

Teaching and Learning English Using Differentiated Learning Strategy in Merdeka Curriculum at Remote Island : Calssroom Practices

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the teaching and learning process through the implementation of differentiated learning strategy for teaching speaking in the Merdeka Curriculum at a remote island school. Employing a case study design, data were collected through direct classroom observation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, involving one English teacher and five eighth-grade students. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that the teacher applied differentiation based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles by using varied speaking tasks, contextual materials, and flexible grouping. Despite constraints such as limited technology, restricted instructional time, and lack of resources, the differentiated learning strategy fostered student engagement and improved speaking confidence. The results indicate that differentiated learning, when implemented responsively, can enhance inclusive and effective speaking instruction in remote educational settings.

Keywords: *Differentiated Learning Strategy, Speaking, Merdeka Curriculum, Remote Island, Teaching and Learning Process*

Introduction

The transformation of Indonesia's education system through the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* has brought forward a paradigm shift from uniform instruction to a more flexible, student-centered learning environment. One of the curriculum's core features is the recognition of learner diversity and the empowerment of teachers to design learning experiences that are responsive to students' needs, interests, and learning profiles (Syafi'i, 2021). This shift aligns closely with the principles of differentiated learning strategy, an approach that modifies content, process, and product to address individual differences in the classroom (Tomlinson, 2014).

In the context of English language teaching, particularly speaking, differentiated learning is highly relevant. Speaking is not only a fundamental skill in communication but also one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition for learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. Brown (2001) describes speaking as an interactive and productive skill that requires active participation, while Munir (2018) asserts that speaking ability is best developed through continuous, contextual, and meaningful practice. Therefore, teaching speaking through differentiated strategies allows educators to provide personalized pathways that accommodate students with varying levels of language readiness, confidence, and engagement.

The implementation of differentiated learning strategy in speaking classes, however, becomes increasingly complex in remote and under-resourced educational environments, such as remote island. The geographical isolation, lack of access to digital

tools, limited instructional materials, and shortage of professional development opportunities present significant barriers to effective teaching. Despite these challenges, SMP Negeri Satap 2 Liukang Tupabbiring, the only junior high school on the island, has adopted the Merdeka Curriculum and seeks to implement differentiated learning strategy in its english speaking lessons. Understanding how this process unfolds in a real classroom is crucial for evaluating the curriculum' feasibility and effectiveness in remote settings.

While numerous studies have explored teacher perceptions (Yulia, 2024; Rahmawati, 2023), student outcomes (Hidayati, 2023), and curriculum adaptation (Anggraeni, 2024) in differentiated instruction, few have documented the actual teaching and learning process in remote, resource-limited classrooms particularly in the context of speaking skill development. This study attempts to fill that gap by focusing specifically on how differentiated learning strategies are operationalized during classroom instruction of speaking in the Merdeka Curriculum.

To address this, the present study investigates the teaching and learning process in an eighth-grade English class through classroom observation. The objective is to describe how differentiated strategies are planned and implemented, what classroom activities are used, how students respond, and what constraints are encountered in the field. The research is expected to provide insights into how differentiated instruction can be adapted to support speaking instruction in challenging educational environments, such as remote islands.

Method

The study employed a case study design to provide an in-depth understanding of classroom practices. According to Creswell (2012), who explains that case studies are widely used in various fields, especially for evaluation purposes Data were obtained through non-participatory classroom observations to capture authentic instructional activities without researcher interference. The participants consisted of English teacher and students from the eighth grade, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and relevance to the teaching of speaking using differentiated strategies. Data analysis includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions.

Results

a. Learning Preparation

Table 1. Learning Preparation

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	The teacher prepares the lesson plan by considering the students' different abilities in speaking.		✓	The lesson plan did not explicitly reflect any consideration of students' varied speaking levels, indicating that differentiation was not formally documented at the planning stage.
2	The teaching materials used are tailored to the students' level of speaking ability.	✓		The materials used during the lesson were adapted to accommodate different levels of speaking proficiency, ensuring both accessibility and appropriate challenge for all learners.
3	Teachers plan varied speaking activities for students with different abilities (e.g. group discussions, individual presentations, role plays).	✓		The teacher designed a variety of speaking activities such as discussions, role plays, and individual tasks to meet the needs of students with different speaking

4	Technology or learning media is used to support speaking learning according to students' needs.	✓	No technology or learning media (e.g., videos, apps) was used during the speaking lesson, limiting the variety and potential support that could have been offered digitally.
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While the lesson plan did not explicitly show adaptation to different speaking proficiency levels, the teacher displayed awareness during practice. Although the checklist noted that the differentiation was not formally documented, the instructional practices reflected thoughtful planning in activities.

Guru: "...oke setiap pertemuan itu kita punya tujuan pembelajaran dan this morning our learning purpose adalah siswa dapat mengidentifikasi ucapan salam dan perpisahan dalam Bahasa Inggris"

Siswa: "Iya pak"

Teacher: "Every session we have a learning objective. This morning, our goal is that students can identify greetings and farewell expressions in English."

Students: "Yes sir" (English Translation)

The materials and content were suitable for beginners, using familiar vocabulary and situations.

Guru: "Because today, it's turn to us to learn English, maka saya harap anak-anak sekalian fokus dalam belajar. Karena Bahasa Inggris ini bukan bahasa kita, ini bahasa asing, jadi terdengar sulit bagi kalian pemula dalam belajar Bahasa Inggris."

Siswa: "Iya pak"

Teacher: "Because today, it's our turn to learn English, I hope all of you focus in class. English is not our native language, it's a foreign language, so it might sound difficult for you as beginners."

Students: "Alright sir" (English Translation)

The teacher also prepared a variety of speaking tasks, including games, repetition drills, role-play situations, and group discussions.

All the findings above, showed that the teacher has done the learning preparation in implementation of differentiated learning strategy. Two of the four components related to learning preparation were implemented effectively, it means that teacher carried out well the implementation of differentiated learning strategy in terms of preparing the learning process.

b. Classroom Implementation of Differentiated Learning Strategy

Table 2. Classrooms Implementation of Differentiated Learning Strategy

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	The teacher divides students into groups according to their speaking level	✓		Students were grouped based on their speaking proficiency, allowing more effective peer interaction and instructional focus.
2	Teachers give different instructions based on the needs and speaking ability levels of the students.	✓		The teacher provided instructions that were adjusted to match students' proficiency levels, helping each student engage with tasks they could manage confidently.

3	Speaking activities are tailored to students' learning styles and needs.	✓		The activities were designed to match visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning preferences, increasing engagement and comprehension
4	The teacher provides fair opportunities for all students to speak and participate in the activity.	✓		All students were given equal chances to speak during the lesson, regardless of their fluency level, which promoted inclusivity and fairness.
5	The teacher provides individual or group feedback according to the students' needs after each speaking activity.	✓		Feedback was provided both individually and in groups based on observed needs, ensuring targeted and constructive support for improvement.
6	Students who struggle with speaking are given additional support, either from teachers or classmates.	✓		Additional support was provided to struggling students through teacher assistance and peer support, fostering a collaborative and responsive environment

Students were grouped and guided based on their individual abilities. The instructions were simple, clear, and often supported with translations or context familiar to students.

Guru : "...Bahasa Inggrisnya satu apa?"

Siswa : "One."

Guru : "Dua?"

Siswa: "Two."

Guru : "Tiga?"

Siswa : "Three."

Guru : "...Ini lagi. Kalau kita bertanya how's everything? bisa jawabnya everything is good, bisa juga I'm feeling good."

Teacher: "...What is 'satu' in English?"

Student: "One."

Teacher: "Dua?"

Student: "Two." (English Translation)

Teacher: "...If someone says 'How's everything?', we can answer 'Everything is good' or 'I'm feeling good'." (English Translation)

These examples show how the teacher gradually built up the vocabulary while ensuring everyone could follow. Group work was a major part of the learning strategy. After discussions, each group had a representative present their answers.

Guru: "...Oke, saya mulai dari kelompok 3 dulu. Siapa yang ditunjuk? Stand up please."

Teacher: "...Now each group should choose a representative. Group 3, who is chosen? Stand up, please." (English Translation)

The teacher adjusted instructions and examples according to the students' varying proficiency. Contextual scenarios were used to make abstract concepts relatable. For example, the teacher asked:

Guru: "...misalnya kalian jalan-jalan ke dermaga, ke pinggir pantai, dan ketemu sama teman. You meet your friend there, at beach misalnya, kalian ketemu teman menyapa. Apa yang kalian katakan?"

Siswa: "Hi, hello."

Guru: "Kalau kita menanyakan kabar ke orang seperti apa?"
Siswa: "How are you?"

Teacher: "...If you meet your friend at the beach, what would you say?"
Students: "Hi", "Hello."
Teacher: "What if you ask how they are?"
Students: "How are you?" (English Translation)

To address learning styles, the teacher employed auditory repetition, visual examples (writing on the board), and physical games. The class was divided into groups and given a worksheet (LKPD) to identify greeting and farewell expressions.

Guru: "...Oke sekarang, I will give you five minutes to discuss your task. Lima menit saya berikan waktu untuk mendiskusikan."
Student: "sudah pak"

Teacher: "...I will give you five minutes to discuss your task. Don't make a noise."
Student: "finished, sir." (English Translation)

Feedback was consistently given in a positive tone, often followed by group applause, which created a safe environment for practice.

Guru: "Oke, good. Tepuk tangan untuk temannya."
Siswa: (siswa tepuk tangan)

Teacher: "Good, clap your hand. That's excellent!"
Students: (clap their hands)

All the data was found above showed that teacher were implement differentiated learning strategy very well. It can be seen from all the aspects in classroom implementation of differentiated learning strategy carried out well, starting with students were grouped thoughtfully, sometimes homogeneously and at other times heterogeneously, depending on the learning goals. Feedback was given not only collectively but also tailored individually or by group, depending on specific needs identified during the activity. In addition, extra support was provided for students who found speaking challenging. This support came either from the teacher or from classmates who acted as learning partners, promoting a collaborative learning culture.

c. The Use of Technology in Learning

Table 3. The Use of Technology in Learning

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	Teachers use assistive technology tools (e.g., videos, apps, online platforms) to support students' speaking activities		✓	The teacher did not use any assistive technology to support speaking activities, which limited multimodal learning opportunities.
2	Technology is used to provide variety in the way students practice speaking skills		✓	There was no use of multimedia tools (like videos or audio recordings) to offer variety in speaking practice.
3	Technology is used to provide immediate feedback to students on their speaking skills.		✓	No technological tools were used to give real-time or automated feedback, indicating a missed opportunity for individualized response.

One area of limitation was the absence of digital media or assistive technology. The teacher acknowledged this openly:

Guru: "...Walaupun kita sulit belajar menggunakan alat bantu berupa LCD proyektor, yaa... tapi kita bisa tetap memahami pelajaran hari ini."
Siswa: "Tidak masalah pak"

Teacher: "...Even though we don't have projectors, we can still understand our lesson today."

Student: "No problem, sir" (English Translation)

This reflects the context of a remote island with limited technological resources. Despite that, the teacher creatively maintained student engagement using games and physical interaction.

According to the findings above it can be conclude that the use of technology was less, teacher cannot provide technology tools to the classroom. This happen because the area was limited to the upgraded learning resources, differentiated learning strategy was implement in the remote area where the access to educational resources, adequate teacher training and limited social support are major obstacles. Despite the teacher efforts to differentiate instruction manually, the absence of technological support highlights an important gap in the overall teaching and learning process.

d. Assessment of Speaking Skills

Table 4.4 Assessment of Speaking Skills

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	Teachers conduct formative (during the activity) and summative (after the activity) speaking assessments by taking into account students' different abilities.	✓		The teacher assessed students both during and after activities, adapting assessments based on each student's ability to ensure fairness and relevance.
2	Speaking assessment includes various aspects such as fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use, which are adjusted to the students' ability level.	✓		Assessment covered key components of speaking, such as fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary, and was matched to each student's proficiency.
3	The feedback given after the speaking assessment is constructive and helps students understand the areas that need improvement.	✓		The teacher offered clear and supportive feedback post-assessment, helping students recognize specific areas for development.

Assessment was conducted informally during activities and presentations. The teacher observed students' pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and fluency, adapting questions according to each group's ability.

Guru: "...Yang mana saja ungkapan perpisahan dalam Bahasa Inggris?"

Siswa: "See you, goodbye, and good night."

Guru: "Clap your hands for your friend."

Teacher: "...What farewell expressions did you find?"

Student: "See you, Goodbye, Good night."

Teacher: "Clap your hand for your friend." (English Translation)

Formative assessment occurred continuously through questioning, while summative elements appeared during group presentations. Feedback was clear and constructive.

Data above indicate that teacher using assessment speaking skill in differentiated learning strategy, three elements of assessment was used in teaching learning process,

both formative and summative assessments in evaluating students' speaking skills. These assessments were conducted as part of the differentiated learning strategy and were designed to reflect the diverse needs and ability levels of the students.

The teacher assessed speaking by focusing on multiple key aspects, including fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. Importantly, these criteria were not applied rigidly across all students; rather, they were adjusted according to the students' speaking proficiency. This indicates an alignment with the principles of differentiated instruction, where expectations are modified to suit the learners' individual levels and needs.

Furthermore, the observation revealed that constructive feedback was consistently provided after speaking assessments. The feedback was specific, clear, and supportive, helping students to understand exactly which areas of their speaking performance required improvement. For instance, the teacher did not simply state that a student made mistakes, but explained which words were mispronounced or where fluency could be enhanced. This kind of feedback empowered students to reflect on their performance and engage in targeted practice. As a result, feedback served not only as an evaluation tool but also as a learning opportunity.

e. Student Involvement

Table 4.5 Students Involvement

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	Students are actively involved in speaking activities designed by the teacher.	✓		Students participated enthusiastically in the speaking activities, demonstrating high engagement and interest.
2	Students participate in group discussions or other speaking activities according to their ability level.	✓		Participation was adjusted to match students' speaking levels, allowing each student to contribute meaningfully.
3	Students feel comfortable and confident in speaking during class activities.	✓		Most students appeared confident and comfortable speaking in class, showing reduced anxiety and increased self-assurance.
4	Students support each other and give positive feedback to classmates during speaking activities.	✓		Students offered supportive and encouraging feedback to peers, fostering a collaborative and respectful classroom environment.

The classroom environment supported active participation. Students were enthusiastic, collaborative, and comfortable speaking English.

Teacher: "What do you feel after learning English today? Apa yang kalian rasakan setelah belajar hari ini?"

Student: "Happy!"

Teacher: "What do you feel after learning English today?"

Student: "Happy!" (English Translation)

The teacher encouraged peer support:

Guru: "...Very nice, Semua pagi ini sudah bisa mencerna pelajaran kita.

Teacher: "...Very nice, this morning you could all understand our lesson." (English Translation)

Games such as *Don't Touch What I Say* helped reinforce vocabulary in a fun, kinesthetic way. Students also practiced through real-life scenarios. This suggests that the differentiated strategy created a supportive and enjoyable learning environment.

From the findings above, differentiated learning strategy was implemented because four aspects about students' involvement was happen in learning process. This was evident from their active participation in various speaking activities designed by the

teacher. Students appeared to enjoy taking part in group discussions and other speaking tasks that were tailored to their individual ability levels.

The overall classroom atmosphere seemed positive and engaging, which helped students feel more confident during speaking lessons. In addition, students were observed giving feedback to one another. This peer interaction contributed to more comfortable and supportive classroom environment, enhancing the effectiveness of the speaking activities.

f. Class Management

Table 4.6 Class Management

No	Aspect Observed	Yes	No	Description
1	The teacher manages time effectively to ensure every student has a chance to speak.		✓	Time was not managed efficiently. Teacher cannot provide all students the opportunity to speak without feeling rushed or excluded.
	The teacher ensures that the classroom atmosphere is conducive for all students to practice speaking without fear or anxiety.		✓	The classroom atmosphere was supportive and calm, encouraging students to speak freely and confidently
3	Teachers manage students of different ability levels in a fair and inclusive manner in speaking activities.	✓		Students of varying speaking levels were treated equally, and tasks were managed inclusively to involve everyone.

The teacher demonstrated effective time management by balancing instruction, group activities, presentations, and review. The atmosphere remained calm, respectful, and inclusive.

Guru: "Kita peregangan lagi, sekarang kita menggunakan Bahasa Inggris. Mata itu eyes, hidung itu nose, mulut itu mouth, telinga itu ears."

Teacher: "Now let's stretch again using English. Eyes, nose, mouth, ears" (English Translation)

The session concluded with reflection and motivation.

Guru: saya ucapkan thank you for today, tetap semangat, tetap belajar di rumah, dan never give up dalam belajar.

Teacher: "Thank you for today. Keep learning at home and never give up." (English Translation)

This statement not only summarized the values of the lesson but also encouraged students to be resilient learners.

Even though one of three aspects of class management in implementation of differentiated learning strategy did not deliver well, but the overall classroom management was very running well. Teacher runs the class very pleasantly. The overall classroom atmosphere was calm, respectful, and conducive to learning. Students did not show signs of anxiety or fear when asked to participate. This indicates that the teacher had succeeded in creating a psychologically safe space for learning. Each student received attention appropriate to their needs, and classroom interactions promoted equity and belonging.

Discussion

The findings of this study from classroom observations reveal that the teaching and learning process through the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in speaking instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum was conducted with partial success. The teacher demonstrated awareness of student differences and attempted to accommodate them through varied activities and flexible grouping. However, challenges remained, particularly in planning, technology use, and classroom management.

The preparation stage of the teaching process showed that while the lesson plan did not explicitly reflect differentiation in writing, the actual classroom practices did. The teacher adapted materials and speaking tasks to match different proficiency levels and learning preferences. This indicates an informal but meaningful application of differentiation. As confirmed by Sun, Zhao, & Wang (2023), many teachers in low-resource environments adapt on the spot based on student reactions rather than through formal planning documents, which reflects a gap between policy and practice. Although the teacher did not integrate assistive learning technologies in the preparation, there was a clear effort to vary the types of speaking activities, such as role plays and discussions, based on student readiness.

During implementation, differentiation was more visibly integrated. Students were grouped according to their speaking levels and given tasks suited to their abilities. Instruction was tailored to each group, and the teacher ensured equal participation across all levels of learners. Furthermore, individualized and group feedback was consistently provided, and students with lower speaking ability received extra support from both the teacher and peers. This aligns well with Tomlinson's (2017) model of differentiated instruction, which promotes readiness-based grouping, task variation, and responsive teaching as core components.

A particularly strong aspect of the teaching-learning process was the emotional climate created in the classroom. Students were observed to be comfortable, confident, and actively involved in speaking activities. They appreciated the fairness and inclusivity of the teacher's approach. Peer feedback was also noted, which helpedThis section is also a major part of the research articles and is also usually the longest part of an article. Discussion of the research presented in this section are the result. The process of data analysis such as statistical calculations or other processes for the achievement of its research. Please present the discussion narratively.

Conclusion

this study revealed that the implementation of differentiated learning strategy in teaching speaking under the Merdeka Curriculum at remote island school was conducted with thoughtful and responsive practices, despite several contextual limitations. The teacher demonstrated an understanding of student differences by varying speaking tasks, using contextual examples, forming flexible groups, and giving personalized feedback. These instructional practices successfully fostered student engagement, participation, and speaking confidence. However, the implementation lacked formal lesson planning that reflected differentiated elements, and the absence of technological tools restricted the variety of instructional modes. This limitation reflects broader systemic challenges such as limited access to digital resources, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teacher support in remote areas. Nonetheless, this research contributes to the growing body of literature by providing a real-classroom example of how differentiated learning strategy can function effectively in underserved

and geographically isolated settings, reinforcing the importance of teacher adaptability and creativity in delivering equitable education.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that future research expands the scope by involving multiple schools, larger participant samples, and a variety of data collection methods to gain a broader perspective on differentiated instruction in diverse educational contexts. Teachers, especially in remote and under-resourced schools, would benefit from ongoing professional development focused on designing and implementing differentiated strategies in both planning and delivery. Furthermore, educational stakeholders and policymakers are encouraged to invest in improving school infrastructure, including access to basic technological tools, to support multimodal and inclusive learning. Finally, curriculum developers should provide more practical, context-sensitive guidance on differentiated instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum framework, so that educators can implement it more effectively in varied and constrained classroom settings. These steps are crucial for bridging the gap between curriculum ideals and actual teaching practice, especially in remote island schools that continue to face structural and resource-related challenges.

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