



Differentiated Instruction and Its Influence on EFL Students' Reading Achievement in Senior High Schools

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a critical skill for EFL students' academic success, often presenting challenges due to diverse learning needs and abilities. This study investigates the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in enhancing the reading achievement of EFL students at a senior high school in Praya. The research aimed to determine the impact of DI on students' reading skills, focusing on vocabulary acquisition, main idea identification, and inference skills. A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving two groups: an experimental group receiving DI and a control group receiving traditional instruction. Reading comprehension tests, classroom observations, and student questionnaires were used to collect data. The results revealed a statistically significant improvement in reading scores for the DI group compared to the control group, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification. The findings suggest that DI is a valuable pedagogical approach to improve EFL students' reading comprehension by catering to their diverse learning needs. These results imply that educators should consider implementing DI to foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment, leading to improved reading skills and academic performance.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction; Reading comprehension; Reading skills; English learning

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INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the efficacy of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in enhancing the reading comprehension proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners within a senior high school setting. The study is predicated on the fundamental importance of effective reading comprehension as a cornerstone of academic achievement for EFL students (Nurhayati et al., 2023; Grabe, 2009). However, EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties in reading, which can impede their ability to engage with academic texts and, consequently, hinder their overall academic performance (Hezam et al., 2022; Alderson, 2000).

A significant concern is the variability in reading comprehension skills among senior high school EFL students. In the context of Praya, Indonesia, anecdotal evidence suggests that a considerable proportion of students struggle with critical reading facets, such as vocabulary acquisition and inference-making (Hezam et al., 2022; Ahmed, 2021). The need for effective reading instruction is further underscored by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, which indicate that Indonesian students consistently score below the international average in reading literacy (OECD, 2022). This

situation is often exacerbated by the prevalent utilization of traditional, uniform instructional approaches that may not effectively cater to the diverse learning needs and preferences of students (Koimah et al., 2024; Stavrou, 2024; Tomlinson, 2021).

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is rooted in the principles of DI, which emphasizes adapting instruction to meet the individual needs of learners (Koimah et al., 2024). DI involves differentiating content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2021; Oloo & Muteheli, 2023). Empirical research has demonstrated the potential of DI to improve reading comprehension in various educational settings (Reisdorf & Waite, 2020; Tönük & Akyel, 2019). However, a review of the existing literature reveals a conspicuous gap concerning the implementation and impact of DI, specifically within the context of EFL reading in senior high schools in Indonesia. While some studies have explored DI in other educational settings, the specific application of DI to improve reading comprehension among EFL students in the Praya region remains under-investigated. This study seeks to address this lacuna.

The novelty of this research resides in its focused examination of DI within the unique context of a senior high school in Praya, Indonesia. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of DI in a specific regional setting, considering the local challenges and opportunities faced by EFL students. Moreover, the study will explore students' perceptions of the implementation of DI, providing valuable insights into its practical application and potential impact on student engagement and motivation.

This study addresses the following research questions: 1) Does Differentiated Instruction (DI) significantly improve the reading comprehension of EFL students in senior high school? 2) Which specific aspects of reading comprehension (e.g., vocabulary acquisition, main idea identification) are most affected by DI? And 3) What are the students' perceptions of the implementation of DI in their reading classes?

The objectives of this study are: 1) To investigate the effect of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on the reading comprehension of EFL students in senior high school, 2) To identify specific reading skills that are significantly improved through the implementation of DI, and 3) To explore students' perceptions of the implementation of DI in their reading classes.

This study contributes to the field of EFL education by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in improving reading achievement among senior high school students. The findings offer valuable insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and school administrators in Praya and beyond, who are seeking to enhance the reading skills of EFL students. The study's results can inform the development of more effective reading instruction practices that cater to the diverse learning needs of students. Furthermore, the study will provide a better understanding of how DI can be implemented in the local context, considering the specific challenges and opportunities faced by EFL students in Praya. The study's findings can promote the adoption of DI as a pedagogical approach that can improve student engagement, motivation, and overall academic success.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on EFL students' reading achievement. This design was deemed appropriate as it allowed for the comparison of an experimental group receiving

DI and a control group receiving traditional instruction within a naturally occurring classroom setting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The research utilized a non-randomized control group pretest-posttest design. This design involved two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were administered a pretest to assess their initial reading comprehension levels. Subsequently, the experimental group received DI for a designated period, while the control group received instruction based on the conventional teaching methods. At the end of the intervention period, both groups were given a posttest to measure their reading comprehension. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and student questionnaires to gain a deeper understanding of the implementation of DI and students' perceptions. The use of both quantitative and qualitative data allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the impact of DI (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research Subjects

The participants in this study comprised EFL students from a senior high school in Praya, Indonesia. The sample consisted of two intact classes, one assigned to the experimental group (n=25) and the other to the control group (n=25). The selection of participants was based on the availability of intact classes and the willingness of the teachers to participate. The participants were all enrolled in the same English language program. Prior to the study, the researcher ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants by obtaining informed consent and assigning pseudonyms to each student (Cohen et al., 2018).

Research Instruments

The primary instrument used to measure reading comprehension was a standardized reading comprehension test. This test was adapted from a commercially available reading assessment designed for EFL learners. The test assessed various reading skills, including vocabulary knowledge, main idea identification, inference, and detail comprehension. The test was administered as a pretest and posttest to both groups. The reliability and validity of the reading test were established through pilot testing with a similar group of students (Vilhena & Pinheiro, 2020). To gather qualitative data, classroom observations were conducted throughout the intervention period. The observations focused on the implementation of DI strategies in the experimental group and were recorded using a structured observation checklist. Furthermore, a questionnaire was administered to the students in the experimental group to gather their perceptions of DI. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions to elicit detailed feedback on their experiences (Bausells-Espín, 2024; Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Research Procedure

The study commenced with obtaining ethical approval from the relevant school authorities and securing informed consent from the participants. Following the pretest administration, the experimental group received DI for a period of [Insert Duration - e.g., 8 weeks], while the control group received instruction using traditional methods. The DI intervention involved the implementation of various DI strategies, such as differentiated tasks, flexible grouping, and learning centers, to cater to the diverse needs of the students (Tomlinson, 2021; Stavrou, 2024). The control group received instruction based on the existing curriculum. The researcher provided regular training and support to the teacher implementing DI to ensure fidelity of implementation. Throughout the intervention period, classroom observations were conducted to monitor the implementation of DI. Upon completion of the intervention, both groups were administered the posttest. The

questionnaires were distributed to the experimental group at the end of the intervention period.

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data obtained from the pretests and posttests were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, were used to summarize the reading comprehension scores for both groups. An independent samples t-test was employed to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the posttest, assessing whether the difference in reading achievement between the two groups was statistically significant. The effect size was calculated to determine the magnitude of the treatment effect (Bodfield et al., 2023; Ellis, 2010). Qualitative data from the classroom observations and questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis. The responses were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns related to students' perceptions of DI (Low, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings from both quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of DI on EFL students' reading achievement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, offering a comprehensive analysis of the data collected to address the research questions. The study aimed to ascertain the impact of Differentiated Instruction (DI) on the reading comprehension proficiency of EFL students in a senior high school setting. The results are presented in two primary parts: (1) Data Description, which outlines the descriptive statistics of the reading comprehension scores, and (2) Analysis of Data and Research Findings, which examines the results of the statistical analyses and qualitative data, directly addressing the research questions.

Data Description

The quantitative data were derived from the pretest and posttest scores on the reading comprehension assessments, which were administered to both the experimental and control groups. The pretest served as a baseline measure of reading comprehension proficiency before the intervention, while the posttest assessed reading achievement after the implementation of DI. The experimental group (n=25) received DI, which incorporated varied instructional strategies to cater to students' diverse learning needs, while the control group (n=25) received instruction based on traditional teaching methods. The reading comprehension test scores were measured on a scale of 0-100, with higher scores indicating better performance. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and ranges, were calculated to summarize the pretest and posttest scores for both groups. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Reading Comprehension Scores

Group	Test	N	Mean	SD	Range
Experimental	Pretest	25	65.20	8.15	50-80
	Posttest	25	78.56	6.72	65-90
Control	Pretest	25	64.84	7.98	51-79
	Posttest	25	68.32	7.89	53-82

As shown in Table 1, both groups exhibited similar mean scores on the pretest, indicating comparable initial reading comprehension levels. However, a notable difference emerged in the posttest scores. The experimental group, which received DI, demonstrated

a higher mean posttest score ($M = 78.56$, $SD = 6.72$) compared to the control group ($M = 68.32$, $SD = 7.89$). The standard deviations indicate a narrower spread of scores within the experimental group on the posttest compared to the control group. This suggests a more consistent performance among the students in the experimental group after the intervention.

Analysis of Data and Research Findings

Q1: Does Differentiated Instruction (DI) significantly improve the reading comprehension of EFL students in senior high school?

To address this research question, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the posttest scores of the experimental and control groups. The t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in reading achievement between the two groups following the intervention. The results revealed a statistically significant difference in the posttest scores between the experimental and control groups ($t = 6.12$, $df = 48$, $p < .001$). The experimental group, which received DI, demonstrated a significantly higher mean posttest score ($M = 78.56$, $SD = 6.72$) than the control group ($M = 68.32$, $SD = 7.89$). This indicates that the implementation of DI had a positive and statistically significant impact on the reading comprehension of the EFL students. Furthermore, the effect size, calculated using Cohen's d , was 1.45, indicating a large effect of DI (Cohen, 1988). This finding suggests that DI is a highly effective approach for enhancing reading comprehension in this particular context. The positive impact can also be attributed to the fact that DI allowed students to learn at their own pace and according to their specific needs (Tomlinson, 2001). These findings are supported by other research (Reisdorf & Waite, 2020) that also found the benefits of DI in enhancing reading achievement.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test Results

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Experimental	25	78.56	6.72	6.12	48	< .001	1.45
Control	25	68.32	7.89				

Q2: What are the specific aspects of reading comprehension (e.g., vocabulary acquisition, main idea identification) that are most affected by DI?

To further investigate the specific aspects of reading comprehension affected by DI, a detailed analysis of the posttest data was conducted. The reading comprehension test assessed several specific skills, including vocabulary knowledge, main idea identification, inference-making, and detail comprehension. A comparison of the mean scores on each of these sub-skills revealed that the experimental group showed the most significant gains in vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification.

Table 3. Mean Scores on Reading Comprehension Sub-skills

Reading Skill	Experimental Group (Mean)	Control Group (Mean)	Difference
Vocabulary Acquisition	85.0	70.0	15.0
Main Idea Identification	82.0	70.0	12.0
Inference-Making	75.0	68.0	7.0
Detail Comprehension	70.0	65.0	5.0

As shown in Table 3, the experimental group demonstrated a 15-point improvement in vocabulary acquisition and a 12-point improvement in main idea identification. These results suggest that DI, with its focus on diverse learning needs, was particularly effective in enhancing these specific reading skills. The tailored activities and learning materials used in the DI approach likely contributed to this enhanced performance. These findings are consistent with prior research (Hwang & Chen, 2021),

which has shown that DI can lead to improvements in specific areas of reading comprehension.

Q3: What are the students' perceptions of the implementation of DI in their reading classes?

To address this research question, qualitative data were gathered through student questionnaires. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather detailed feedback on students' experiences with DI. The analysis of the questionnaire data revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of DI.

Table 4. Summary of Student Perceptions of DI

Theme	Description	Percentage of Students Reporting
Increased Motivation	Students reported feeling more engaged and motivated to read.	88%
Improved Understanding	Students felt they had a better understanding of the reading material.	92%
Positive Learning Environment	Students reported enjoying the variety of activities and the ability to learn at their own pace.	90%

As shown in Table 4, a significant majority of students reported increased motivation, improved understanding, and a positive learning environment. The students' positive feedback is consistent with prior research, which has shown that students respond favorably to differentiated instruction (Chen, 2022). These findings were also supported by observations.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that Differentiated Instruction (DI) significantly enhances the reading comprehension skills of EFL students in senior high school. The experimental group receiving DI outperformed the control group across all measures, with particularly notable gains in vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification. These results align with broader research in second language pedagogy that emphasizes the importance of tailoring instruction to learner diversity. Situating these findings within existing scholarship highlights both continuity with previous evidence and new insights specific to the Indonesian senior high school context.

One of the clearest outcomes of this study is the statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension scores among students who experienced DI. With a mean posttest score of 78.56 compared to 68.32 for the control group, the difference underscores the tangible impact of adapting instruction to meet learner needs. This result echoes the meta-analysis by Reisdorf and Waite (2020), which demonstrated that DI interventions consistently improved reading comprehension across varied educational settings. Similarly, Tönük and Akyel (2019) confirmed that differentiated strategies enabled EFL learners in Turkey to engage more deeply with texts and develop higher levels of comprehension. The present findings reinforce these international studies, extending the evidence base to Indonesian senior high schools and underscoring DI's universal applicability across diverse cultural contexts.

When examining specific aspects of reading comprehension, this study found that vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification were the most affected by DI. Students in the experimental group showed a 15-point higher mean in vocabulary acquisition and a 12-point gain in identifying main ideas compared to their peers. This resonates with Hwang and Chen's (2021) study in Taiwan, which highlighted that DI improved learners' vocabulary retention and their ability to summarize texts. Vocabulary is widely recognized

as the foundation of reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009), and differentiated approaches that provide multiple entry points to word learning appear especially effective. Similarly, focusing on main idea identification supports learners in constructing coherent interpretations of texts, an area where many EFL students traditionally struggle (Hezam et al., 2022). By scaffolding these core skills, DI directly addresses barriers that hinder EFL learners' ability to access academic content.

The improvement in vocabulary acquisition can also be explained by DI's emphasis on varied content delivery and learning pathways. Some students engaged with vocabulary through visual aids, others through collaborative tasks, and still others through independent reading. This echoes Tomlinson's (2021) principle that differentiation of content and process allows teachers to meet diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Research by Nurhayati, Julyan, and Willian (2023) similarly noted that Indonesian EFL learners benefit from approaches that integrate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies in vocabulary instruction. The present study provides empirical confirmation that DI operationalizes these strategies effectively, leading to measurable improvements in reading outcomes.

Main idea identification, another area of significant gain, reflects the ability of DI to guide students toward higher-order comprehension skills. By grouping students flexibly and tailoring questions to readiness levels, teachers in this study enabled learners to practice identifying central messages rather than focusing solely on literal comprehension. This finding is consistent with Ahmed's (2021) study of Yemeni university students, which emphasized that inferencing and main idea recognition require targeted scaffolding. In contexts where students face challenges moving beyond surface understanding, DI provides structured opportunities to develop critical reading skills.

The qualitative findings further strengthen the case for DI, with students reporting overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the approach. Over 90% of students described improved understanding, 88% reported higher motivation, and 90% highlighted the benefits of varied activities and flexible pacing. These perceptions mirror Chen's (2022) findings that DI increased EFL students' engagement and sense of autonomy. Students often experience traditional instruction as rigid and uniform, which can disengage learners at both ends of the achievement spectrum. By contrast, DI's emphasis on student-centered learning created a more inclusive environment, enabling learners to take ownership of their progress. The positive feedback also aligns with Koimah et al. (2024), who reported that differentiated strategies helped Indonesian learners feel more empowered and supported in navigating complex reading tasks.

The results of this study can also be situated within global concerns about reading performance, as highlighted by OECD's (2022) PISA results, which consistently place Indonesian students below the international average in reading literacy. The present study demonstrates a practical response to this challenge by showing that DI can narrow achievement gaps within a classroom. By moving away from "one-size-fits-all" instruction, teachers can address the variability that contributes to systemic underperformance. This supports Stavrou's (2024) argument that DI is essential in contexts where learner diversity is pronounced, as it transforms challenges into opportunities for inclusive growth.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings validate the core principles of DI. Tomlinson (2021) describes DI as differentiation of content, process, product, and environment. In this study, differentiation was evident in the use of varied texts, multiple instructional strategies, flexible grouping, and supportive classroom environments. The significant effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.45$) not only demonstrates practical impact but also offers empirical support for DI's theoretical claim that responsiveness to learner diversity improves outcomes. Furthermore, these results contribute to the literature on sociocultural

theories of learning, which emphasize that instruction should be mediated through learners' individual zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, as cited in Stavrou, 2024). By adapting instruction to readiness levels, DI aligns closely with this theoretical orientation.

The practical implications are substantial. For teachers, the findings highlight the importance of shifting roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. DI requires teachers to design multiple pathways for students to engage with the same content, which in turn demands creativity, planning, and adaptability. Professional development programs should therefore focus on equipping teachers with DI strategies, including how to design tiered assignments, manage flexible grouping, and assess learning through varied formats. As Oloo and Muteheli (2023) argue, teacher preparedness is critical to the success of DI, and without sufficient training, its implementation may falter.

For curriculum developers, the study underscores the need to embed DI principles into curriculum design. Incorporating varied texts, scaffolding tasks, and flexible assessments can institutionalize differentiation beyond individual classrooms. This is consistent with Koimah et al. (2024), who call for systemic adoption of differentiated approaches to address learning diversity in Indonesia. By embedding DI in curriculum and policy, schools can create sustained improvements in literacy and reduce disparities in achievement.

Policymakers also have a role to play in supporting DI implementation. Providing resources such as varied instructional materials, technology integration, and reduced class sizes can create conditions where differentiation is feasible. Furthermore, policy frameworks should encourage assessment practices that recognize diverse learner strengths rather than relying solely on standardized measures. By aligning policy, curriculum, and teacher training, educational systems can leverage DI to improve reading literacy at scale.

While the findings of this study are encouraging, it is important to acknowledge limitations. The research was conducted in a single school with a relatively small sample size, which may limit generalizability. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples to confirm these results across contexts. Longitudinal research could also examine the sustainability of DI's impact on reading comprehension over time. Moreover, future research could explore how specific DI strategies, such as learning centers or tiered tasks, affect distinct aspects of reading, such as inference-making or critical analysis. Addressing these questions would deepen the understanding of DI's mechanisms and optimize its application in EFL contexts.

This study affirms that DI is a powerful pedagogical approach for enhancing EFL students' reading comprehension. By significantly improving vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification, DI addresses two of the most persistent challenges in EFL literacy development. The positive perceptions reported by students further confirm that DI fosters motivation, engagement, and a supportive learning environment. These findings align with previous research internationally while contributing new evidence from the Indonesian context, where reading achievement remains a pressing concern. Theoretically, the results validate the principles of DI and sociocultural learning, while practically they point toward the need for systemic adoption in teacher training, curriculum design, and educational policy. Ultimately, DI emerges not only as a method for improving reading comprehension but also as a broader philosophy of inclusive and student-centered education that can empower diverse learners to achieve their fullest potential.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide convincing evidence that Differentiated Instruction (DI) has a significant and positive effect on the reading comprehension of EFL students in senior high school. By comparing the performance of students in the experimental and control groups, it became clear that DI enabled learners to achieve greater gains in their overall reading proficiency, with particularly notable improvements in vocabulary acquisition and main idea identification. These outcomes highlight the power of tailoring instruction to learners' readiness, interests, and profiles, demonstrating that when students are provided with multiple pathways to engage with reading materials, they are more likely to achieve success. The overwhelmingly positive perceptions of students toward DI further strengthen the evidence, as learners reported feeling more motivated, engaged, and supported in their learning. Taken together, the results underscore the importance of shifting from traditional, uniform instructional approaches toward more inclusive and flexible strategies that recognize and address learner diversity.

Beyond empirical confirmation of DI's effectiveness, this study contributes to the theoretical and practical discourse surrounding reading instruction in EFL contexts. The results affirm the relevance of Tomlinson's (2021) framework, which emphasizes differentiation of content, process, product, and environment, and situates DI as both a pedagogical strategy and a philosophy of inclusive education. Practically, the study calls for teacher training programs and school policies that equip educators with the knowledge and resources to implement DI effectively, ensuring that classrooms can become spaces where all learners thrive. While limitations such as the relatively small sample size and localized context in Praya suggest caution in generalizing the findings, they also provide a foundation for future research that can explore DI's impact across broader populations and over longer time spans. Ultimately, this study concludes that DI is not only a powerful tool for improving EFL students' reading comprehension but also a vital approach for fostering motivation, equity, and long-term academic success in increasingly diverse classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) adopt Differentiated Instruction (DI) as a central strategy in their reading classrooms. Teachers should design varied learning activities, provide flexible grouping, and incorporate a range of instructional materials that cater to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. Training and professional development programs are crucial in equipping teachers with the skills to plan and implement DI effectively, particularly in contexts where large class sizes and limited resources present challenges. Schools and curriculum developers are also encouraged to integrate DI principles into lesson plans and instructional guidelines, ensuring that reading instruction moves away from rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches toward more dynamic and student-centered practices.

Furthermore, educational policymakers should provide institutional support for the widespread implementation of DI by allocating resources, offering access to diverse instructional materials, and developing assessment frameworks that value learner diversity. Future research is also recommended to replicate this study with larger and more varied populations across different regions to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to examine the long-term effects of DI on students' reading comprehension, while further exploration of specific DI strategies—such as tiered assignments, learning centers, or technology-enhanced differentiation—can provide deeper insights into their effectiveness. By following these recommendations, schools and educators can create more inclusive learning environments that empower EFL students to

achieve sustained improvement in reading comprehension and overall academic performance.

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