Navigating Differentiated Learning in Inclusive English Classrooms: Teachers' Challenges and Adaptive Strategies under Indonesia's National Curriculum

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Abstract

Differentiated learning is an important pedagogical principle of Indonesia's National Curriculum, which places emphasis on learner-centred education and responsiveness to students' diverse educational needs. In inclusive English classrooms, teachers need to respond to differences in readiness, learning profiles, language competence, and special educational needs while also meeting curriculum expectations. This study examined the problems English teachers faced when implementing differentiated learning and the adaptive strategies they used in response. A qualitative case study was conducted with five English teachers in a public junior high school in Surabaya, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes emerged: teachers' conceptual understanding of differentiated learning; challenges arising from learner diversity, limited instructional time, and inadequate resources; adaptive instructional strategies; and the importance of collaborative institutional support. The findings suggest that differentiated learning is best understood as a form of responsive pedagogical decision-making in which teachers adjust instruction to learner variation within particular classroom conditions. The study provides empirical evidence from an Indonesian inclusive English classroom context and offers implications for teacher professional development, curriculum implementation, and institutional support.

***Keywords**: differentiated learning, inclusive English classrooms, inclusive education, English language teaching, Indonesia's national curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Classrooms have become increasingly diverse, changing how educators think about the purposes of education. Education is not only concerned with academic achievement; it also involves giving learners equitable opportunities to participate and learn, regardless of their cognitive abilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identities, language proficiency, or special educational needs (Ainscow, 2020). This shift is reflected in international efforts such as UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which call for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all learners (UNESCO, 2016). In this context, inclusion means more than placing students with different needs in the same classroom. Teachers also need to create conditions where students can participate meaningfully, feel they belong, and have opportunities to learn (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). Learner diversity can therefore be viewed as an educational resource rather than simply a challenge, calling for flexible approaches that respond to differences in readiness, interests, learning profiles, and developmental needs (Ainscow,

2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

These developments are also reflected in Indonesia's curriculum reform. Indonesia's National Curriculum places considerable emphasis on learner-centred instruction, teacher autonomy, and attention to individual learners. Rather than relying solely on standardized approaches, the National Curriculum encourages teachers to develop contextualized learning experiences that account for students' characteristics and classroom realities. Within this orientation, differentiated learning has become an important part of classroom practice. Teachers are expected to consider students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles when planning learning experiences. This view also aligns with constructivist perspectives, which see learning as an active, individual process rather than a passive transfer of knowledge. Through instructional flexibility and formative assessment, differentiated learning is expected to support creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and lifelong learning while promoting educational equity and inclusion (Kemendikbudristek, 2021; OECD, 2024).

The discussion of differentiated learning in this study is grounded in Tomlinson's work on differentiated instruction. Tomlinson argues that effective teaching begins by recognizing that learners are different, rather than assuming that the same instruction will work equally well for everyone. Teachers can adjust four related aspects of instruction: content, process, product, and learning environment according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). These ideas also fit with constructivist perspectives and Vygotsky's sociocultural view, particularly the role of scaffolding within learners' zones of proximal development (Wibowo et al., 2025; Margolis, 2020). Differentiated teaching is closely related to inclusive pedagogy, which seeks to provide learning opportunities for all learners rather than create separate instructional pathways for students with special educational needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Mohsin & Zakaria, 2017). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that differentiation involves ongoing pedagogical decisions about formative assessment, flexible grouping, classroom management, and instructional design to support participation and achievement for all learners (Margolis, 2020).

In inclusive English classrooms, differentiated learning is not simply a set of techniques for modifying tasks, but a way of organizing learning opportunities around learner variability. This perspective matters in English language teaching because differences in language proficiency can affect students' access to classroom input, participation in interaction, and ability to demonstrate learning. Differentiation may therefore involve adjustments to language input, task complexity, opportunities for interaction, scaffolding, grouping, and forms of assessment while maintaining meaningful learning goals. In this sense, differentiation and inclusive pedagogy work together: teachers respond to differences among learners while keeping participation in the same learning community as far as possible (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014).

This issue is particularly relevant to English language teaching because students often differ in language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, confidence in communicating, learning pace, and readiness to engage with particular tasks. English learning also requires teachers to work across listening, speaking, reading, and writing while balancing linguistic accuracy, communicative competence, learner engagement, and inclusive participation (Andriyani et al., 2026; Hossain, 2024). In this setting, differentiation involves more than changing instructional materials. Teachers may adjust language input, scaffold communicative tasks, use multimodal resources, organize flexible groups, and vary assessment approaches in response to learner characteristics (Goyibova et al., 2025). Previous research has linked systematic differentiated learning with learner motivation, classroom participation, language achievement, and self-efficacy. At the same time, these outcomes are partly dependent on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, assessment literacy, classroom management skills, and ability to make reflective instructional decisions (Deunk

et al., 2018; Pozas et al., 2020; Yuen et al., 2023).

Even with its strong theoretical basis and the benefits reported in previous research, differentiated learning can be difficult to implement. Studies in different educational settings have identified large class sizes, limited instructional and preparation time, inadequate teaching resources, and uneven professional development as recurring challenges (Langelaan et al., 2024). Teachers in inclusive classrooms also need to respond to differences in academic ability, language proficiency, behaviour, and special educational needs while maintaining curriculum coverage and learner engagement (Pozas et al., 2020; Ardenlid, 2025). English language classrooms bring additional demands because students may differ in communicative ability, language exposure, and reading skills, while teachers are expected to integrate several language skills within classroom interaction (Andriyani et al., 2026; Hossain, 2024). These conditions point to differentiated learning as an ongoing process of adaptation rather than the simple application of predetermined techniques (Pozas et al., 2020).

Research on differentiated instruction has expanded, but several gaps remain. First, some studies are mainly philosophical or policy-oriented, or they rely on teachers' perceptions, which provides limited evidence of how differentiation is enacted in everyday classroom practice (Langelaan et al., 2024). Second, empirical research on differentiated learning in inclusive English language classrooms remains limited, particularly in Indonesian contexts (Muttaqin & Rahman, 2025). Language learning has its own communicative, linguistic, and interactional processes, so findings from general education classrooms cannot automatically be transferred to English language teaching (Hossain, 2024). Third, previous studies have often described implementation challenges without fully explaining how teachers adjust their instructional practices when working within contextual constraints and trying to maintain equitable learning opportunities. These gaps make qualitative inquiry valuable, particularly research that brings together teachers' accounts and evidence from classroom observation.

Against this background, this study examines how English teachers experience differentiated learning in one inclusive public junior high school operating under Indonesia's National Curriculum. The study is grounded in Tomlinson's differentiated instruction theory and principles of inclusive pedagogy and focuses on the problems teachers encounter and the ways they adapt their teaching in response to learner diversity. By combining semi-structured interviews with classroom observations, the study looks beyond whether differentiated learning is implemented and considers how teachers deal with competing instructional demands while maintaining learning opportunities for students with different academic abilities and special educational needs. The study contributes to the literature by examining differentiated learning as responsive pedagogical decision-making in an Indonesian inclusive English classroom context and by bringing teachers' accounts together with evidence from observed classroom practice.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What problems do English teachers face in implementing differentiated learning in inclusive English classrooms? (2) How do English teachers modify pedagogical practices to respond to these challenges?

METHOD

Design

A qualitative case study examined how English teachers experienced and enacted differentiated learning in inclusive classrooms under Indonesia's National Curriculum. This approach was appropriate because the study focused on teachers' experiences, instructional decisions, and adaptations as they occurred in their usual classroom settings, rather than on measuring predetermined variables or testing causal relationships (Sankalaite et al., 2023; Neubauer-Hametner et al., 2025). The case was bounded by one

inclusive junior high school, making it possible to examine in depth how teachers understood differentiated learning, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they used to respond to students with diverse academic abilities and special educational needs.

Participants

The study was conducted at a public junior high school in Surabaya, Indonesia, that had adopted Indonesia's National Curriculum and formally accommodated both regular students and students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms. The school was purposively selected because subject teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administrators implemented differentiated learning and inclusive education through collaboration.

Five English teachers participated in the study. They were selected purposively according to three criteria: (1) they were currently teaching English in inclusive classrooms, (2) they had implemented differentiated learning for at least one academic year under the National Curriculum, and (3) they voluntarily agreed to take part in interviews and classroom observations. The teachers taught at different grade levels and had varying teaching experience, providing different perspectives on differentiated learning across inclusive English classrooms. The unit of analysis was teachers' instructional practices and professional experiences in implementing differentiated learning, rather than individual student performance.

Research Instruments

Two researcher-developed qualitative instruments were used: a semi-structured interview protocol and a non-participant classroom observation protocol. The two instruments complemented each other and supported methodological triangulation by capturing both teachers' reported experiences and their observed instructional practices.

The semi-structured interview protocol contained eleven open-ended questions developed with reference to the literature on differentiated learning and inclusive education. The questions covered eight areas: (1) teachers' understanding of differentiated learning; (2) previous professional development and training related to differentiation and inclusion; (3) challenges encountered during implementation; (4) strategies used to respond to learner diversity; (5) classroom management practices; (6) differentiated assessment practices; (7) institutional and school-level support; and (8) teachers' perceptions of the outcomes of differentiated learning. The open-ended format gave participants room to describe their experiences in their own words, while follow-up questions were used when clarification or further detail was needed.

The classroom observation protocol was developed to document how differentiated learning was enacted in actual classroom settings. It was informed by Tomlinson's differentiated instruction framework and focused on six aspects: (1) content differentiation, (2) process differentiation, (3) product differentiation, (4) challenges related to learner diversity, (5) classroom time management, and (6) student participation (Tomlinson, 2014). During the observations, the researcher recorded field notes on teachers' instructional practices, classroom interactions, grouping arrangements, use of instructional materials and resources, assessment activities, classroom management, and students' responses to learning activities.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Using both techniques supported the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings through methodological triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). The interviews were conducted in Indonesian so that participants could describe their experiences comfortably and in detail. Each interview lasted approximately

40-60 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy before analysis.

Classroom observations were conducted with each participating teacher, focusing on instructional techniques, teacher-student interactions, grouping practices, learning resources, assessment practices, time management, and student participation (Tomlinson, 2014). Each of the five participating teachers was observed once for approximately 80 minutes during a regular English lesson. The five observation sessions provided a direct view of classroom practice across the participating teachers. This allowed the researcher to compare how differentiation was enacted in different classroom situations rather than relying only on teachers' descriptions of their practices.

The two data sources were compared throughout the study to identify convergence, complementarity, and possible discrepancies between teachers' reported beliefs and their observed instructional practices. This comparison provided a fuller understanding of differentiated learning in the participating classrooms and strengthened the credibility of the interpretation.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, as discussed in Byrne, 2022). Interview transcripts and classroom observation field notes were analyzed alongside one another so that evidence from the two sources could be compared throughout the process.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six recursive phases. First, the researcher became familiar with the data by reading the interview transcripts and observation notes repeatedly and recording preliminary analytical memos. Second, initial codes were generated inductively at the semantic level by identifying meaningful segments related to differentiated learning, implementation challenges, learner diversity, and adaptive pedagogical practices. Third, related codes were brought together into broader categories that represented patterns across participants and data sources. Fourth, the categories were reviewed and compared to develop candidate themes that captured meaningful patterns in the dataset while remaining distinct from one another. Fifth, the central organizing concept of each theme was identified, and the themes were named in relation to the research questions. Sixth, the themes were reviewed through continued comparison of interview and observation evidence and interpreted in relation to differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy.

Interview accounts were continually compared with classroom observations to identify convergence, complementarity, and discrepancies between reported and observed practices. This process strengthened the credibility of the thematic interpretations and helped the study move beyond teachers' self-reported experiences to examine how differentiated learning was enacted in actual classroom contexts.

RESULTS

Theme 1. Teachers' Pedagogical Understanding: From Differentiation to Responsive Decision-Making

All five teachers described differentiated learning as a learner-centred approach that needed to be adjusted to students' readiness, interests, learning profiles, and educational needs. For the participants, differentiation was not simply a matter of changing instructional materials. It involved making ongoing instructional decisions based on students' characteristics. R4 explained that differentiation should start with diagnostic assessment:

Excerpt 1

"Differentiation must be preceded by a pre-test… we need to establish the

students' starting point before learning begins."

R1 similarly described differentiated learning as a way of taking students' needs, abilities, and interests into account. Teachers also linked their understanding to ongoing professional learning through workshops and platforms such as *Merdeka Mengajar* (PMM) and *Guru dan Tenaga Kependidikan* (GTK). These activities helped them keep their knowledge up to date and discuss differentiated learning with colleagues.

The classroom observations supported these accounts. Teachers adjusted the amount of information, learning activities, and instructional support according to students' readiness levels. Observation records also showed the use of different materials and learning activities across the classrooms, although the extent of differentiation varied with classroom conditions. Taken together, the interview and observation evidence showed that teachers understood differentiation as a responsive process, while its enactment required repeated adjustment to classroom circumstances.

The observations provided more concrete evidence of this variation. Across the five observed lessons, teachers adjusted the level of difficulty and amount of instructional content in response to students' readiness. R2, R3, and R5 were observed providing different levels of task difficulty for regular students and students with special educational needs, while R4 and R5 also adjusted task difficulty for some regular students to monitor their progress. These observations suggest that teachers understood differentiation as something that had to be adjusted during teaching rather than applied in the same way in every class.

Theme 2. Managing Learner Diversity: Inclusion, Classroom Conditions, and Teacher Workload

Across the interviews, learner diversity was repeatedly identified as a major challenge in implementing differentiated learning. Participants described learner diversity, large class sizes, limited instructional time, and inadequate facilities as closely connected conditions that made classroom instruction more difficult. R1 explained that differentiated learning required additional preparation because teachers had to prepare varied materials while also managing large classes and inclusive learning needs. R5 highlighted the problem of inadequate technological facilities and the presence of students with diverse special educational needs:

Excerpt 2

"The main obstacle is the limited facilities and infrastructure at the school. In each classroom, there are many broken electronic devices, such as LCDs, PCs, and projectors, which significantly hinder the teaching and learning process."

Participants also described difficulties in organising groups that included students with different learning needs. R4 explained that differences in competency across classes meant that teachers had to respond to different needs within limited instructional time. She noted that a classroom could include several types of special educational needs, which made it difficult to distribute attention equally. Other participants also reported that some students were reluctant to support peers with additional learning needs, reducing the effectiveness of collaborative learning.

The classroom observations reflected these difficulties. Teachers often had to divide their attention among groups of learners, while some students who required greater support needed one-to-one assistance or intervention from special education staff. Lesson pacing also had to be adjusted at times because students worked at different rates. The combined evidence indicates that responding to learner diversity in resource-limited inclusive classrooms placed substantial demands on teachers and constrained the consistency of differentiated learning.

The observations also showed differences in how teachers responded to students with special educational needs. R1 tended to give more attention to regular students, while R2 was able to integrate some students with special educational needs but relied on a special education teacher when more intensive support was needed. R3 and R4 experienced difficulty because their attention had to be divided among learners with different needs, whereas R5 tended to rely on teaching assistants to support students with special educational needs. These classroom differences show that learner diversity was experienced not only as differences in students' abilities, but also as a practical challenge in distributing teacher attention.

Theme 3. Adaptive Instructional Strategies: Teacher Agency and Professional Adaptation

In response to these challenges, teachers adapted their instructional practices to the learners and resources available to them. Participants described differentiation in instructional materials, learning processes, assessment tasks, grouping arrangements, instructional media, and motivational support.

R1 identified differentiation of content, process, and product through differentiated instructional tasks for regular students and students with special educational needs:

Excerpt 3

"Content differentiation strategy. Process differentiation and product differentiation by distinguishing regular students from inclusion students."

R5 stressed the importance of creating learner profiles, grouping students according to their characteristics, and conducting continuous assessment:

Excerpt 4

"The actions taken include creating student profiles and grouping them based on their individual characteristics, understanding students' needs, finding suitable teaching methods, and conducting assessments."

Teachers also adapted instructional media to fit classroom conditions. When technological infrastructure was unavailable, they used digital resources, educational games, printed materials, and improvised teaching aids. R2 described using "Magic Pocket" and other game-based media to serve different groups of learners:

Excerpt 5

"Due to limited facilities, I sometimes use game media like Magic Pocket and the box. The Magic Pocket is usually for regular students, while the Magic Blackboard is specifically for inclusive students because not all of them can handle the calculations."

R4 explained that basic teaching aids sometimes replaced malfunctioning classroom technology:

Excerpt 6

"There are several classes where the LCDs are broken, and there are limitations in facilities, so I usually use various tools, even if they are old, but I use those various tools."

Participants also stressed the importance of emotional support and positive relationships with students with special educational needs in maintaining motivation and

engagement. The observation data supported these accounts: teachers adjusted classroom interaction according to students' learning progress and used differentiated activities, flexible grouping, varied learning resources, and differentiated assessment. Across the observed classrooms, the evidence therefore showed a pattern of continual instructional adjustment rather than reliance on one fixed teaching approach.

More specifically, the observations showed differentiation across content, process, and product, although the pattern was not identical across teachers. In terms of content, teachers varied the level of difficulty of learning materials and tasks. For process, R2, R3, and R4 used different learning activities in response to learner diversity, while R5 used different activities for regular students and students with special educational needs. Differences were also observed in products and assessment: R2, R3, and R5 used different tasks for different groups, whereas R4 differentiated the grades given to students. These observations complement the interview accounts by showing how differentiation appeared in practical classroom decisions.

Variation was also visible in student participation. In R1's classroom, teacher talk was more dominant, and no students were observed asking questions. In contrast, regular students in the classrooms of R2-R5 actively asked questions. In R5's classroom, the teacher also provided additional guidance to students who had difficulty understanding the lesson. This variation highlights the importance of teachers' responses in supporting student participation during instruction.

Theme 4. Institutional Support: Professional Learning, School Conditions, and Policy

The fourth theme concerned the conditions required to sustain differentiated learning beyond individual teacher effort. Participants highlighted professional development, school leadership, professional learning communities, parental engagement, and specialized support services. R1 explained that teacher competence was strengthened through regular training provided through the Education Office and GTK platform:

> **Excerpt 7**
> *"The support needed for differentiated learning to run optimally comes from many aspects. In addition to support from the school, such as commitment, policies, and allocation of planning time, continuous training, like workshops or differentiation and inclusion certification, also greatly helps optimize differentiated learning."*

R5 also mentioned resource rooms and principal support as factors contributing to inclusive learning:

> **Excerpt 8**
> *"Adequate facilities and infrastructure; the presence of facilities for sharing best practices among subject teachers; and support from the principal for the improvement of teacher quality."*

Teachers further noted that sustainable differentiated learning required adequate preparation time, improved facilities, and parental collaboration to support students' development beyond the classroom. The observation data also showed that the availability of instructional resources and classroom conditions influenced the ways teachers organized learning activities and provided support to students.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that teachers did not implement differentiated learning through a fixed set of strategies. Instead, they adjusted their teaching in response to students and to the

conditions of their classrooms. Across the four themes, teachers described differentiation as an ongoing instructional judgement shaped by students' readiness, learning profiles, interests, language-related differences, and special educational needs. For the participants, differentiation involved more than changing the content of a lesson. It meant working out how curriculum expectations could be met within the realities of a mixed classroom. This finding adds to Tomlinson's (2014) conceptualization of differentiated instruction by showing how the approach operates as responsive pedagogical decision-making in actual classroom settings. The classroom observations supported this interpretation, showing teachers adjusting instructional content, learning activities, assessment techniques, and classroom interactions according to classroom needs.

At the same time, the observation data showed that this responsiveness was not uniform across classrooms. Although all five teachers demonstrated some form of adaptation, the extent and consistency of differentiation varied. Some teachers adjusted tasks and activities directly to learner needs, while others relied more on special education teachers or teaching assistants when students required additional support. This variation suggests that knowing the principles of differentiated learning does not automatically lead to the same classroom practice. Teachers still need to make real-time decisions while managing learner diversity, time, and competing classroom demands (Tomlinson, 2014; Pozas et al., 2020).

The first theme points to a gap between teachers' understanding of differentiated learning and what they could consistently do in the classroom. Knowing the concept was not enough. Teachers also needed to connect that knowledge with what they learned about students during instruction and use it to make practical decisions. This finding is consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) view of differentiation as a proactive response to learner readiness, interests, and learning profiles and with research emphasizing the importance of teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional adaptation (Deunk et al., 2018; Pozas et al., 2020). Langelaan et al. (2024) likewise emphasize the role of teacher preparation and professional development in developing knowledge and practices for differentiated instruction. The present findings add classroom-level evidence by showing that teachers' understanding becomes meaningful in practice when it is translated into ongoing, context-sensitive choices.

The second theme illustrates how several forms of diversity and constraint came together in the classroom. These included academic readiness, language proficiency, special educational needs, class size, available teaching time, and resources. This finding is consistent with inclusive pedagogy, which seeks to expand access to learning opportunities for all learners rather than treating students with additional needs as requiring entirely separate instructional pathways (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). It also corresponds with the view that inclusion requires schools and teachers to respond systematically to differences and barriers to participation (Ainscow, 2020). In English classrooms, these demands can be intensified by differences in language exposure, proficiency, and communicative confidence (Andriyani et al., 2026; Hossain, 2024). The present study further suggests that class size, preparation time, and resource constraints interact with learner diversity rather than operating as isolated problems, increasing the cognitive and organizational demands placed on teachers (Pozas et al., 2020; Langelaan et al., 2024). These challenges should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of teacher commitment to differentiated learning; rather, they may also reflect the structural and organizational constraints within which teachers were expected to implement it.

The third theme draws attention to the choices teachers made in responding to these differences. Teachers responded to learner variability by selecting, adapting, and combining strategies rather than relying on a single standardized procedure. Their practices of differentiating materials, learning processes, assessment, grouping, instructional media, and motivational support are consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) framework of adjusting

content, process, product, and learning environment. They also correspond with research showing that teachers employ multiple differentiation practices according to student diversity and that implementation depends on pedagogical knowledge and instructional judgement (Deunk et al., 2018; Pozas et al., 2020). Ardenlid (2025) similarly illustrates how teachers adapt beliefs and practices in mixed-ability classrooms. These findings add to this work by showing that teacher agency operates within contextual constraints. Teachers make professional decisions in response to learner needs, available resources, time, and classroom conditions. Differentiation can therefore be understood as a context-sensitive professional practice rather than a fixed set of techniques.

The observation of student participation adds another dimension to this interpretation. Differences were visible not only in the tasks teachers provided but also in how students participated during lessons. The more teacher-dominated interaction observed in R1's classroom contrasted with the active questioning seen among regular students in R2-R5. This suggests that responsive teaching also involves noticing how students participate and adjusting support during interaction, rather than focusing only on the design of materials or assessment (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The fourth theme makes clear that the conditions surrounding teachers matter for the sustainability of differentiated learning. Participants emphasised professional development, school leadership, professional learning communities, parental participation, specialized support, planning time, and educational resources. This finding aligns with ecological conceptions of inclusive education, where participation depends on interactions among classroom practices, schools, families, and broader educational systems (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). It also supports research identifying continued professional learning as an important condition for effective differentiation (Langelaan et al., 2024; Yuen et al., 2023). The present study adds that institutional support becomes particularly important when teachers are expected to translate conceptual knowledge into sustainable classroom practice. Differentiated learning is therefore not solely an individual teacher responsibility; it is also shaped by the organizational environment in which teachers work.

The findings also raise several issues for curriculum implementation in Indonesia. The National Curriculum supports learner-centred instruction, formative assessment, and attention to students' characteristics (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). At the same time, the findings indicate that expectations for differentiated learning need to be accompanied by conditions that make implementation possible, including professional development, planning time, instructional resources, technical infrastructure, and institutional collaboration. This interpretation is consistent with broader discussions of educational reform that emphasize teacher capacity and supportive conditions for curriculum implementation (OECD, 2024). Curriculum implementation, therefore, is not simply a matter of meeting curricular expectations. Teachers also need organizational conditions that allow them to exercise professional judgement and respond to learner variability.

The study also adds classroom-based evidence from Indonesian inclusive English classrooms, a setting that research on differentiated learning has paid relatively little attention to. By combining interviews and classroom observations, the study shows how teachers enact differentiation and negotiate learner diversity, pedagogical adaptation, and institutional support. The findings contribute to the literature by framing differentiated learning as a context-dependent, reflexive, and collaborative pedagogical process rather than a rigid instructional paradigm. This perspective may also be useful in other educational settings where teachers are working to implement inclusive and learner-centred curricula in increasingly diverse classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how five English teachers experienced and enacted differentiated

learning in inclusive classrooms under Indonesia's National Curriculum, drawing on interviews and classroom observations. The findings show that teachers faced challenges related to learner diversity, large class sizes, limited instructional time, inadequate facilities, and diverse educational needs. In response, they adapted content and learning processes, used flexible grouping and varied instructional media, differentiated assessment, and provided motivational and emotional support. Overall, differentiated learning emerged as a form of responsive pedagogical decision-making shaped by learner variation and classroom conditions.

The findings highlight the importance of professional development, adequate planning time, instructional resources, technical infrastructure, and institutional support for sustaining differentiated learning. The study was conducted in one inclusive junior high school with five English teachers and focused primarily on teachers' experiences and classroom practices; therefore, the findings provide contextual rather than statistically generalizable insights. Future research could involve multiple schools and include students', parents', and school leaders' perspectives, as well as longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to examine differentiated learning in relation to students' language development, engagement, and inclusive educational experiences.

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