

## **EXPLORING CHALLENGES OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

This study purposes to explore the challenges faced while implementing differentiated instruction in the context of an English foreign language classroom. A qualitative case study is utilized in this study to investigate the challenges encountered while adopting differentiated instruction in the context of an English foreign language classroom. The researcher employed a purposive sample method, selecting five participants who had engaged in differentiated instruction professional development and had experience implementing differentiated instruction. The study discovered that teachers face challenges when organizing and delivering differentiated instruction, such as dealing with the selection of materials, methods, and assessments that match students' characteristics, teachers' intrinsic factors, a large number of students, time invested, and learning references. Participants offered suggestions and feedback to other teachers who want to use differentiated instruction by exploring more variations of learning activities, being open to technology, participating in various forms of professional development, recognizing the personality of the students they teach, and spending more time preparing instruction so that student's learning needs are truly met. In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of differentiated instruction, the researcher recommends involving a greater number of participants, including teachers as well as students, in future studies.

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Differentiated Instruction, English Foreign Language*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The growth of education has changed significantly over time. The need for personalized instruction to fulfill the needs of various students has become more widely recognized in the area of education in recent years. Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) argues that teachers must consider how students can participate in learning by identifying their learning needs and optimizing each individual student's potential. It aims to optimize and develop the skills and characteristics the students already have as an effort to prepare them to face future challenges. Therefore, Shareefa (2023) emphasized that it is crucial to provide equal opportunities for all students that can accommodate a wide variety of student potential.

As proposed by Tomlinson (1999), differentiated instruction has emerged as a potential approach to meet the needs of various students in the English language classroom. Differentiated instruction defined as an instruction that facilitates, serves, and acknowledges students' different learning styles in accordance with their readiness, interests, and learning profile. Suwastini et al. (2021) highlighted that differentiated instruction is generally instruction designed with several variations to adapt the teaching-learning process to the

different student characteristics. Because not all students have the equal ability to understand the lessons from the teacher. However, it doesn't mean that differentiated instruction is done individually for each student. In this context, differentiated instruction is considered a strategy for integrating essential skills and standards-based content while individualizing the curriculum to meet the current instructional needs of students (Williams, 2023). Ortega et al. (2018) emphasized differentiated instruction can be a helpful method for teachers in managing effective classroom that will facilitate students' differences in learning and put students as the center of instructional process. By addressing individual needs and offering suitable chances to learn, differentiated instruction is a potential strategy for supporting high-achieving students in mixed-ability classrooms (Ziernwald et al., 2022).

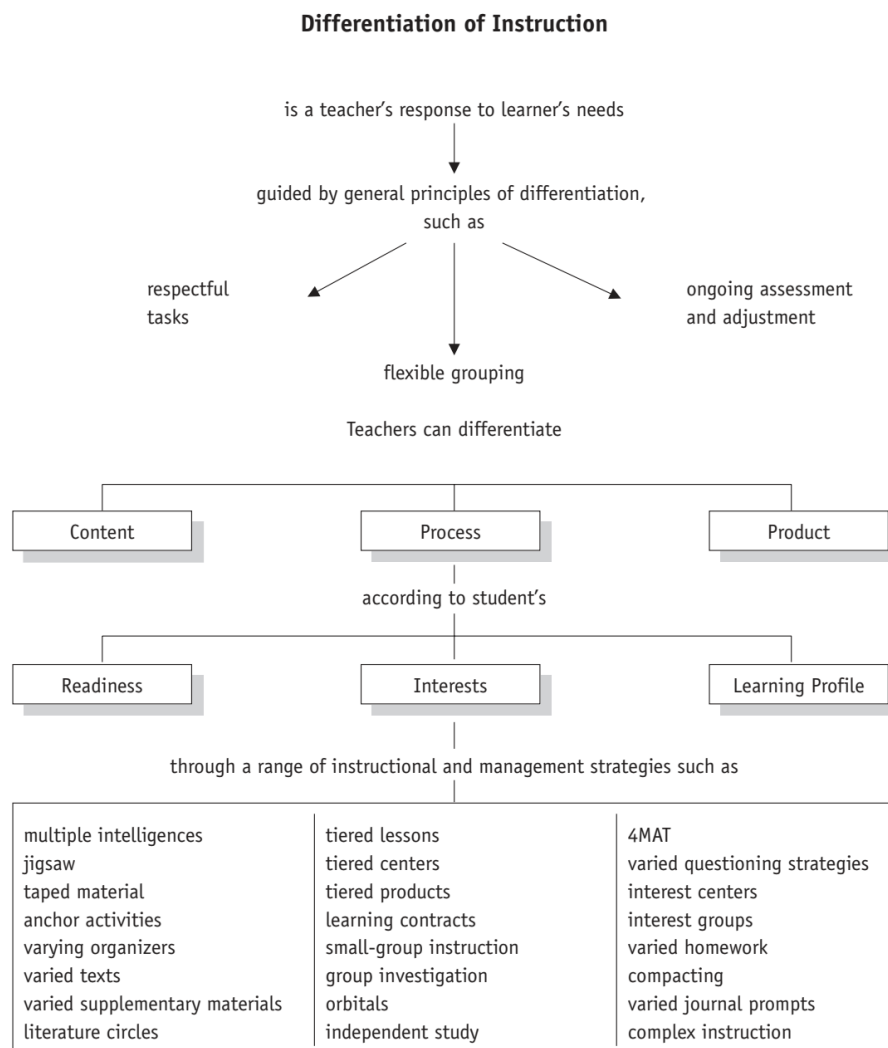


Figure 1. Key Elements of Differentiated Instruction (Tomlinson, 1999)

Before beginning the teaching learning process, teachers who implement differentiated instruction have to consider several factors. Differentiated instruction considers factors such as interest, readiness, and learning profile to provide the student with personalized instruction and support (Suprayogi et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers can use effectively differentiated instruction during teaching, to improve instruction, as well as to support learning for all students. By acknowledging differences among students, it is essential to improve teaching and learning.

Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) defined readiness as the level of knowledge, comprehension and skills that students currently have in relation to a specific learning material. While, interest refers to what students like to learn, think and do. Then, learning profile relates to the preferred way of learning. These factors, according to Sun (2023), guide teachers in designing and using differentiated instruction in classrooms. Tomlinson (2001) added when teachers use readiness level as a focus for differentiating the instruction, students will be required to do more challenging work that takes them out of their comfort zone. Then, students are encouraged to do self-development so that their competence improves to the next level. To consider students' interests, teachers are suggested to identifying the interests that students carry with them into the classroom. In addition, teachers can also try to create new interests by sharing their interest in a topic so that the same interest will be formed in their students. Students' learning styles, intelligence preferences, gender, and culture can be categorized as learning profiles for consideration to conduct differentiated learning that suits the students. Each category has been well studied and proven to be essential to the learning process.

Differentiated instruction is creating heterogeneous classrooms by offering students chances to explore the knowledge, understanding, and skills, to focus on instructional activities helping students progress from fundamental concepts of understanding to higher levels of thinking, and to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and skills (Grecu, 2023). This is in line to what (Tomlinson, 1999) highlighted that teachers can modify content (input), process or product (output). Tomlinson (2017) added that by distinguishing these three elements, teachers propose different approaches to what students learn, how they learn it, and how they demonstrate what they have learned. What these different approaches all share in common is that they are designed to stimulate substantial progress in all students with stated learning goals,

as well as addressing the learning pace and other supports needed to enhance the learning of the class as a whole and the students as individuals.

Tomlinson (1999) explained content as the teacher's learning objectives and the tools or methods used to achieve them. Process refers to activities designed to make sure that students utilize their abilities to comprehend essential ideas and information. Products are tools that students use or produce to show or expand what they have learned. In response to students' readiness level, interest or learning profile, Tomlinson (2001) detailed how content, process and product are differentiated.

#### Content

- Content differentiation based on students' readiness aims to match the material or information to be learned with the students' ability to read and comprehend it.
- Content differentiation based on students' interests engages the inclusion of ideas and materials in the curriculum that build on students' current interests or broaden students' interests.
- Content differentiation based on students' learning profiles means making sure that students have a way to acquire materials and ideas that match their personal way of learning.

#### Process

- Differentiating process based on student readiness means fitting the task difficulty to the student's actual comprehension and skill level.
- Differentiating processes based on student interests engages offering students options on a topic to focus on or assisting them in connecting personal interests with reasonable goals.
- Differentiating process based on students' learning profiles typically means promoting students to understand an idea in their personal way of learning.

#### Product

- At this point, teachers and students can adapt to the product task. The task should explain to the students what knowledge, comprehension, and skills they should put into their tasks; the steps, processes, and work habits they should show when they do the task; the options for representing their learning; and expected quality. Teachers and students can adjust the product (written, oral, recorded, with icons, through models, or

with a combination of these) according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The teacher can provide a mutually agreed-upon selection of products to which the students can propose alternatives by adding to and assisting the teacher in modifying the essential requirements to meet the student's learning needs, as long as the alternatives direct the students toward the key information, understandings, and skills that are the purpose of the task.

Differentiated instruction has a beneficial effect on students' learning in the classroom, according to several studies. The studies found that differentiated instruction has been demonstrated to promote intellectual development and interest in the subject, to help learners understand key concepts, and it is also an effective approach that can help all students learn and advance more quickly (Dalila et al., 2022; Magableh and Abdullah, 2020; Sahril et al., 2021; Ziernwald et al., 2022). This has been proven by Hussein and Saleh (2021) through a quasi-experimental study conducted in the context of Bahraini EFL Secondary School Students. The study found that the use of differentiated instruction effectively increased reading comprehension ability and helped students improving their reading performance. The study also suggested that using a variety of materials and activities that suit the different needs and abilities of students can improve their reading comprehension ability. In addition, Ojong (2023) found that differentiated instruction significantly affects students' motivation, enhances an inclusive learning environment, and increases students' engagement and achievement in second language acquisition.

After experiencing of undifferentiated instruction for many years, it can be difficult to imagine what a classroom with differentiation would be like and this can lead to teacher misconceptions in implementing differentiated instruction. This was proven by Sougari and Mavroudi (2019) who found that learning implemented by teachers in Greek public primary schools is still teacher-centered. Although teachers gave positive responses to differentiated instruction, it was not really implemented because teachers misunderstood the basic concepts of differentiated instruction. Implementing differentiated instruction can be challenging for teachers, as it requires adjusting content, processes, and products based on students' readiness, interest, and learning profiles, which needs to be investigated in depth. The fact that there are not many examples of differentiated instruction makes it even more challenging to implement (Tomlinson, 1999).

This study aims to explore the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction in the context of the English foreign language classroom. By conducting this study, it is expected to contribute to the field of education by providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with differentiated instruction in the English foreign language classroom. The findings hopefully facilitate the development of effective strategies and recommendations for educators and policy makers to promote the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, which will ultimately benefit English language learners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction in the context of the English foreign language classroom. Unlike studies that examined a large number of participants to gather a broader and representative perspective, case studies are naturally valued as a unit that allows for in-depth investigation (Saldaña, 2011). Case study is one of the qualitative research methods used to examine a unit in depth (Ary et al., 2010). This unit can be a group, individual, location, class, program, policy, process, institution, or community. In this case study, the unit that been investigated was a group of teachers.

The researcher employed the purposive sampling method in which the researcher selected participants with certain considerations (Ary et al., 2010). The case study involves selecting a group of English teachers as research participants. Based on the preliminary study, there were 5 teachers teaching English course who participated in professional development regarding differentiated instruction and had experience in implementing differentiated instruction. Each teacher comes from different school. This participant selection consideration has a high potential to provide the needed data.

Data collection is the crucial stage in this study since the goal of the study is to get valid data. Data was collected through structured interviews with participants to gather information on the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction in the context of the English foreign language classroom. The interviews used an interview guide with some open-ended questions. The questions in this interview were divided into four (4) sub-themes as follows:

Table 1. Interview Questions' Sub-Themes

No	Sub-Themes
1	Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Instruction
2	Preparation and implementation of Differentiated Instruction
3	Challenges Faced
4	Teacher's Reflection on Outcomes and Support in Differentiated Instruction Implementation

Due to the fact that gathering participants in a central location or visiting each participant individually was not possible, open-ended questions on the questionnaire were conducted with all participants via Google Form. This questioning type allows the researcher to ask close-ended questions followed by open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012). First, the interviewed participants were provided with a Google Form link with questions related to differentiated instruction. Participants were then given some time to answer the interview questions. Then, the collected data were analyzed to get the study result.

The data collected was analyzed thematically to identify the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction in the context of the English foreign language classroom. The technique of analyzing the data in this study applied Ary et al. (2010)'s concept. They believed that the analysis of qualitative data consists of three steps: organizing and familiarizing, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. The data through interviews were organized by dividing interview answers into some folders for each participant. Then, the data were sorted into categories of identify the challenges faced when implementing differentiated instruction in the context of the English foreign language classroom. Finally, the shorted data were interpreted and represented in narration.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction can promote the achievement of all students (Ginja and Chen, 2020; Hasanah et al., 2022; Jufrianto et al., 2023), but teachers' misconceptions about it must first be cleared up. Teachers need to be familiar with differentiated instruction and understand its implementation. Since all 5 participants in this study had participated in professional development or training opportunities related to implementing differentiated instruction in the

EFL classroom, they agreed that they are familiar with differentiated instruction and understand its implementation. However, their level of familiarity and understanding varies. Some of them are very familiar and understand the differentiated instruction, others are quite familiar and understand.

Furthermore, in relation to motivation in implementing differentiated instruction, the five participants have the same thoughts. Meeting students' learning needs is their motivation for implementing differentiated learning in the classroom.

*“To make learning meaningful for students in accordance with their characteristics and also to accommodate their learning needs” (Teacher 1)*

*“To achieve the goal of the teaching and learning process which is to make students learn more efficiently” (Teacher 3)*

*“To meet students' learning needs so that they can more easily learn and accept the information provided” (Teacher 5)*

### **Preparation and implementation of Differentiated Instruction**

In terms of learners' characteristic considered to implement differentiated instruction, the finding mentioned that participants agreed to focus on students' interest. However, they had different view on taking students' readiness and learning profile into account. Teachers 1 and 3 stated that they only pay more attention to students' interests. Other views were expressed by teachers 2, 4 and 5 who considered all aspects in implementing differentiated instruction. As for the aspects that need to be differentiated, the five teachers had the same opinion. They agreed to differentiate content, process and product in teaching and learning process. In the interview, teachers also provided a brief illustration of how they implemented differentiated instruction. All teachers applied the same steps in the preparation and implementation of differentiated instruction.

*“Before conducting differentiation planning, I first conduct an initial formative test to determine the tendency of students' learning styles, interests and talents, as well as their initial understanding of a particular topic. The results of the initial test are used to determine the teaching materials and media, activities in learning and differentiated assessments that will be applied.” (Teacher 5)*

*“I started by giving a diagnostic test before teaching a particular subject. I analyze the results of the test to determine which parts of my teaching can be adapted to differentiated instruction. Then I make preparations on what and how to teach the*



*learning material with differentiated instruction. If possible, I also try to listen to suggestions from other teacher colleagues.” (Teacher 2)*

### **Challenges Faced**

In implementing differentiated instruction, participants experienced various challenges. However, they also found ways to handle the challenges. The study found that teachers faced challenges in planning and delivering differentiated instruction, such as coping with materials, methods and assessments selection that match the characteristics of the students, teachers' intrinsic factors, the large number of students, the amount of time invested, and learning references.

*“The challenge in lesson planning is related to the increase of preparation time and energy that must be taken because we have to make differentiated materials besides we as teachers have to do other tasks, the challenge in implementation is that teachers must be ready to organize various strategies to facilitate differentiated student activities, and the challenge in assessment is to conduct different assessments so that teachers also have to provide different assessment rubrics. In addition, as a vocational English teacher majoring in Fashion Management, I have difficulty finding references to appropriate ESP content because most English books are only about English in general.” (Teacher 5)*

*“I think my challenge in implementing differentiated instruction is myself. The amount of work that needs to be done as a teacher has drained a lot of energy and thoughts so that this lowers my motivation to implement differentiated instruction.” (Teacher 2)*

Teachers remained positive even though they faced many challenges in implementing differentiated instruction. Although teachers found challenges in implementing differentiated instruction, they also attempted to address the challenges encountered through grouping the students based on their characteristics, enriching the variation of the content, process and product, and exploring beneficial motivation.

*“The large number of students makes it challenging to organize the class. Dividing them into groups according to their interest, readiness or learning style and challenging advanced students while providing additional support and guidance to weaker students will be helpful in classroom organization.” (Teacher 4)*

*“To overcome the challenges faced, I try to allocate time and try to find variations both in terms of materials and assessments.” (Teacher 1)*

## **Teacher's Reflection on Outcomes and Support in Differentiated Instruction Implementation**

Overall, all participants had positive outcomes as a result of implementing differentiated instruction. They could feel the changes in students' learning motivation before and after differentiated instruction was implemented. Students' engagement increased in learning activities. The impact of implementing differentiated instruction was also felt by the teachers in terms of students' learning outcomes which increased. Finally, the teachers agreed that students' attitudes towards English lessons also changed as well. Additionally, continuous support and learning opportunities are crucial for teachers to effectively implement differentiated instruction in their classrooms. According to this study, teachers reported that they are also adequately supported by their environment. Teacher colleagues and their schools provided positive feedback and facilitated the adoption of differentiated instruction.

At the end, they shared what they need to improve or change as well as suggestions for other teachers who want to implement differentiated instruction.

*"I feel that I need to be more active in finding variations of learning activities to apply differentiated instruction next. I suggest adopting differentiated instruction step by step from the easiest thing to apply, because that is where a more effective and meaningful application for students begins."* (Teacher 1)

*"As a teacher, you must be willing to accept any changes, especially in the EFL field. Based on my experience implementing differentiated instruction, I will improve my language teaching skills by learning more about different strategies and be open with technology to involve more technology in learning so that students' needs can be addressed."* (Teacher 2)

*"I try to improve my teaching ability by enriching different teaching techniques so students are more active and achieve learning goals. In my opinion, attending various workshops that support differentiated instruction will significantly help us in its implementation."* (Teacher 3)

*"Try to recognize students' learning characteristics more deeply because we will find it easier to determine what actions we will take in the classroom so that students' learning needs can be fulfilled. This is what I am focusing on now to improve."* (Teacher 4)

*"I try to increase the variety of learning content and activities. For those who want to implement differentiated instruction, prepare your energy and time because differentiated instruction takes more time and energy in teaching, and start attending training to open your mind about the importance of teaching according to students' learning needs."* (Teacher 5)

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Instruction**

Teachers' participation in professional development in this study had a positive impact on their familiarity and understanding of differentiated instruction. At the very least, their participation in professional development gave them an understanding of the fundamental concepts of differentiated instruction. Shareefa (2023) believes that training programs and development sessions that teachers undertake in the context of implementing differentiated teaching have a positive effect on their teaching and learning process as evidenced by the results of the study which showed teachers' overall high familiarity and understanding of differentiated instruction components. In addition, (Moosa and Shareefa (2019), in their study, highlighted the importance of professional development for teachers to break their misconceptions about its practice. They suggested a careful professional development providing teachers with in-depth training on the principles and strategies of differentiated instruction can develop a solid knowledge foundation in the implementation of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

The motivation to fulfil students' needs that drove the participants to implement differentiated instruction is consistent with what Malacapay, (2019), Pozas et al. (2020), and Shareefa (2023) emphasized related to the importance of differentiated instruction that provides opportunities for students to learn at their own pace and according to their individual needs. This means teachers should modify the materials taught, the way of teaching, and the tasks or projects given to students to meet the needs and preferences of each student.

### **Preparation and implementation of Differentiated Instruction**

Teachers play a crucial role in implementation of differentiated instruction by selecting appropriate learning strategies, providing constructive feedback, and supporting students who need it. Teachers need to consider the elements of students' readiness, interest and learning profile as well as understand three essential features of differentiated instruction, are content, process, and product differentiation. The distinction of teachers' decisions in considering students' characteristics and differentiated aspects of learning also happened in other study. Ismajli and Imami-Morina (2018) discovered that comprehension and application of differentiated instruction in elementary schools are not at the appropriate level. Teachers

frequently focus on the product rather than the material or process of differentiated instruction. Investigating teachers' beliefs and practices regarding differentiated instruction in the Greek TESOL context, Tzanni (2018) found that the participants in the study showed stronger beliefs towards differentiation based on students' learning profiles and interests. However, their beliefs towards differentiation based on students' readiness were weaker. All of these findings are in harmony with what Tomlinson (1999) suggested that teachers can adopt one or several elements of the curriculum (content, process, product) based on one or several students' characteristics (readiness, interest, learning profile) at any point in the lesson. However, teachers do not need to differentiate all elements in all possible ways since an effective differentiated classroom covers many aspects and times where whole class and some without differentiation is normal. In addition, Tomlinson (1999) advised teachers to modify curriculum elements only when they see students need it and they believe that the modification can increase the possibility of students understanding important ideas and using important skills better. This is in line with Pozas et al. (2020)'s study that found teachers in top schools and classes tend to use differentiation mechanisms less because of the belief that in more selective and 'top' schools and classes, differentiated teaching is not necessary, considering that most of the students are high-ability students.

### **Challenges Faced**

The challenges in planning and delivering differentiated instruction found in this study is in line with what was found in previous study that in the preparation and implementation of differentiated instruction, teachers struggled in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment while addressing students' skills, abilities, and learning profiles (Malacapay, 2019), teachers' lack of commitment for differentiated instruction (Melese, 2019), a large number of students can make it difficult for teachers to provide differentiated instruction and meet the unique needs of each student. (Ojong, 2023), time-consuming as teachers may struggle to find enough time to create and implement the instruction while covering the required curriculum. (Smets and Struyven, 2020), and limited sources as teachers may lack access to necessary materials, technology, and professional development opportunities (Zerai et al., 2023).

Some previous studies also suggested various ways to deal with the difficulties associated with adopting differentiated instruction. Conducting a study at public and private school in Jakarta, Suprayogi et al. (2018) found that one of the main strategy to implement differentiated instruction adopted by the teachers is students should be organized into groups so that targeted instruction and activities can meet the students' needs. In addition, Jufrianto et al. (2023) also pointed out that by proactively enriching strategies, teachers can overcome the challenges of differentiated instruction and create a more effective and engaging learning environment for their students. Finally, Ginja and Chen (2020) argued that teachers need to overcome low self-efficacy and motivation by familiarizing themselves with differentiated instruction strategies through research presentations, workshops, seminars and advocating for its implementation. By doing so, teachers can minimize the challenges faced, successfully implement differentiated instruction in the classroom and promote the achievement of all students.

### **Teacher's Reflection on Outcomes and Support in Differentiated Instruction Implementation**

Several empirical studies were cited to support the claims of positive outcomes resulted in this study. According to Ziernwald et al. (2022), differentiated instruction had proven effects on motivational-affective characteristics that address diverse needs and interests. In addition, Ojong (2023) highlighted that differentiated instruction significantly affects learners' motivation and engagement. Added by Pozas et al. (2023), teachers perceived a positive impact on student achievement and interest in learning. Another positive effect was also presented by Mardhatillah and Suharyadi (2023) in their study. Differentiated Instruction is proven to increase intellectual development and interest in the course, student understanding of important concepts, and methods that can assist all students to learn and make greater improvements in the context of the English as a Foreign Language classroom.

Sharing real-life examples of effective differentiated instruction with colleagues, including participating in professional learning communities, attending conferences, and using online platforms, is essential to demystify the concept of differentiated instruction and relieve the nerves that teachers may feel when they are expected to use differentiated instruction (Grecu, 2023). Shareefa (2023) highlighted the importance of providing administrative support. School administrators should offer professional development opportunities, access to

learning materials and time for collaborative planning. Therefore, when school administration and other stakeholders equipped teachers with sufficient knowledge and support, the possibility of using differentiated instruction consistently is highly likely.

As shown in the statements in the finding, teachers reflected several points in order to improve the implementation of differentiated instruction in the future more effectively. Teachers suggested to searching for more variations of learning activities, being open to technology, participating in various kinds of professional development, recognizing the character of the students being taught, and taking more time to prepare the instructions so that students' learning needs are truly addressed. These reflections and suggestions were confirmed by some previous studies. Jufrianto et al. (2023) suggested that teachers need to proactively develop various strategies on what students need to learn, how they will learn the lesson, and/or how they will demonstrate what they have learned to increase the likelihood of each student learning as much as possible. In addition, Maruf (2023) recommended that utilizing available resources and supports, such as curriculum materials, technology tools, and instructional coaches, can provide practical guidance and strategies for implementing differentiated instruction. Suprayogi et al. (2021) added that schools should provide special programs to improve the implementation of differentiated instruction among teachers that include professional development on differentiated instruction and sharing sessions among teachers who had experiences in implementing differentiated instruction. Furthermore, Ziernwald et al. (2022) advocated to allocate sufficient time for the preparation and implementation of differentiated instruction.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the challenges encountered while adopting differentiated instruction in English language classes. The five English teachers who took part in this study had undergone professional development in differentiated instruction and had experience implementing it. Participation in professional development increased their knowledge and comprehension of differentiated instruction. However, this study found that teachers encountered challenges in preparing and providing differentiated instruction, such as dealing with materials, methods, assessment, teachers' intrinsic variables, a large number of students, time invested, and learning references. To address these issues, teachers attempted to categorize

students based on their characteristics, improve content, process, and product variation, and explore relevant motivation. Teachers offered recommendations for improvement and input for other teachers on how to better utilize differentiated instruction. Teachers advised to seek more variation in learning activities, welcome technology, participate in professional development, identify the personalities of the students they teach, and spend more time planning teaching to match the learning requirements of students. Since this study is limited to only interview 5 English teachers, these participants may only represent a small proportion of teachers. It is hoped that future studies can involve more participants to get a broader perception of differentiated instruction. In addition, the challenges faced by students in the implementation of differentiated instruction can also be explored to get other perspectives.

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