

The Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning on Reading Skills at the Eighth-Grade Students of a Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Although differentiated learning has been widely implemented in English language teaching, limited studies have investigated its effectiveness in improving junior high school students' reading skills, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving the reading skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. A pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design was employed. The sample consisted of 33 students selected through total sampling. Data were collected using a multiple-choice reading comprehension test and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 through normality and Paired Sample T-Test analyses. The findings revealed that the students' mean score increased from 62.06 to 80.36. The Paired Sample T-Test showed a significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) of less than 0.001, indicating that differentiated learning significantly improved the students' reading skills.

Keyword: *Differentiated Learning, Reading Skills, EFL*

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered a fundamental skill in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it enables students to obtain information, develop their vocabulary, and strengthen their overall language competence (Ibhar, 2022). More than simply recognizing words and written symbols, reading involves an active mental process in which readers interpret texts by connecting the information presented with their existing knowledge and experiences (Nunan, 2017; Woolley, 2019). Effective reading comprehension involves several abilities, including recognizing the central idea, interpreting relevant information, making inferences, and formulating conclusions based on the content of a text (Lailiyah et al., 2019). Therefore, reading competence has an important contribution to students' academic performance as well as their development of English proficiency.

Although reading is essential, achieving adequate comprehension remains challenging for many EFL learners. One of the common difficulties is insufficient vocabulary knowledge, which can prevent students from understanding the meaning and overall message of a text and may consequently affect their academic achievement (Riana & Ningrum, 2020). Students may also encounter difficulties when determining the main idea, interpreting information that is not explicitly stated, or understanding unfamiliar vocabulary within a particular context. Such difficulties demonstrate that reading comprehension continues to be a significant concern in EFL learning.

These challenges can be more pronounced in Indonesia, where English is generally not part of students' everyday communication. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom consequently reduces opportunities for students to practice reading authentic or varied English texts. Previous research has indicated that Indonesian EFL learners commonly face problems related to recognizing main ideas, understanding vocabulary, and interpreting the content of reading passages (Indriyani & Pertiwi, 2021). Similarly, Al-Khasawneh (2019) found

that students' low reading performance may be associated with inadequate vocabulary mastery and the limited use of appropriate teaching strategies. These findings highlight the need for effective approaches to support the development of students' reading comprehension skills in English language instruction.

One factor contributing to students' low reading achievement is the teaching method implemented in the classroom. In many English classes, teachers still employ teacher-centered instruction, where teachers dominate classroom activities while students play passive roles. Such instructional practices often fail to accommodate students' diverse learning characteristics, resulting in low participation and limited opportunities for meaningful learning (Tomlinson, 2017). Consequently, many students experience difficulties in understanding reading materials according to their individual learning needs.

To address these difficulties, teachers are expected to apply teaching strategies that recognize differences in students' abilities, interests, and preferred ways of learning. One approach that has received increasing attention is differentiated instruction. Tomlinson (2017) explains that differentiated instruction involves adjusting the content, learning activities, learning outcomes, and classroom environment according to students' readiness, interests, and individual learning profiles. By applying this approach, teachers can provide a more adaptable learning environment in which students are given opportunities to achieve the intended learning outcomes in accordance with their respective capacities.

Furthermore, Tomlinson (2017) explained that differentiated learning can be implemented by considering students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the present study, the researcher focused on students' learning profiles, particularly visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles, as the basis for implementing differentiated instruction in reading activities. Before conducting the research, the researcher discussed the students' learning characteristics with the English teacher at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. Since the teacher had taught the students for a considerable period, the teacher had sufficient knowledge of the students' classroom participation, responses, and learning preferences. Based on these discussions, the students were grouped into visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning groups. Although all students learned the same descriptive texts and achieved the same learning objectives, each group participated in different learning activities that matched their learning profiles. This approach was intended to increase students' engagement and facilitate more effective learning experiences.

In recent years, differentiated learning has received increasing attention because it provides equal learning opportunities for students with diverse abilities and learning characteristics. Rather than expecting all students to learn in the same way, differentiated instruction encourages teachers to adjust instructional strategies according to students' individual needs, thereby promoting more active participation and meaningful learning experiences (Ismail et al., 2025; Jufrianto et al., 2025).

A number of earlier studies have highlighted the effectiveness of differentiated learning in supporting students' academic development. Saleh (2021) found that learners who received differentiated instruction demonstrated significantly higher reading comprehension performance compared with those who experienced conventional teaching methods. In a similar study, Rukadah et al. (2025) reported that the implementation of differentiated strategies, including flexible grouping and tiered learning tasks, encouraged greater student involvement and contributed to better comprehension of reading texts. In addition, Jufrianto et al. (2025) revealed that differentiated instruction had a positive effect on students' English learning outcomes while also strengthening their motivation to engage in classroom activities. Collectively, these findings suggest that differentiated learning can serve as a promising approach for enhancing students' reading comprehension and overall English performance.

However, despite these encouraging findings, the implementation of differentiated learning in Indonesian EFL classrooms remains relatively limited. Many teachers still experience difficulties in designing differentiated learning activities that accommodate students' diverse learning characteristics (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2023). In addition, most previous studies have focused on general English achievement or have been conducted in

different educational settings. Only a limited number of studies have specifically examined the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving reading skills among eighth-grade students in Indonesian junior high schools. Therefore, a research gap still exists regarding the practical implementation of differentiated learning for improving students' reading skills in this context. This gap highlights the need for further research to investigate the effectiveness of differentiated learning in real classroom settings, particularly in Indonesian junior high schools.

Based on the researcher's preliminary observation conducted during the Teaching Practice Program (PPL) at SMP Negeri 2 OKU, it was found that many eighth-grade students still experienced considerable difficulties in learning English, particularly in reading activities. Most students had limited vocabulary knowledge, making it difficult for them to understand descriptive texts and identify important information. Several students also experienced difficulties in recognizing, pronouncing, and spelling basic English words correctly, which negatively affected their reading comprehension.

The preliminary reading achievement data obtained from the English teacher further confirmed these classroom problems. Of the 33 students in the eighth grade, 20 students (60.6%) scored below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM = 75), while only 13 students (39.4%) achieved the required standard. The students' average score was only 68.5, indicating that their reading skills were still relatively low. These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that limited vocabulary mastery and ineffective instructional strategies are among the major factors contributing to students' poor reading comprehension (Al-Khasawneh, 2019; Indriyani & Pertiwi, 2021).

Furthermore, informal interviews with the English teacher revealed that classroom instruction was still predominantly teacher-centered. During the learning process, students generally listened to explanations, completed exercises individually, and had limited opportunities to actively participate in classroom activities. Such instructional practices made it difficult for teachers to accommodate students' different learning characteristics and often reduced students' motivation and engagement in reading lessons.

Considering the theoretical perspectives, previous empirical findings, and the actual classroom problems identified at SMP Negeri 2 OKU, differentiated learning appears to be a promising instructional approach for improving students' reading skills. Nevertheless, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness among eighth-grade students in this particular context remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this research gap by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving the reading skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. Specifically, this study was conducted to examine whether differentiated learning could significantly improve the reading skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on differentiated instruction and provide practical recommendations for English teachers in implementing more inclusive and student-centered reading instruction.

METHOD

This research adopted a quantitative approach. Machali (2021) explains that quantitative research involves the collection of numerical data, which is subsequently analysed statistically to examine relationships between variables and test predetermined hypotheses.

A pre-experimental method was applied using a one-group pre-test and post-test design. In this design, the same group of participants undertakes an initial test before receiving the treatment and a final test afterward. The comparison between the two test results is used to identify changes in students' learning outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was chosen because the researcher had access to only one existing class, making the use of a control group unfeasible. Thus, the design was considered suitable for assessing the effectiveness of differentiated learning by comparing students' reading comprehension performance before and after the intervention.

The population comprised all eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. Because only one class was available for participation, all 33 students in the class were included as the research sample through total sampling. The research was carried out over six sessions. The first session was used to administer the pre-test, followed by four sessions implementing differentiated learning, and the final session was devoted to the post-test. Each session lasted 45 minutes. Prior to the intervention, the researcher consulted with the English teacher regarding the students' learning characteristics to determine their predominant learning profiles. Based on the information obtained, the students were organized into three groups according to their dominant learning preferences: visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic.

During the four treatment sessions, all students learned the same descriptive text materials and were expected to achieve the same learning objectives. However, the learning process was differentiated according to the students' learning profiles. Visual learners learned through pictures, graphic organizers, and visual reading materials. Auditory learners participated in teacher explanations, group discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and oral reading activities. Kinaesthetic learners were engaged in movement-based and collaborative learning activities, such as matching tasks, group work, and interactive classroom activities. These differentiated learning activities were designed to accommodate students' different learning characteristics while promoting active participation and improving their reading comprehension.

The research instrument was a reading comprehension test in the form of multiple-choice items developed from descriptive texts. The test was given at two different stages, namely prior to and following the implementation of differentiated learning. The data obtained from the test were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Before conducting the hypothesis test, the Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to examine the normality of the data distribution. As the results indicated that the data were normally distributed, the Paired Sample T-Test was subsequently employed to identify whether a statistically significant difference existed between the students' pre-test and post-test scores.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence gathered through this study is structured to address the core research question, specifically evaluating the impact of differentiated instruction on the reading. Comprehension abilities of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. The primary data points were gathered from the students' pre-test and post-test records, which were statistically compared to evaluate the framework's pedagogical value.

Descriptive Statistics

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 OKU, drawing on a sample size of 33 eighth-grade students. The explicit goal was to determine whether differentiated instruction significantly enhances text comprehension.

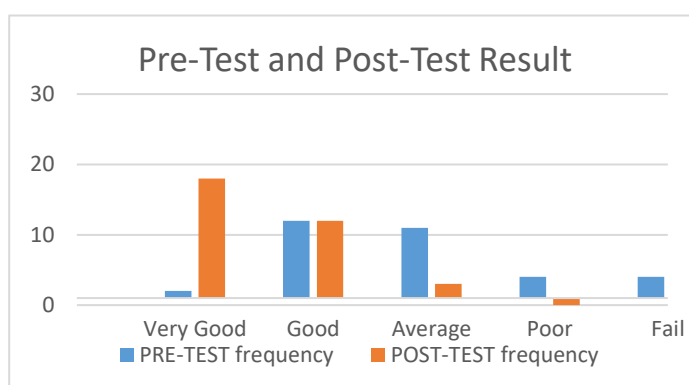


Figure 1 Pre-Test and Post-Test Result

These findings indicate that the students' reading skills improved after the implementation of differentiated learning. Compared with the pre-test results, the number of students in the Very Good category increased from 2 students (6.06%) to 18 students (54.55%), while the Poor and Fail categories, which previously consisted of 4 students (12.12%) each, decreased to 0 students (0%) in the post-test.

Inferential Statistics

A normality test was conducted to determine whether the pre-test and post-test scores were distributed normally. Considering that the study involved 33 students, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the data. The pre-test obtained a significance value of 0.227, whereas the post-test resulted in a significance value of 0.171. Both values exceeded the 0.05 significance level, indicating that the pre-test and post-test scores were normally distributed.

The results revealed that the implementation of differentiated learning contributed significantly to the improvement of reading skills among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. This can be observed from the increase in the students' average score, which rose from 62.06 on the pre-test to 80.36 on the post-test. Furthermore, the Paired Sample T-Test resulted in a Sig. (2-tailed) value of less than 0.001, which was below the predetermined significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the statistical findings confirm that differentiated learning produced a significant positive effect on the students' reading skills.

The improvement can be understood through Tomlinson (2017) concept of differentiated learning, which highlights the importance of adjusting instruction according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the present study, students were classified into visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic groups, enabling them to engage in activities that corresponded with their preferred learning characteristics. This approach encouraged greater involvement during the learning process and helped students comprehend descriptive texts more effectively, particularly in recognizing main ideas and extracting relevant information from the passages.

The results are in line with Saleh (2021), who reported that students receiving differentiated instruction achieved better reading comprehension outcomes than those taught through conventional approaches. Similar findings were presented by Rukadah et al. (2025), who showed that the implementation of flexible grouping and varied learning activities through differentiated instruction could increase student participation and improve their comprehension of reading materials. Jufrianto et al. (2025) likewise found that differentiated learning had a positive influence on students' English achievement and their involvement in classroom activities. The similarities between these studies and the current findings further indicate the potential of differentiated learning as an effective approach to developing reading skills in EFL settings.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that differentiated learning enables teachers to accommodate differences among students while still pursuing common learning objectives. The provision of varied activities according to students' learning profiles can encourage a more inclusive and learner-centered classroom environment. Such an environment provides greater opportunities for students to participate actively and develop their reading abilities. Consequently, differentiated learning may serve as an alternative instructional approach for teaching reading to junior high school students in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results and discussion presented, it can be concluded that differentiated learning was effective in enhancing the reading skills of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 OKU. The implementation of this approach provided students with learning activities that were adapted to their respective learning profiles, thereby encouraging greater classroom participation and supporting improvements in reading comprehension. The findings reinforce Tomlinson's theory of differentiated learning, which stresses the need for teachers to

accommodate students' varied learning needs and characteristics. In addition, the results provide empirical support for the application of differentiated learning in Indonesian junior high school EFL classrooms as an approach to developing students' reading abilities. Accordingly, differentiated learning may be considered a viable alternative for English teachers seeking to establish learning environments that are more inclusive, responsive, and centered on students. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations, particularly its pre-experimental design, which involved only a single class and did not include a control group. Future research is therefore recommended to employ true experimental or quasi-experimental designs involving a larger number of participants and different educational settings. Such studies may provide broader and more reliable evidence concerning the effectiveness of differentiated learning in developing students' reading skills.

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