen inclusive EFL pedagogy and advance equitable access to meaningful language learning opportunities.

Teachers occupy a central position in determining the effectiveness of learning within inclusive classrooms. As the primary facilitators of instruction, they are expected not only to identify but also to responsively address the diverse learning needs of all students, including those with special educational needs. Yet, classroom observations often reveal a persistent reliance on traditional lecture-based approaches that prioritize rote memorization rather than fostering active engagement, higher-order thinking, and skill development. Such practices tend to marginalize students who require individualized support and adaptive instructional methods, thereby constraining their opportunities for meaningful participation.

Against this backdrop, Differentiated Instruction (DI) emerges as a pedagogical framework with strong relevance for inclusive classrooms. By modifying content, process, and products in alignment with students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, DI enables teachers to create more equitable and purposeful learning experiences. This approach sustains learner engagement, mitigates frustration, and cultivates a sense of achievement among heterogeneous student populations. Building on these pedagogical imperatives, the present study explores the enactment of DI within an inclusive junior high school EFL classroom in Cirebon. Specifically, it examines the strategies teachers employed, the challenges they encountered, and the opportunities that arose while implementing DI in an 8th-grade class during the even semester. The study seeks to generate empirically grounded insights that can inform professional development, strengthen inclusive EFL pedagogy, and advance equitable access to language learning.

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METHOD

This research employed a qualitative case study design, which was deemed the most suitable methodological framework for interrogating the pedagogical intricacies of differentiated instruction (DI) within an inclusive EFL classroom (Creswell, W. John & Creswell, 2018). The case study approach provides a means to capture the situated, context-dependent realities of teaching and learning, enabling an in-depth analysis of how teacher decision-making, learner heterogeneity, and adaptive instructional practices intersect in real time. Rather than seeking generalizable patterns through experimental or survey-based designs, this inquiry prioritized ecological validity by examining a bounded instructional setting namely, a junior high school classroom comprising both mainstream and SEN students. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis across two instructional cycles to ensure methodological triangulation and trustworthiness. This design facilitated the documentation of pedagogical practices while highlighting the constraints and affordances shaping their enactment, thus offering theoretically grounded and practice-oriented insights into inclusive EFL pedagogy.

The study was conducted in a public junior high school in West Java, Indonesia, which has adopted an inclusive education policy. The focal site was an eighth-grade EFL class during the even semester, consisting of 32 students, including four students identified as having special educational needs (SEN), such as mild intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties. Identification of SEN students was based on school records and teacher reports derived from prior assessments conducted by the school counseling unit, complemented by ongoing classroom observations of students' learning behaviors and academic performance.

One EFL teacher participated as the primary informant in this study. The teacher had more than eight years of teaching experience and had been involved in inclusive education practices for approximately three years. In addition to formal teacher training, the teacher had participated in professional development workshops related to inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction organized by the local education authority. The teacher was purposively selected due to their experience in managing heterogeneous classrooms and implementing adaptive instructional strategies.

Classroom observations were conducted across four sessions spanning two instructional cycles, a design that allows in-depth examination of processes within a bounded context, consistent with qualitative case study principles (Creswell, W. John & Creswell, 2018). Observations were guided by Tomlinson's (2017) differentiation framework, focusing on four key dimensions: content, process, product, and learning environment. The observations aimed to capture how differentiated instructional strategies were enacted and adapted during the learning process. Although the number of observations was limited, the two-cycle design enabled the researchers to document adjustments in instructional practices over time. Students with special educational needs were identified through school records and teacher assessments based on prior academic performance and classroom learning difficulties.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the observational data. The interview participants included the focal teacher and six students representing different learner profiles; auditory, kinesthetic, verbal-social, independent learners, students with special educational needs, including students with and without SEN. Participants were selected purposively to reflect the diversity of learning characteristics present in the classroom. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and explored participants' experiences with differentiated instruction, including perceptions of task difficulty, engagement, collaborative learning, and instructional support. Interview questions also examined how the teacher planned and adapted instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs. To enhance credibility, preliminary interpretations were shared with the teacher for member checking to confirm the accuracy of the observed classroom practices and interview responses.

Document analysis was also conducted on lesson plans, instructional modules, and classroom materials developed under national curriculum guidelines. This analysis examined how differentiated instruction was embedded at the planning stage, particularly in terms of learning objectives, task variation, scaffolding strategies, and assessment design. Comparing these documents with classroom observations allowed the researchers to identify consistencies and discrepancies between planned and enacted instructional practices.

The collected data were analyzed thematically through an iterative coding process. In the initial stage, preliminary codes were derived deductively

from Tomlinson's framework of differentiated instruction (Marin et al., 2013; Rafi & Pourdana, 2023; Thomlinson et al., 2010). Subsequently, additional categories were generated inductively from the field data to capture emergent themes that were not fully addressed by the theoretical framework. This combined deductive–inductive approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of differentiated instruction practices while remaining responsive to the contextual dynamics of the classroom.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was achieved by integrating evidence from classroom observations, interviews, and instructional documents. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with the participating teacher to confirm the accuracy of the descriptions and interpretations of classroom practices. Third, researcher reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos and reflective notes recorded during data collection and analysis to minimize interpretive bias. Through these procedures, the study sought to produce findings that are credible, contextually grounded, and analytically rigorous.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation progress of differentiated instruction in the inclusive efl classroom

The implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in an inclusive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom presents unique instructional demands. Unlike general subject areas, EFL requires learners to simultaneously develop language comprehension, production, and intercultural competence skills that pose significant challenges for students with diverse learning profiles, especially those with special educational needs (SEN). In inclusive EFL settings, the cognitive demands of second language acquisition are compounded by the heterogeneity of learners, ranging from high-achieving students to those with auditory processing disorders, slow processing speed, or limited literacy in the first language.

This study was conducted in an inclusive Grade VIII EFL classroom comprising 32 students. Among them, six students were identified as having special educational needs, based on multiple sources of information including diagnostic assessments, reports from previous homeroom teachers, psychological records, and medical information provided by parents. This identification process served as a critical foundation for the teacher in designing differentiated instructional strategies tailored to the learners' profiles. The detailed distribution of students with special needs is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Profiles of students with special needs in the EFL classroom*

No	Type of Special Educational Need	Number of Students	Primary Identification Method
1	Specific Learning Disability	2	Teacher's diagnostic assessment, previous homeroom reports
2	Language Processing Disorder	1	Teacher's observation, parental interview, psychologist's note
3	Attention Deficit (ADHD)	1	Medical information from parents, classroom behavior observation
4	Mild Intellectual Disability	2	Academic progress reports

Table 1. illustrates the results of student identification obtained through initial diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the academic year, developmental reports from former homeroom teachers, and official information provided by parents, which included medical and psychological documentation. In addition, ongoing classroom observations enabled the teacher to confirm students' learning characteristics and the need for further support. The presence of students with diverse profiles not only presented pedagogical challenges but also provided a representative context for examining the implementation of differentiated instruction in inclusive EFL settings.

This class followed the national curriculum and operated under the inclusive education policy mandated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. The teacher was expected to deliver the standard EFL content outlined in the Learning Outcomes and Instructional Objectives, including reading, vocabulary, and speaking, while simultaneously adapting instruction to address students' readiness levels, learning preferences, and support needs. To respond to this complexity, the teacher implemented differentiated instruction (DI) strategies based on Tomlinson's framework,

encompassing differentiation of content, process, product, and learning environment. Classroom observations were conducted across four sessions, covering two instructional cycles, in order to capture patterns of DI implementation more systematically. In the first cycle (two sessions), the observation focused on lesson planning and the initial enactment of DI strategies, while in the second cycle (two sessions), the emphasis shifted to how the teacher refined and adjusted practices in response to student feedback and classroom dynamics. This iterative observation design provided a comprehensive picture of how DI was operationalized and progressively developed within an inclusive EFL context.

The mapping of differentiated instructional practices in this inclusive EFL classroom is presented as follows:

Table 1. *Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive EFL Classroom*

DI Element	EFL-Based Strategies Implemented by the Teacher	Observed Implementation (%)
Student Mapping	Conducted learning profile survey (auditory, slow learner, high achiever)	87.5%
	Identified students' English proficiency through baseline assessment	100%
Content Differentiation	Simplified English reading texts based on proficiency levels	100%
	Provided picture-word support and tailored vocab lists	87.5%
Process Differentiation	Used audio tools and peer discussion for auditory/verbal learners	100%
Product Differentiation	Allocated extra time and simplified ins students with learning difficulties	
	Applied flexible grouping in speaking/	
	Allowed oral instead of written outputs performance tasks	
	Offered tiered writing tasks adjusted to English levels	
Learning Environment	Provided emotional support and seating SEN students	100%
	Maintained a low-anxiety, collaborative learning setting	100%
Evaluation & Reflection	Reflected on student performance and a teaching module accordingly	
	Provided individualized feedback to all	

The implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in this inclusive EFL classroom was initiated from the very first meeting through a student mapping phase. At this stage, the teacher identified learners' cognitive styles, English language proficiency levels, and special educational needs using a basic English diagnostic test and profile-based grouping. The results of this mapping provided a crucial foundation for designing instructional strategies that aligned with the class profile.

Subsequent observations, conducted from the second to the fourth session, revealed that content and process differentiation were the most consistently applied strategies. In the second session, the teacher introduced differentiated reading materials: simplified texts with visual support for students with special needs, and more complex texts for high-achieving learners. The third session highlighted differentiation of process, where the teacher employed audiovisual aids, small-group discussions, and flexible grouping to accommodate diverse learning styles, particularly auditory learners and those requiring social interaction. The fourth session demonstrated the application of product differentiation, as the teacher offered alternative assessment formats such as oral presentations, short written tasks, or a combination of images and key phrases.

This progression underscores the teacher's commitment not only to ensuring equitable access to content but also to providing meaningful opportunities for expression aligned with students' readiness levels and learning challenges. In terms of the learning environment, the teacher fostered a psychologically safe classroom by providing emotional support and organizing the physical space to promote comfort and engagement. At the end of each instructional cycle, reflective practice was undertaken through reviewing instructional modules, evaluating student outputs, and revising subsequent lessons based on learner feedback and observed learning progress. This cyclical reflection functioned as a critical mechanism for sustaining differentiated instruction in an inclusive EFL classroom where student diversity requires continuous pedagogical adjustment.

These findings resonate with and extend prior research on differentiated instruction in inclusive settings. For instance, Gourvennec (2021) found that teachers implementing differentiated strategies often relied on ongoing formative reflection to adjust tasks and instructional pacing in heterogeneous classrooms. Similarly, Hermawan (2025) reported that teacher responsiveness played a central role in supporting diverse learners in Indonesian inclusive classrooms, particularly through adaptive task design and flexible instructional approaches. However, unlike these studies, which primarily

emphasized teacher perceptions or general instructional strategies, the present study documents how reflective practices are systematically embedded across multiple instructional cycles, enabling teachers to refine differentiation across the four key components of DI including content, process, product, and learning environment. Furthermore, (Abdulpatta, 2025) highlighted the importance of responsive instructional adjustments in inclusive classrooms but focused mainly on instructional planning. In contrast, the present study demonstrates how reflection during classroom implementation directly informs subsequent instructional decisions, thereby sustaining differentiation in real-time teaching contexts. These findings suggest that iterative reflection is not merely a complementary practice but a central mechanism through which differentiated instruction becomes operational and sustainable in inclusive EFL classrooms.

Types of differentiated instruction dominantly applied by the teacher

The teacher's implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in the inclusive EFL classroom followed the four key components of DI as proposed by Tomlinson (2017): content, process, product, and learning environment. Each component was observed in practice, with varying degrees of emphasis based on classroom demands and student profiles.

Content differentiation

Content differentiation emerged as the most consistent and comprehensive component applied by the model teacher throughout the observed lessons. In response to students' varying levels of English proficiency, the teacher modified instructional materials in the form of reading texts and vocabulary lists. Simplified texts were designed for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and beginners, whereas more complex texts with extended vocabulary were prepared for higher-achieving learners. Visual scaffolds, such as picture cards and picture–word pairs, were also integrated to support students experiencing auditory processing or memory difficulties.

In one descriptive text lesson (Cycle 1), the teacher prepared three sets of reading materials at different levels of complexity. For students with intellectual disabilities, materials included illustrations combined with core vocabulary and short repetitive phrases, enabling them to meaningfully connect images with words. For learners with emerging literacy skills, simplified paragraphs with basic sentence structures and limited vocabulary were provided to reduce cognitive load. Meanwhile, advanced learners received full descriptive texts with compound sentences and an extended lexical range to stimulate language development. This tiered approach enabled all students to engage with the same topic, describing people or objects, at levels appropriate to their linguistic readiness. By scaffolding content, the teacher ensured equitable access to the core learning objectives without compromising EFL curriculum standards.

In second cycle, content differentiation was reinforced through reading materials themed around public places, again presented at varying levels of difficulty. SEN students received picture-based texts accompanied by a list of core vocabulary, intermediate learners worked with short paragraphs using simple sentence patterns, and advanced learners engaged with longer passages containing detailed information. The teacher applied the same strategy with the theme of hobbies and daily activities. Students with intellectual disabilities were provided with repetitive phrases supported by visuals, those with early literacy skills worked with simplified texts focusing on essential vocabulary, and advanced students received narrative passages that required inferential skills.

This tiered approach demonstrates not only how the teacher adapted content to match students' linguistic readiness, but also how all learners remained engaged in a shared theme. The consistent scaffolding of content across sessions provided equitable access to the core learning goals while maintaining EFL curriculum standards. To present these practices more systematically, the following table outlines the student groups, content differentiation strategies, pedagogical objectives, and their observed impact on student engagement and learning development.

Table 3. *Content differentiation analysis result*

Student Group	Materials/Strategies Applied	Pedagogical Objectives	Observed Impact
Students with Special	Illustrated texts, core vocabulary, short and	To support word–image association, reduce cognitive	Students were able to recognize basic vocabulary

Educational Needs (SEN)	repetitive phrases	load, and strengthen memory retention	and associate it with images; increased participation was observed in vocabulary repetition activities.
Students with emerging literacy skills	Simplified paragraphs with basic sentence structures and limited vocabulary	To provide accessible input and facilitate comprehension without overburdening students with complex structures	Students were able to read and understand simplified paragraphs, demonstrating greater confidence when asked to read aloud.
High-achieving students	Extended texts with compound sentences and a broader lexical range	To challenge linguistic development and expand lexical as well as syntactic competence	Students successfully identified more complex descriptive details and produced descriptive sentences with varied structures.
Cross-group strategies	Flashcards, picture–word pairs, visual scaffolding	To support students with auditory or memory processing difficulties	Benefited all student groups, particularly those with working memory challenges, by sustaining active engagement in classroom tasks.

The implementation of content differentiation in English language instruction at junior secondary schools in the Cirebon region demonstrates its effectiveness in bridging gaps in student proficiency. The adaptation of learning materials tailored to diverse needs—ranging from students with intellectual disabilities and emerging literacy skills to high-achieving learners—provides equitable access to curricular goals. Each group engages with content aligned to their linguistic readiness, reducing feelings of being left behind or overwhelmed. This tiered approach enhances engagement as materials remain relevant and comprehensible. Consequently, content differentiation fosters equity while maintaining appropriate curricular challenges for all learners. (Alhameedyeen, 2023) found that differentiated instruction helps teachers adjust learning pathways for diverse learner readiness in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Olanrewaju Adebisi, (2024) reported that process differentiation is commonly used to address varied learning needs. In the present study, differentiation extends beyond process to include systematic adjustments to learning content, enabling students with different proficiency levels to access the same curricular objectives through varied entry points.

Process differentiation

Process differentiation also emerged significantly, particularly in the ways the teacher designed learning tasks and structured classroom interactions. Multiple pathways were provided for students to engage with the material, such as listening activities for auditory learners, group discussions for verbal–social learners, and hands-on tasks for kinesthetic learners. Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) were consistently granted extended time and paired with peers as a form of scaffolded support.

In one vocabulary acquisition activity, the teacher organized students into small groups based on their learning profiles, thereby accommodating diverse ways of processing new English input. Auditory learners practiced with recorded vocabulary lists and repeated each word aloud to strengthen both pronunciation and retention. SEN students were paired with peers and provided with picture cards matched to vocabulary items, allowing them to learn through visual associations and guided interaction. Meanwhile, independent learners were tasked with constructing sentences using the target vocabulary and presenting them orally to the class, which fostered creative language use. This multi-format approach ensured that all students remained actively engaged while reducing cognitive load, particularly for those requiring concrete, structured, or repetitive input to effectively comprehend new linguistic elements.

Table 4. *Analysis of process differentiation*

Student Learning Profile	Teacher Strategy	Activity Format	Academic Impact	Affective Impact
Auditory	Providing	Oral repetition of	Improved	Enhanced

Learners	recorded word lists	vocabulary	pronunciation and memory retention	confidence through repetition
Verbal–Social Learners	Group discussions	Collaborative vocabulary exploration	Strengthened comprehension through interaction	Development of collaboration skills
Kinesthetic Learners	Hands-on practice	Using picture cards and word games	Linking vocabulary to concrete experiences	Learning becomes more enjoyable
SEN Students	Extended time and peer-buddy support	Matching vocabulary with visual prompts	Equal access to core material	Reduced anxiety and increased engagement
Independent Learners	Sentence construction tasks	Creating and presenting original sentences	Enhanced linguistic creativity	Strengthened sense of personal achievement

The implementation of process differentiation in the inclusive EFL classroom was evident not only in the variety of strategies employed by the teacher but also in the outcomes observed across both academic and affective domains. Each group of students, characterized by distinct learning profiles, demonstrated unique responses to the differentiated strategies applied. To sharpen the interpretation of these outcomes, this study relied on formative assessment data collected during the instructional process, including classroom observation notes, student work samples, and teacher reflections after each instructional cycle. Although quantitative values were presented through diagrams, the study remains fundamentally qualitative in nature, as its primary aim was to interpret the meaning and dynamics of classroom practices. The visualization below illustrates the comparative academic and affective impacts of process differentiation across diverse student groups in the inclusive EFL setting (Tajik et al., 2024).

The graph illustrates the outcomes of the analysis on the impact of implementing process differentiation in inclusive EFL instruction at a junior high school in the Cirebon region. The scores presented represent both academic impacts (content mastery, language skills, and vocabulary retention) and affective impacts (motivation, self-confidence, and emotional engagement).

The analysis reveals that students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) demonstrated the highest gains in both academic and affective domains. This can be attributed to additional support mechanisms, such as extended learning time, the use of picture cards, and peer-assisted learning. Auditory learners and kinesthetic learners showed contrasting patterns: auditory learners outperformed in academic achievement but scored lower in affective outcomes, whereas kinesthetic learners displayed relatively balanced results, though with lower academic performance overall. Independent learners excelled in affective dimensions, benefitting from opportunities to create and actively participate in classroom discussions. Meanwhile, the verbal social learners demonstrated a balanced improvement in both academic mastery and emotional engagement through group-based activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that process differentiation effectively accommodates diverse learning profiles within the inclusive EFL classroom. The approach not only enhances academic achievement but also fosters affective engagement, which is crucial for foreign language learning, particularly in classrooms characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity.

Product differentiation

Product differentiation the variation in how students demonstrate their understanding was moderately implemented. While most assessments followed the same rubric, students were sometimes allowed to select how they presented their outcomes, such as oral presentations, written responses, or drawing-based responses for SEN students. At the conclusion of a unit on “My Family,” the teacher allowed students to demonstrate their understanding through multiple output formats, tailored to their individual abilities and preferences. High-achieving students wrote a structured paragraph in English, applying correct grammar and vocabulary to describe their family members in detail. Students with special educational needs were encouraged to present orally, supported by flashcards and visual cues that

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helped them recall and express key information. Meanwhile, other students opted to use a combination of labeled drawings and short English phrases to convey their ideas. This flexible approach enabled all learners to showcase their knowledge in ways that aligned with their strengths. However, the implementation of product differentiation remained in progress, as it required the development of more specific rubrics and careful planning to fairly assess diverse student outputs (Yuen et al., 2023).

Learning environment differentiation

The teacher also paid significant attention to creating an inclusive and low-anxiety learning environment, though this was less instructional and more behavioral. SEN students were seated near the teacher or peer mentors, and classroom norms encouraged collaboration and mutual respect. Visual timetables, praise routines, and flexible seating were used to create emotional safety. A "language buddy" system was used, where high-performing students were paired with SEN students during pair work. Classrooms had designated quiet corners where students could opt out temporarily if overstimulated. This made the class emotionally safe and socially inclusive, especially important in language learning where confidence is key.

To provide a clearer picture, the following table summarizes the types of differentiation observed, along with their frequency of use and examples of activities implemented by the teacher.

Table 5. *Summary of DI types observed*

DI Type	Frequency of Use	Example Activity
Content	High	Tiered reading texts for descriptive writing
Process	High	Audio + group + scaffolded tasks during vocabulary lessons
Product	Moderate	Choice between oral or written final tasks
Learning Environment	Moderate-High	Flexible seating, language buddy system, visual schedules

The teacher demonstrated strong content and process differentiation, ensuring that all students especially those with special needs, were able to access and process EFL content effectively. While product differentiation was present, its application was more limited due to assessment constraints and time management. Meanwhile, the learning environment was carefully managed to reduce stress and build inclusion, which is crucial for students learning a foreign language in a mixed-ability setting.

Student responses to differentiated instruction in the inclusive EFL classroom

The application of differentiated instruction in the inclusive EFL setting elicited varied responses from students, reflecting their diverse learning profiles, abilities, and levels of language proficiency. These responses were categorized based on classroom observation and supported by student interviews. Reflective and high-performing students responded positively to tiered tasks and flexible grouping. They appreciated having opportunities to work independently and apply higher-order thinking skills. One student remarked:

> R1: "I like writing in my own words. It helps me think more clearly in English."

R1 showed consistent engagement, took initiative during discussions, and demonstrated noticeable improvement in their vocabulary and sentence construction.

Students with special educational needs (SEN), particularly those with intellectual or processing difficulties, responded better when learning materials were adapted to their needs and when peer support was integrated. A student with a mild learning disability shared as exemplified by R2:

> R2: "I understand more easily when my friend explains something and we look at pictures."

R2 expressed greater confidence when learning tasks were broken down into simpler steps, supported with visuals, or delivered in a calm and structured environment. However, without continuous support, their participation tended to decline. Auditory learners and socially oriented students benefited most from oral scaffolding and interactive discussions. They responded well to group work, music-based vocabulary games, and repeated pronunciation drills. One interviewee noted:

> R3: "I find it easier to remember new words

> when we listen and talk about them. Just reading doesn't help me much, but when I actually say the words and hear others use them, they stick better."

Students with slow or inaccurate processing styles required additional time and guidance to complete tasks. They often struggled when asked to respond spontaneously but became more confident when allowed to rehearse their ideas. Teachers reported that these students responded best when instructions were repeated and paired with gestures or visual cues.

These student responses align with Tomlinson's (2017) view that differentiated instruction promotes equitable learning by addressing individual learning needs and preferences. In this inclusive EFL classroom, tiered content and varied processes enabled students with different abilities to access and engage with language learning. Student interviews further indicated that differentiated strategies improved comprehension while strengthening learners' confidence and motivation. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies. Kenny et al., (2023) found that differentiated instruction increased students' sense of competence and classroom inclusion, while (Sun, 2023) showed that instructional adaptation improved learner engagement in language classrooms. Consistent with these findings, the present study demonstrates that differentiated strategies in inclusive EFL settings not only support comprehension but also foster students' confidence and participation in classroom learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how process differentiation was applied in an inclusive EFL classroom at a junior high school in Cirebon and how students with different learning profiles responded to these practices. The findings indicate that the teacher successfully employed various strategies, such as recorded word lists, group discussions, hands-on activities, peer support, and sentence construction tasks, to address the diverse needs of auditory, verbal-social, kinesthetic, independent, and SEN learners. These practices showed that differentiated instruction not only improved academic outcomes (vocabulary mastery, language skills, and retention) but also enhanced affective aspects (motivation, confidence, and emotional engagement), particularly for SEN students who benefited most from extended time, visual scaffolding, and peer assistance.

Student responses highlighted varied patterns of impact: auditory learners demonstrated stronger academic achievement but lower affective outcomes, while kinesthetic learners displayed a more balanced yet modest improvement. Independent learners thrived affectively through creative autonomy, and verbal-social learners achieved a balance of academic mastery and social engagement through collaborative activities. These results affirm that differentiated instruction provides equitable access to English language learning in heterogeneous classrooms and strengthens both academic and affective dimensions of learning.

Despite the promising outcomes, challenges remain in the consistent implementation of differentiation, particularly in preparing adaptive materials, designing assessments, and managing teacher workload. This suggests that inclusive EFL classrooms require continuous institutional support, including teacher training, collaborative planning time, and curriculum alignment. In conclusion, differentiated instruction emerges as a practical and impactful approach to fostering inclusion in language learning. Its application in EFL settings should be encouraged and refined to ensure that every student, regardless of learning profile, has meaningful opportunities to learn, participate, and succeed.

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