

DIFFERENTIAL INSTRUCTION IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the use of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and investigate English teachers' views on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD. The participants of this study were two English lecturers of English language education department in a private inclusive university in Indonesia. Employing qualitative method, this study used the data gathered from the interviews with the participants. This study used thematic analysis and generated five themes regarding to the use of differentiated instructions and teachers' views on it. The first three themes were used to explain the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD. The first three themes are the participants used differentiated class-assignments for students with ASD in their English class, they used differentiated content materials for students with ASD, and lastly, they provided outside-class assistance for students with ASD. The last two themes were used to reveal teachers' views on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD. First, differentiated instructions lessened the level of anxiety of students with ASD, and second, differentiated instructions provided a positive learning environment for students with ASD. Based on the results and limitation of the study, some implications, contributions, and suggestions for future studies are presented.

Keywords: *differentiated instructions, students with ASD, teaching English to students with ASD.*

INTRODUCTION

In education, students with special needs, are likely suggested to go to a special school, which people think it is the best way to educate these children. Singal (2016) claimed that 57 million children in 2011 were out from public school, which most of them were special needs children. On the other hand, in reality, both students with special needs or normal students, they need education in order to experience positive, successful social interactions with students, teachers, and others (Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen, & Brent, 2001). Likewise, both children with special needs and normal children need education in their life in order to have beneficial life experiences and skills in their

life. In relation to this, as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Budiyo, Sheehy, Kaye, and Rofiah (2019), all children have the same and equal access to education manifested in “education for all” movement.

Differentiated instruction approach is one among the other teaching approaches that accommodates different needs and abilities for students with autism in inclusive education setting. Endal, Padmadewi, and Ratningsih (2013) define differentiated instruction as “a process in teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class.” (p. 3). In other words, differentiated instructions used in the classroom may help students to burgeon their potential in the classroom based on their needs, abilities, and learning styles. In addition, to promote the success of differentiated instructions, it requires both teachers’ and students’ participation. As Endal et al. (2013) stated, “differentiation implies that the purpose of schools should be to maximize the capabilities of all students.” (p. 3), schools also have a responsibility to help teachers in applying differentiated instructions in the classroom. By applying differentiated instructions in classroom, it is expected that teachers will accommodate different abilities and learning styles in order to plan the appropriate instructional activities to all students.

Educating students with special needs, especially students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), might be challenging work for teachers. Kristiana and Widayanti (2013) claimed that there are 88% of the teachers who does not have basic idea about autism and how to deal with these students. Baxter et al. (2015) and Robert and Williams (2016) in Budiyo et al. (2019) discussed in their study that some teachers might not have basic skills to teach students with special needs. Additionally, they stated that “children who are given the diagnostic label of ASD will experience a severe impairment in their reciprocal social interactions” (p. 2) which somehow creates more challenging situation for teachers. Likewise, Robert and Williams (2016) in Budiyo et al. (2019) stated that children with ASD may have problems in speech and language delay, learning difficulties, and hearing impairment. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Padmadewi and Artini (2017) claimed that schools and teachers have limited material development and teaching skills to cope with students with ASD. However, despite of the limitations faced by teachers and educators in coping with students with special needs, a study conducted Morley, Bailey, Tan, and Cooke (2005) found out that “teacher’s attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN (Special Education Needs) can have a considerable impact on their educational experiences” (p. 4). This study investigates that teachers may have beneficial educational and teaching experiences by teaching students with ASD.

Previous studies have investigated the readiness of teachers in using differentiated instructions in teaching students with ASD and the approaches in teaching students with ASD in inclusive education setting. However, the implementation of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD has not been extensively discussed. English teachers might have little knowledge about how to teach students with ASD and the implementation of differentiated instructions as one of the approaches to teach them. Therefore, this study investigated the implementation of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD and the English teachers’ views on differentiated instructions to teach students with ASD.

By using the questions: 1) To what extent do teachers employ differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD?, and 2) What are the teachers' views on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD?, this study aims to explore the implementation of differentiated instructions in teaching English for students with ASD and investigate English teachers' point of view on differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD. By exploring the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD and teachers' perspective on differentiated instructions, it is expected that this study may bring some benefits. First, English teachers will gain knowledge about the interventions they might implement in teaching English to students with ASD. Second, this study will provide some insights into English teachers' perspectives of differentiated instructions for students with ASD. Lastly, this study will enrich the paucity of literature in differentiated instructions in English Language Teaching (ELT) for students with ASD.

Students with Autism

According to Wirt et al. (2000), more than 11% of children ranged from 6 until 17 years old in U.S were special needs. To be more specific, children with autism are 1,0%, or around 53.576 among 5.541.166 children aged six until seventeen who suffer from various special needs. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Sakya, Santosa, and Bagus (2017) reported that there is no specific number of how many children are affected by autism. As Zigler (2002) stated, there are more and more special needs students, specifically students with ASD, who enroll in regular school or inclusive school. With some dominant characteristics, such as low intelligence and inability of understanding the school materials (Santrock, 2007), they might be recognized easily. Santrock (2007) mentioned that most of students with autism suffer from speech and language delay, learning difficulties, or even hearing impairment. They also have difficulties in adapting, communicating, and interacting with their friends and surroundings. They may need an easily understood environment with a low level of distraction and sensory stimulus to reduce their anxiety. In relation with the support system, they may need learning and behavior support, appropriate teaching approaches, and a "safe place" to calm down their emotion. These characteristics show that special needs students, or more specifically autistic children, really need special treatments in their life (Santrock, 2007).

United Nations (2015) proposed a regulation declaring that institutions should respect for "human rights and fair and non-discriminatory processes and equal opportunities, where no one is excluded or discriminated". Regarding to this, recently many schools accept the enrollment of students with autism as it is one of general education teachers' responsibilities to cope with students with different learning needs and abilities (Robertson et al., 2003). Moreover, some parents also admitted that they preferred to enroll their autistic children to regular school in order to provide equal education as the other children receive (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017).

Differentiated Instructions

Students with ASD need special treatments in their study. In dealing with students with ASD, differentiated instructions may help teachers during the learning process by doing need analysis beforehand. Even though teachers already have their teaching style, it is important to remember that special needs students need special treatments in order to understand the lessons (Tomlinson, 2000). Hall (2002) defined differentiated instruction as one of the learning and teaching approach used in the class to deal with the students with different ability. It means the teachers first seek to the students' ability, so that they can go further with their differentiated instructions to be applied in the classroom. By doing so, it is hoped that these students will be able to find their own interest and willingness, and all the students in the classroom can achieve the equal target with different paths. Moreover, Aftab (2015) further claimed that the students in differentiated instructions are required to be responsible on their learning. Since the teachers need to find out the needs of the students, it is important for the head of the school to allow and facilitate the teachers to modify the learning process in the classroom, so that all the students can be taught "equally" with their own diversity.

Tomlinson (2000) further proposed some classroom elements that can be teachers' consideration in applying differentiated instructions: 1) Content; 2) Process; 3) Products; 4) Learning Environment. Content focuses on the differentiating the information that the students will achieve in the learning process. Next up, process emphasize on the differentiating the classroom activities in order to help the students mastering the content. Third, products is the climax in the learning process in which the students need to extent or apply about what they have got from the materials. Last, learning environment highlights on the differentiating the classroom management.

Even though, at some points, differentiated instructions seem to be the solution for the students with ASD, on the other hand, Aftab (2015) found some problems that occurred in implementing differentiated instructions, such as time limitation, lack of modern technology, disinterest from the head of the school, and teaching resources. These problems may lead to the absences of differentiated instructions implemented by teachers despite the fact that they know the students need it (Aftab, 2015). However, in some private schools, where teachers may have more time to modify the lessons, they may implement these differentiated instructions in their classroom, so that their students in mixed ability classroom, partially, will have the same chance to develop their skills (Aftab, 2015).

METHOD

Research design

This study employed qualitative method by using interviews. By using qualitative method, this study aims to "make sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions" (Cohen, Lawrence, and Morrison, 2007, p. 461). That means that by using qualitative method, this study investigates the participants' point of view, and does not generalize the result of the data. Additionally, by using qualitative method, this study focuses on a smaller number of participants than quantitative method does, yet the data collected are rich and detailed (Cohen et al., 2007).

Moreover, this study adopts interpretivism paradigm; it seeks for participants' experiences and perceptions to interpret and construct data (Thanh &

Thanh, 2015). The interviews in this study aim to seek for meaningful data from various view points of the participants. As its nature, interpretivism believes different point of view from different individuals to gain deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

The interviews were done with two English lecturers of a higher education in order to get in-depth and rich data. Cohen et al. (2007) claimed interview as an “interpretation of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their point of view” (p. 461). This means that the interviews were used to reveal the theoretical and practical opinion from the research participants. Moreover, Laing (1967) in Cohen et al. (2007) also stated that interviews tend to be more inter-subjective, not merely subjective or objective. In other words, interviews are subject-bound, yet they are objective as the data collected are based on real life situation, not merely opinion.

Research Participants

This study was conducted in an English language department of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants in this study were two English lecturers of the English language department. As a private inclusive university, this university receives both regular students and students with special needs, such as students with physical disabilities and autism. The two lecturers were chosen as the research participants as they taught subjects which the students with autism enrolled in. These two participants taught two different classes in the department where the students with ASD study. In addition, Endal et al. (2013) asserted that educators are expected to provide meaningful learning experience and good learning situation for the students. That means teachers play a crucial role in the classroom to engage students in learning process and provide facilitating learning environments. Therefore, for that reason, the data for this study were gathered from the lecturers who taught the students with autism.

Research instruments

This study gathered the data by using interviews with two lecturers who taught English to the students with autism. The interviews with the lecturers were aimed to reveal their subjective opinion about the students’ participation in class (Dornyei, 2007). Moreover, Dornyei (2007) also stated that “interview is a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise” (p. 361) which means the interviews in this study were not aimed to generalize the perspective of the lecturers, instead they were used to see different point of views in teaching students with autism. Furthermore, the interviews focused on the extent of differentiated instructions employed in the participants’ class and their views and experiences in employing differentiated instructions to teach English to students with autism.

Data collection and data analysis

Prior to the interviews, the researchers distributed inform consent form to the participants asking their willingness to participate in this study. Then, the researchers conducted interviews to gain participants’ personal opinions towards the topic being studied (Dornyei, 2007). As suggested by Kvale (1996) in Cohen et al. (2007), the researchers applied the seven steps of interview procedure, i.e. 1)

thematizing (the aim of the study); 2) designing (translating the research objectives into the questions); 3) interviewing (the peak of the steps); 4) transcribing (written form of the interview); 5) analyzing (also known as coding, in which the researchers seek for the theme of from the result of the interview); 6) verifying (seeking the relation between the literature and the result of the interview); and 7) reporting (the result of the interview).

Ethical Consideration

To get permission from the participants, the researchers prepared an inform consent form. As Greene and Hogan (2005) stated, it is important to give a consent form to the participants before the interviews to obtain the participants' consent before involving them to participate in the study. The researchers explained what was written in the consent form verbally, including the topic, the implications, and the impact of the study (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Moreover, the participants were informed that their identity and personal information would be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were used in the report to keep their confidentiality and to minimize harm caused by participating in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researchers analyzed the results of the interviews to answer the research questions. After being transcribed and coded, the data were analyze thoroughly to generate themes based on the two research questions. Three themes were generated to explain the extent the implementation of differentiated instructions in English class. In addition, two themes were generated to explain the English teachers' views on the participation of students with autism in English class.

Research question 1: To what extent do teachers employ differentiated instructions in teaching students with ASD in English class?

Based on the results of the interviews, there were three emerging themes on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching students with ASD in English class. Table 1 illustrates the three themes generated for the first research question.

Table 1. Emerging themes for research question 1

Theme 1	Teachers used differentiated class-assignments for the students with ASD
Theme 2	Teachers used differentiated-content materials for the students with ASD
Theme 3	Teachers provided outside-class assistance for the students with ASD

Theme 1: Teachers used differentiated class-assignments for the students with ASD

Based on the data, the participants implemented differentiated instructions in giving class-assignments for the students with ASD based on the subject they taught. Laila (pseudonym), the lecturer of Basic Grammar, stated that she

implemented a different approach in assigning assignments for the students with ASD. The assignments developed for the students with ASD were small in terms of the numbers of questions compared to the other students. She explained that the students with ASD seemed to have difficulties in doing the assignments within the time frame given. They tended to spend more time on doing the assignments compared to the other students because of their anxiety and limited capabilities. She explained:

Laila : ... and then I treated him a bit differently in terms of assignments, I applied a special approach.

Researcher : So you give differentiated instruction to this student?

Laila : Yes, the autistic student you're right. With the other students, for example, I gave them a quiz with 20 questions in it. While for the autistic student, I reduced the numbers ... like 10 questions for them. For example, there are 10 questions, then, he can only do 5 questions out of 10, that's okay, no need to be forced.

(Laila/Assignments)

Similarly, Maria (pseudonym), who taught extensive reading subject, applied differentiated class-assignments to the students with ASD by designing the assignments based on the reading texts they read and lessening the number of questions in the assignments. During the interview, she explained:

... And then I treated him a bit differently in terms of assignment. The reading texts they read were slightly different in numbers of pages. He read fewer reading texts compared to the other friends. As for the assignments or quizzes, they answered questions based on the texts they read. The questions were also fewer than the other students. (Maria/Assignments)

In Laila and Maria's classes, differentiating class-assignments for the students with ASD aligns with the four elements of classroom differentiated instructions proposed by Tomlinson (2000). The process of differentiating class-assignments reflects the second element, i.e. process, in Tomlinson's differentiated instruction elements. It emphasizes on differentiating classroom activities and tasks to help the students master the content of the lesson. Moreover, differentiated class-assignments done by Laila and Maria provided opportunities for students with ASD to be able to achieve the learning target by using different path of learning (Hall, 2002).

Theme 2: Teachers used differentiated-content materials for the students with ASD

All participants explained that they used differentiated-content materials for teaching the students with ASD. They provided the same materials as the other students, yet the materials were reduced in terms of the contents. They reported:

For example, let's say the other students learn countable nouns, non-count nouns, and singular and plural nouns from the module on page 5 to 10. The autistic student could not manage to understand most or some of them. I need to selectively assign them which parts of the topics they should read before the meeting. Well, for example, I assigned him to read countable nouns (part A) only, noun-count nouns

*(part B), and singular and plural nouns (part A) in the module. The assessment was also given based on the parts they read previously. [Laila/Content]
I simplified the materials, of course ... if normal kids have five pages to read, with him I just assigned him to read 2 or 3 pages. [Maria/Content]*

Moreover, the participants stated that by differentiating the materials, they also lowered their expectations towards the students with ASD.

For students with ASD, we should not expect them to achieve as high as the other students in class. I mean, our expectation as a teacher should be different for each student. [Maria]

... I reduce the loads for him ... I realize that he will not be able to perform as well as average students in my class. The most important thing is he is not frustrated in my class and he manage to pass this subject. [Laila]

Maulana, et al., (2019) mention that differentiating content materials as a part of differentiated instructions is used to accommodate different ability of the students in the classroom. By knowing the students with ASD' abilities and simplifying the materials for them, the participants showed their efforts to help them to be successful in learning. These findings are consistent with the expert' statements (Santrock, 2007) asserting that students with ASD need special treatments to understand the lessons better. In regards to this, Aftab (2015) states that teachers may modify their materials so that the students in the classroom who have mixed ability will have the same chance to learn.

Theme 3: Teachers provided outside-class assistance for the students with ASD

Laila and Maria admitted that implementing differentiated instructions in-class teaching and learning process was not enough. They claimed that they provided outside-class assistance to better prepare them before the class. Maria did the outside-class assistance to assign the student to read certain texts at home. She, on a daily basis, invited the student with ASD to come to her office right after the class and asked him challenges he encountered in class. While Laila prepared a 'green card' consisting of a sequence of activities the student would do the following meeting. Similar to Maria, Laila invited the student to come to her at the end of each meeting to give him the 'green card'. She, then, explained which topic he should read at home to prepare the quiz and what he would do in class the following meeting.

Right after the class, I invited him to come to my room, and then I told him, "Next week we will learn bla bla bla in the class, page bla bla until page bla bla. To prepare it, you have to read page bla bla until bla bla. Can you do that?" I also asked if he found any difficulties during the class. He would, usually, told me that he could not do the assignment because it was difficult od because he did not understand it. [Maria/Assistance]

Every meeting, I always provided a 'green card' for him. The card, consisting of a table with 3 columns: number, instruction, and checklist, was aimed to inform him the activities he needed to do on the following meeting. At the end of the class, I

always asked him to stay longer or to come to my room and discussed the card. I explained what he needed to prepare at home before coming to the class the following week, what he would do in the class, and what assignments he needed to work on. By doing this, I found it helpful for him. He could do better in class. [Laila/Assistance]

Santrock (2007) asserted that students with ASD may need behavior and learning support. The interventions done by Maria and Laila on their students with ASD resemble behavior and learning support stated by Santrock (2007). Outside-class assistance might encourage students with ASD to have good preparation of their learning which may lead to the decreased level of anxiety and compulsive behavior (Filipek et al., 2006). Moreover, as in Laila's case, outside-class assistance may be appropriate for students with ASD as it helps them better prepare the in-class learning process.

Research question 2: What are the teachers' views on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD?

To answer the second research questions, two emerging themes were generated from the results of the interviews. Table 2 illustrates the two emerging themes for research question 2.

Table 2. Emerging themes for research question 2

Theme 1	Differentiated instructions lessened the level of anxiety of students with ASD
Theme 2	Differentiated instructions provided a positive learning environment for students with ASD

Theme 1: Differentiated instructions lessened the level of anxiety of students with ASD

Both participants admitted that differentiated instructions implemented in basic grammar and extensive reading classes helped the students with ASD in lessening their level of anxiety. The students with ASD did not seem to be frightened and nervous in joining class activities and doing class-assignments. They would have been able to prepare the lessons before the class, join the class activities, and do the assignments. They stated:

By giving him the 'green card' at the end of the meeting, he did not seem to be nervous, worried, and frightened during the class activities. Long before I implemented differentiated instructions to him, he often felt nervous, worried, and frightened during class activities. He would bite his nails and repeatedly say or ask the same statements or questions. He would shake his hands and uttered unclearly. By using the 'green card', he would be more prepared. He knew previously what activities he would do in the following meeting and could prepare things before the class. (Laila/Anxiety)

... before I adopted differentiated instructions, he found it difficult to mingle with other friends during class activities, so he did not really contribute much. When given differentiated contents and assignments, he seemed to be less nervous and worried during class activities and more engaged in group work and other class activities. (Maria/Anxiety)

The participants' view on differentiated instructions in lessening the level of anxiety of students with ASD corresponds Zigler's statement (2002) affirming that students with ASD usually have difficulties in adapting, communicating, and interacting with their friends and surroundings, as a result they might need a good learning environment to reduce their anxiety. Differentiated instructions adopted by both participants seem to create a friendly and convenient learning environment for students with ASD; this can be seen from the low level of anxiety they had during class activities (Filipek et al., 2006).

Theme 2: Differentiated instructions provided a positive learning environment for students with ASD

The participants were all in agreement that differentiated instructions provided a positive learning environment where students with ASD seemed to feel safe to participate in class activities, such as class discussion and group work. They did not seem to be hesitated, afraid, or unconfident to contribute in group work, although their contribution was not as big as the other friends. Differentiated instructions seemed help students with ASD to follow the lesson and engage in class activities at their pace and abilities. Therefore, they felt more confident in joining class activities, following the lectures, and doing assignments. The participants mentioned:

His friends did not seem reluctant to help him. They could understand him fully. In group work, he joined the discussion, took part in doing the project, and confidently presented the results in front of the class ... I think it's because he had the 'green card'. [Laila/L_Environment]

... What is important is that he could experience working in groups and he felt comfortable to work with his friends. He could do the assignments most of the time and he did not bite his nails or cry anymore in class. [Maria/L_Environment]

In regards to this finding, Tomlinson (2000) proposed four classroom elements that can be teachers' consideration in applying differentiated instructions. Learning environment is one of the elements which is expected to provide meaningful learning experience and good learning situation for the students with ASD. The finding shows that differentiated instructions that the participants implemented in two classes provided positive learning environments where students with ASD felt safe to join in all class activities.

CONCLUSION

Summary

With regards to the findings that have been explained above, there are some points that could be summarized. The participants were in agreement that they created different class-assignments for students with ASD. The differentiated-class assignments which align with Tomlinson's elements (2000) in differentiated instructions were developed based on the students' needs, abilities, and learning styles. In addition, the findings showed that the participants employed differentiated-content materials to teach English to students with ASD. Instead of simplifying the materials, the students with ASD learned the same topics as the rest of the class did, yet the depth of the topics was lessened based on their abilities. Besides those two interventions, the participants also provided outside-class assistance for students with ASD. Behavior and learning supports were more than important for students with ASD, as asserted by Santrock (2007). Outside-class assistance was seen as behavior and learning supports for them. During outside-class assistance, students with ASD were encouraged to share their worries, difficulties, and concerns. Lecturers, then, discussed possible solution or did other interventions for them. Furthermore, during outside-class assistance, students with ASD were given a sequence of activities they would do in the following meeting to better prepare them in class.

The results of this study reveal the participants' view on the extent of differentiated instructions in teaching English to students with ASD. First, the participants believed that differentiated instructions lessened the level of students' anxiety during the class. By the interventions specifically designed for students with ASD, they seemed less anxious during the class. Second, differentiated instructions provided a positive learning environment for students with ASD. They seemed more confident and less stressed in joining class activities and doing assignments.

Implications and contributions

From the findings of this study, there are some implications that can be drawn for English teachers who teach in an inclusive educational setting and the policy makers. For English teachers who have students with ASD in their class, they should initially do needs analysis about the students' needs, abilities, and learning style (Tomlinson, 2000). Moreover, as Endal et al. (2013) stated that teachers would be able to optimize the students' capabilities by finding out the right interventions based on their needs, abilities, and learning styles. For the policy makers in inclusive education settings, they should allow and facilitate teachers to modify the learning process in the classroom, so that all the students can be taught "equally" with their own diversity (Aftab, 2015).

This study will make contribution for the other English teachers in implementing differentiated instructions for students with ASD. English teachers will gain knowledge in the interventions they might do in differentiating the instructions for students with ASD. Moreover, this study will make contribution for school administrators and policy makers in inclusive education. School administrators and policy makers might use the results of this study to issue policies which accommodate students with ASD learning process.

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