

Implementation Of Differentiated Instruction In Multi-Level English Language Classrooms: Strategies And Outcomes

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Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 21 November 2025

Published: 08 December 2025

Keywords:

differentiated instruction,
multi-level class,
English language learning,
higher education,
instructional strategy

Abstract

This study aims to describe the implementation of differentiated instruction in multi-level English language classrooms among undergraduate Management students at Mandalika University of Education. Employing a descriptive quantitative approach, the study involved 35 student participants during the 2025/2026 odd semester. Data were collected through questionnaires, classroom observations, and focus group interviews, then analyzed using descriptive and thematic techniques. Findings reveal that differentiated instruction-adapting materials, teaching processes, student products, and the learning environment-effectively enhances student participation, motivation, and achievement across all proficiency levels. Notably, significant improvement was recorded among students at the basic proficiency level, and the classroom climate became more inclusive and supportive. These results reinforce the role of differentiated instruction as a key strategy for teaching English in heterogeneous higher education settings, though institutional backing and ongoing professional development for instructors remain essential.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English in Indonesian higher education has become a fundamental requirement for preparing graduates who can compete globally (Religioni et al., 2024a). However, multi-level English classrooms are increasingly common in university settings, where students demonstrate a broad spectrum of prior knowledge, motivation, and language proficiency (Saputra et al., 2025; Tundreng et al., 2025). This diversity is further amplified by a shift towards learner-centered pedagogy and the adoption of the Merdeka Curriculum (Oktoma et al., 2025). As a result, English lecturers are challenged to bridge the achievement gap between advanced and struggling learners, especially in large, heterogeneous classes (Diananseri & Yaslina, 2024; Saputra et al., 2025).

Field observations in the English for Management class at Mandalika University of Education in the odd semester of 2025/2026 revealed substantial diversity in student performance across all core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Some students grasp material quickly, while others find even the basics challenging (Saputra et al., 2025). These disparities are often exacerbated by differences in learning opportunities, socioeconomic background, and exposure to English outside the classroom (Oktoma et al., 2025; Saputra et al., 2025). A conventional “one size fits all” approach is no longer sufficient for equitable learning, particularly when formative and authentic assessment require individualized engagement (Saputra et al., 2025).

Drawing from an expanding literature, differentiated instruction (DI) is widely recognized as an effective response to classroom diversity, especially in English language teaching (Saban, 2023;

Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Saputra et al., 2025). DI refers to deliberate adjustments in content, instructional process, learning products, and classroom environment according to students' readiness, interests, and profiles (Saban, 2023; Saputra et al., 2025). Empirical studies in both Indonesian and international contexts show that DI enhances engagement, achievement, and motivation in EFL classrooms (Oktoma et al., 2025; Sapkota, 2025; Saputra et al., 2025). These improvements are attributed to flexible grouping, tiered materials, project-based learning, and autonomy in task selection (Religioni, 2024; Diananseri, 2024). However, practical implementation faces several barriers such as increased lesson planning time, insufficient resources, varied teacher competencies, and the need for ongoing training and institutional support (Sapkota, 2025; Saputra et al., 2025; Tundreng et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian university context, research highlights positive student perceptions and measurable gains in English proficiency as a result of DI practices (Oktoma et al., 2025; Saban, 2023; Sapkota, 2025; Saputra et al., 2025). Studies also note that clear communication and fairness in instructional differentiation are necessary conditions for DI's success (Saputra et al., 2025). The multi-faceted benefits of DI are also supported by international studies that report improvements in academic performance, self-efficacy, and classroom climate (Dosch & Zidon, 2014; Maryani et al., 2025; Saban, 2023; Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012; Sapkota, 2025).

Nevertheless, teachers report that navigating multi-level classrooms with DI requires systemic backing, structured professional development, and adequate time for planning and reflection (Oktoma et al., 2025; Saban, 2023; Tundreng et al., 2025). In practical terms, sustainable DI is most likely when supported institutionally and championed by trained, reflective instructors (Oktoma et al., 2025; Saban, 2023).

The present study seeks to document the implementation, strategies, and perceived outcomes of differentiated instruction in a multi-level English language classroom of undergraduate Management students at Mandalika University of Education. Based on both classroom-based evidence and scholarly literature, the research aims to address the following questions: (1) How is differentiated instruction manifested during English language teaching in a multi-level class? (2) Which strategies are most prominent, and what are the associated opportunities and barriers? (3) What are student outcomes and responses as a result of differentiated instruction? The authors' direct classroom experience provides motivation for this inquiry, and findings are expected to contribute to the continued advancement of inclusive, responsive English language education both in Indonesia and internationally.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to explore the implementation of differentiated instruction in a multi-level English language classroom for undergraduate Management students at Mandalika University of Education. The participants consisted of 35 students enrolled in the English course during the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. Instrument development began with the construction and validation of a comprehensive questionnaire, semi-structured classroom observation guides, and a focus group interview protocol. The primary questionnaire contained both Likert-scale and open-ended items, targeting four core aspects of differentiation: instructional content, learning process, student product, and classroom environment. Prior to the main intervention, a preliminary needs assessment was conducted to map out students' language proficiency, learning preferences, and individual challenges.

During the course of one semester, the instructor systematically implemented differentiated instruction strategies, including varied learning materials, flexible grouping, tiered assignments, and alternative assessment practices. Regular classroom observations were conducted to monitor teacher-student interactions, participation, and the dynamics of instruction. Additionally, focus group

interviews were held at the end of the semester to gain further insight into students' perceptions, experiences, and perceived benefits and challenges of differentiated instruction.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively, focusing on frequencies, percentages, and mean scores for each differentiation aspect. Qualitative data from observation notes and interviews underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to effective strategies, barriers encountered, and the overall impact of differentiated instruction on motivation and achievement. All ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Through this mixed-methods approach, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the processes and outcomes associated with differentiated instruction in a diverse tertiary-level English language learning context.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Discussion

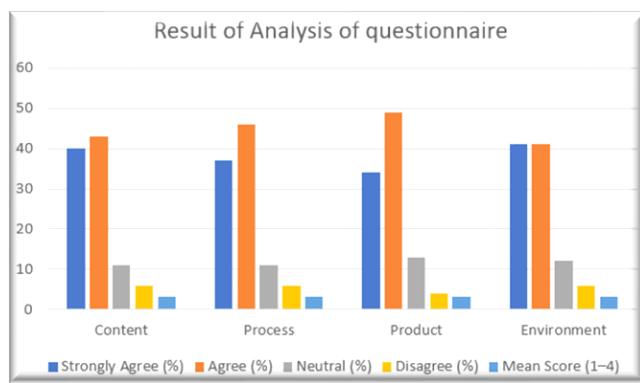
The study explored the impact of differentiated instruction (DI) in a multi-level English classroom of 35 undergraduate Management students at Mandalika University of Education. Data were gathered through questionnaires, classroom observations, student reflections, and focus group interviews, focusing on the areas of content, process, product, and learning environment.

Quantitative Results

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed notable improvements across key aspects of differentiation:

Tabel 1.
Result of Analysis of questionnaire

Differentiation Aspect	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean Score (1-4)
Content	40	43	11	6	3.17
Process	37	46	11	6	3.14
Product	34	49	13	4	3.13
Environment	41	41	12	6	3.17



Graphic 1.
Result of Analysis of questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire analysis, as depicted in the chart, indicate that the majority of students gave positive ratings for the implementation of differentiated instruction in the multi-level English language classroom. The aspects of content, process, product, and learning environment were all dominated by the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" categories, as evidenced by the high percentages in both groups. The mean scores for each aspect ranged from 3.13 to 3.17 on a 4-point scale,

indicating that the instructional program was not only able to facilitate diverse learning needs, but was also well received by the students.

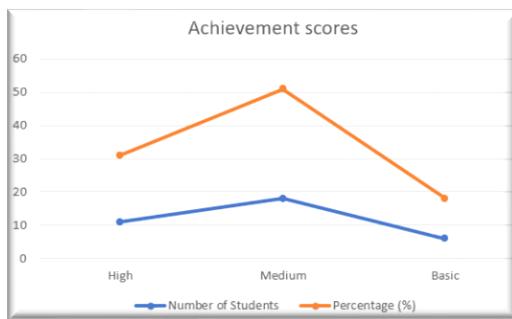
The low percentages for the “Neutral” and “Disagree” categories signify that the differentiated instruction successfully minimized student hesitation and fostered a supportive setting for their success. This also reflects a high level of satisfaction with the variety of materials, flexible learning processes, relevant task product development, as well as an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Overall, these data reinforce previous research findings that differentiated instruction can increase motivation, participation, and learning outcomes. Instructional models that are adapted to students’ readiness, interests, and learning profiles have been shown to effectively accommodate diversity in the classroom and create more meaningful and effective learning experiences for all students. The challenges related to time and preparation can be offset by higher learning outcomes and a more harmonious classroom atmosphere.

High mean scores and strong agreement rates indicate that the majority of students felt their diverse learning profiles, interests, and readiness were well accommodated through DI, especially in lesson content and learning environment. Students reported increased satisfaction and motivation as lessons felt more relevant, personalized, and supportive. Achievement scores were also mapped over the semester:

Tabel 2.
Achievement scores

Proficiency Level	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
High	11	31
Medium	18	51
Basic	6	18



Graphic 1.
Result of Analysis of questionnaire

This distribution evidences improvement: students in the “High” achievement group increased, while those in the “Basic” category declined, suggesting that differentiated grouping and flexible tasks fostered academic advancement, particularly among less proficient learners.

Qualitative Analysis

Observation and interview data provide further clarity into mechanisms and outcomes. Students highlighted that being offered choices in assignments-such as role-playing, mind maps, presentations, and written products-made learning more enjoyable and meaningful. Those with higher proficiency appreciated challenging, open-ended tasks and opportunities to lead peer

discussions, while those needing extra support benefited from scaffolded activities, vocabulary resources, and tailored feedback.

Multiple reflections revealed that DI improved student engagement on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels. Emotionally, students described feeling more motivated and less anxious about making mistakes due to the supportive environment and peer help. Cognitively, appropriately challenging materials encouraged critical thinking, as students regularly engaged with texts and tasks matched to their development levels. Behaviorally, participation increased with students contributing actively in group work and classroom discussions.

Students consistently mentioned that autonomy in choosing project topics or learning pathways strengthened self-efficacy and investment in their progress. As one student noted, "When I could select my group and assignment type, I felt responsible to do better." Peer tutoring within mixed-level groups fostered collaboration; advanced students supported those at basic levels, with evidence of mutual gains for both subgroups.

Discussion and Literature Context

The results are consistent with prior studies indicating that DI enhances motivation, academic achievement, and self-confidence by promoting instructional flexibility and inclusive classroom climates. Collaborative, differentiated learning environments encourage greater participation, risk-taking, and development across varied proficiency levels. These findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasizing social interaction and collaborative learning as critical to cognitive growth. Other literature notes the reduction of language anxiety and increase in confidence among learners engaged in DI classrooms, particularly in speaking tasks.

The research also highlights practical considerations. Teachers invested additional time in lesson planning and assessment due to the complexity of differentiation. A small number of students expressed difficulty with varied tasks, indicating a need for clear guidelines and gradual adjustment to DI practices. Institutional support and professional development are recommended to sustain effective differentiation.

Overall Impact

The implementation of differentiated instruction in this study resulted in clear benefits for both academic performance and classroom dynamics. Students achieved greater progress, showed higher engagement, and reported enhanced enjoyment in learning English. The positive outcomes across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral domains suggest that DI should be promoted as a key pedagogical approach in tertiary English language education, especially in diverse and multi-level learning settings. By providing choice, autonomy, and targeted supports, differentiated instruction can bridge achievement gaps and empower all students to succeed.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research confirms that the implementation of differentiated instruction in multi-level English language classes at Mandalika University of Education was highly effective in meeting a wide range of student needs and promoting academic success. Both quantitative data and qualitative feedback demonstrated significant gains in student achievement, engagement, and motivation—especially among those in the lowest proficiency group, who progressed to higher levels of performance. These results are aligned with findings from systematic reviews and empirical studies, which report similar outcomes for differentiated instruction in EFL and higher education settings (Religioni et al., 2024b; Saputra et al., 2025). The use of varied materials, task types, and assessment methods not only fostered inclusivity and academic improvement, but also strengthened students' self-efficacy, collaboration, and responsibility for their own learning (Oktoma et al., 2025; Purnamaningwulan, 2024).

A qualitative improvement in classroom environment was also evident-students reported feeling more supported, confident, and comfortable expressing themselves, corroborating earlier research emphasizing the importance of climate and personalized support (Saban, 2023). Nevertheless, the study acknowledges practical challenges, such as increased instructional planning time and the need for clear guidance when introducing differentiated tasks, mirroring barriers cited in prior literature (Saban, 2023; Saputra et al., 2025). Taken together, the findings provide compelling evidence that differentiated instruction is a vital strategy for advancing achievement and equity in tertiary English language classrooms, though success depends on institutional support, robust planning, and ongoing professional development (Oktoma et al., 2025; Religioni et al., 2024).

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