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A Comparative Case Study on Differentiated Writing Activities by School Teachers in Two Malaysian Schools

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Abstract

A typical classroom in Malaysia is full of students with mixed academic abilities and the growing student diversity calls for equal access to robust learning experiences. Taking this into account, teachers must therefore design lesson and assessment plans which can cater to a variety of students' learning preferences. The differentiated approach is a method which advocates adaptation of instructional practices corresponding to the diverse needs of students to create equal learning opportunities for all. However, when it comes to assessment, teachers are still contingent upon uniform assessment methods irrespective of their students' learning abilities. As classroom formative assessment is central to effective teaching and learning, the present study explores differentiated assessment practices of Malaysian ESL teachers. The objectives of this study are to examine and compare how four ESL secondary school teachers differentiate their formative writing assessment in classroom teaching and learning and what challenges they experience. Information was obtained through an open-ended survey with 4 secondary school teachers from 2 different schools in the northern region of Malaysia. The results show that regardless of educational experience, the respondents share similar notions on how to assess their students' writing skills and similar challenges involving time constraints. The implications of the results strongly suggest more focused teacher professional development programs to facilitate implementation of differentiated assessment in Malaysia.

Keywords: Secondary School, Teachers, Differentiated Assessment, Formative Assessment, Writing.

Introduction

In this modern age, teachers are required to attain appropriate skills and knowledge to effectively conduct classroom instruction and assessment (Kaur et al., 2018). Current research has focused on the differentiation approach which is based on the principal belief that 21st century classrooms should provide supportive learning environments with a variety of opportunities and instructional paths to cater for a diversity of students and their individual needs (Tzanni, 2018). This study is set in the Malaysian context where educational reform planning by the Ministry of Education is structured via the Malaysian Education Blueprint

(2013-2025). The Blueprint aims to provide equal and flexible education for Malaysian learners who are diverse in cultural and learning backgrounds to minimise their achievement differences (Ismail & Aziz, 2019). Following that, the responsibility falls on local schools and their teachers who need to deal with the potential needs of their students and provide better access to quality education for each of them. As students in this age attain learning in a variety of ways, differentiated instruction and assessment can play a part to eliminate the average student stereotype associated with conventional standardised testing approaches by assessing students with a variety of testing choices that corresponds with what they know and what they are able to learn with assistance (Noman & Kaur, 2014; Nychkalo et al., 2020).

Differentiated assessment is an approach that allows teachers, via a variety of techniques and tools, to form opportunities for their academically diverse learners to realistically demonstrate their learning and progress during their learning time (Kaur et. al., 2018). However, when it comes to Malaysian educational practices, in general, classroom assessments are still based on one-size-fits-all norms as students, regardless of their differing background knowledge, are still required to achieve the same learning outcomes (Noman & Kaur, 2014). Differentiation supports the modern view of student-centred learning in which teachers act as a facilitator (Noman & Kaur, 2014). This helps build learners' metacognitive skills as they can reflect on their learning, comprehend what they do and do not know, set their own personal goals and plan how to achieve them (Noman & Kaur, 2014). However, when the assessment is carried out through standardised or one-size-fits-all testing, the benefits of differentiation are lost (Noman & Kaur, 2014).

Problem Statement

In the differentiation approach, differentiated instruction and assessment should be practised together to create a beneficial and meaningful education (Kaur et.al., 2018). Research on the approach has been increasing recently to validate its positive outcomes in various classroom settings, and these encouraging findings evidently suggest that the differentiation approach can be applicable in the second language learning settings too (Tzanni, 2018). The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) introduces differentiated instruction strategies for teachers to use in their classroom. However, for differentiated assessment strategies, there is a lack of focus by the Blueprint (Kaur et. al., 2018). This is also true in the literature on differentiation in which most studies focus on instruction but the equally significant feature of teaching and learning which is assessment, is generally overlooked (Noman & Kaur, 2014).

When implementing classroom assessments, a teacher's aptitude to select and make use of a variety of strategies that are suitable for their students' level is significant (Kaur et. al., 2018). Although many teachers acknowledge that students have different learning needs, only a handful of teachers accommodate these differences into their assessment practices (Gaitas & Martins, 2016). Balancing student needs with lesson objectives, teaching methods, readiness levels, material variance, and learning aids to practice differentiation does not come easy for teachers (Tzanni, 2018). This can result in teachers falling back to standardised summative testing to gauge their students' learning at the end, ignoring the classroom work that has been accumulated over the course of an academic year (Noman & Kaur, 2014).

In English language learning, writing is deemed as the most challenging skill to acquire especially for second language learners (ESL) and, according to Ismail (2019), many Malaysian

teachers find issue in the teaching of writing skills because of the diversified learning needs of their students. With the introduction of the differentiation approach, there is an assumption that all teachers would follow the guidelines provided by the curriculum syllabus that aligns with differentiated instruction and conduct their own differentiated assessment based on their students' needs. This can lead to differences in strategies used by teachers across the country. Hence, it is imperative to identify and compare the differentiated assessment strategies practised by teachers and challenges faced by them when implementing the differentiation approach, particularly during classroom formative writing.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

- a) to compare the differentiation strategies used by ESL teachers during classroom formative writing assessment at secondary school level.
- b) to identify the challenges faced by ESL teachers during classroom formative writing assessment at secondary school level.

Differentiated Assessment

According to Massaad and Chaker (2020), one of the underlying factors that impedes students with mixed abilities from mastering the speaking and writing skills is the use of an undifferentiated and conventional approach of instruction and assessment which does not always help them to construct knowledge. Conventional standardised assessment practice has been panned by scholars because it overlooks the different ability of the students (Noman & Kaur, 2014). Not until recently has Malaysia put emphasis on the differentiation approach strategy, corresponding with the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) to establish 21st century teaching and learning in its education curriculum (Ismail & Aziz, 2019). The differentiation approach is not entirely a new concept as it has been operated under the guise of 'mixed ability teaching' for a very long time (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020). It is a teaching strategy that involves teachers to adapt flexibility in their classroom teaching and learning, responding to their students' needs as opposed to students following the curriculum by the tee (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020). The differentiation approach makes it workable for learners with different levels of ability in a classroom to obtain the suitable learning opportunities based on their personal levels of ability (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020). Also, it encourages them to make decisions accountable to their learning and permits them to express distinctive advantages, interests, and strengths of knowledge (Nychkalo et. al., 2020). Hence, the need for the teacher to plan and adapt his or her classroom teaching according to the individual students' needs based on appropriate pedagogical situations is instrumental in the differentiation approach.

Tomlinson (1999) defines differentiation as a process of adapting instruction to meet individual needs by using ongoing assessment and flexible grouping to encourage learners to support and share responsibility among themselves in their learning (cited in Moya & Tobar, 2016). According to Kamarulzaman et al (2015), differentiation refers to an instructional approach in teaching via adaptation that complements curriculum features such as suitable content, process, product, and environment with the learners' learning preferences such as current levels of readiness, interest, learning style, and preferred mode of learning. It is considered as a proactive teaching and learning approach that requires teachers to provide a variety of learning pathways through teaching resources and assessment instruments based on their students' preferences (Kamarulzaman et. al., 2015). According to Gaitas and Martins

(2016), differentiation is a student-centred teaching strategy that allows a wide range of students with different learning and scaffolding needs to adapt to their classroom learning. It is deeply a learner-centred approach (Tzanni, 2018). Suprayogi et al (2017) defined differentiation as a multidimensional approach that builds on the varying differences in learners. To sum up, the differentiation approach requires teachers to flexibly adapt their classroom teaching and learning strategies to fairly cater to their students' learning needs and preferences.

The differentiation approach in instruction and assessment, theoretically, is established from the sociocultural aspect of Vygotsky's constructivist theory which posits that students must be able to engage in appropriate constructive classroom interaction and discussion with competent instructors and peers to progress academically and professionally (Massaad & Chaker, 2020). In most literature on differentiation, the approach is connected to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the approach encourages teachers' adaptation of curriculum elements to match with their learners' learning needs (cited in Kamarulzaman et.al., 2015). This is done by providing students with different levels of challenges that would stimulate growth in their learning. ZPD differs from the notion of standardised testing by advocating the assessment of students' ability based on their current knowledge and what they can learn with the help of someone who already knows (Noman & Kaur, 2014). Because of this, students are assessed based on their distinctive ZPD (Massaad & Chaker, 2020). Hence, the theory is beneficial for students of mixed and disparate needs. Additionally, the differentiation approach compliments the multiple intelligence theory by Gardner (1983) in which individuals differ in their thinking and learning (cited in Kamarulzaman et.al., 2015). The differentiation approach requires teachers to develop strategies and materials based on the students' favoured modes of learning. Hence, this can ensure that each student is given an appropriate opportunity to learn. According to Moya and Tobar (2016); Ismail (2019), differentiation does not mean individualization or creating more individualised lessons, instead it is about paying attention to differing learning styles, needs and learning preferences.

The five dimensions of differentiated instruction as pointed by Suprayogi et.al (2017) are as follow:

- a) It is to cope with student diversity.
- b) It is by adopting specific teaching strategies.
- c) It invokes a variety of learning activities.
- d) It is used to monitor individual student needs.
- e) It leads to optimal learning outcomes.

Additionally, Nychkalo et.al (2020) presented the core characteristics of differentiated instruction in their paper which are as follow:

- a) It is a way to increase the efficiency of the education process.
- b) It is a form and means of teaching individualization.
- c) It is an academic principle that takes account of typological features of students in which the goals and content of education, teaching forms and methods are selected and differentiated.
- d) It can ensure maximum productive educational and cognitive activities from students based on student-centred interaction.

- e) It can be a way to organise individual learning that considers the interest and aptitudes of students.
- f) It uses a system of instruction based on differentiation.

Studies on Differentiated Assessment Strategies

Suprayogi et.al (2017) investigated the link between the implementation of differentiated instruction to teachers' self-efficacy, teaching beliefs and their background characteristics based on classroom size in the Indonesian primary school context. Based on their survey using three different scales – differentiated instruction implementation scale (DIIS), teacher's self-efficacy scale (TSES), and teaching belief scale (TBS), their regression analysis found that the bigger the classroom, the higher the need to implement differentiated instruction to accommodate the student diversity. However, the same analysis showed no significant relationship between teaching experience and differentiated implementation, indicating that there is no distinction between senior and fresh teachers when it comes to the implementation of differentiated instruction.

A small-scale study by Tzanni (2018) on the influence of differentiation on teaching beliefs and practices found that teachers tend to differentiate more in terms of the process and tend to do that reactively rather than proactively. This implied that teachers tend to differentiate in areas that do not add more burdens to their busy schedule. The study investigated the teachers' beliefs towards differentiation in response to their students' readiness, interests and learning profile as well as their teaching practices related to differentiation of content, process, product and learning environment respectively. The study also reported that training and classroom facilities play an important role in whether the differentiated instructions succeed or fail.

Nychkalo et.al (2020) examined English teachers' use of differentiated instruction in schools in Ukraine in which their participants were divided into experimental and control groups. Based on their survey of 408 English teachers, their findings stated there is insufficient attention to the need to enhance teachers' motivation to master the differentiated instruction strategies as the teacher's training provided for differentiated instruction is unsystematic and inconsistent. They stressed that effective teachers' training for differentiated instruction was a necessity to meet students' and teaching personnel's varied needs.

In Malaysia, Ramli and Yusoff (2020) surveyed 428 secondary school teachers from 424 schools across the east coast of Malaysia using the teacher's self-efficacy scale (TSES) and differentiated instruction practices inventory to identify the learning content, process, product, environment, and assessment in their classroom teaching. Their findings showed that overall, teachers' practice of differentiated instruction is at a good level due to their high self-efficacy, which helps them to respond positively to difficulties they face in their classrooms.

Ismail and Aziz (2019), in a quantitative study, surveyed ESL primary school teachers on their awareness toward the differentiated approach, their perceptions of differentiated lesson planning, materials building, practices and self-competency towards differentiated learning. Their findings indicated that teachers are fully aware of the diversity of their students and are

receptive to the differentiation approach as it promotes better, enjoyable, and satisfactory teaching and learning sessions. However, they also found that teachers are struggling to implement and manage the strategy in their classroom from the planning stage to practice.

Kaur et.al (2018) investigated how differentiated assessment practices of in-service teachers were aligned with the four components of differentiation. Using open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews with supporting documents, their data were collected over a period of seven months. 32 teachers were utilised for their final analysis. Out of them, 12 were randomly selected for in-depth interviews and were asked to provide documentary evidence of project activities as well as assessment instructions, plans and reports. Their findings found that teachers were aware of basic principles of differentiation but there were gaps in knowledge, especially in strategic knowledge of differentiated assessment applications. According to Kaur et.al (2018), teachers were having issues implementing differentiated strategies due to time constraints and large numbers of students in their classrooms. Kaur et.al (2018) suggested the need for major stakeholders such as policymakers, school authorities and administrators as well as parents to commit and play better roles to improve teachers' competencies development.

There are only a few studies on differentiation which are related to writing skills. Moya and Tobar (2016) surveyed a total of 104 students and 2 English teachers to assess their perceptions of the differentiated instruction strategies and found that there are positive effects of the approach on the development of students' writing and speaking skills. The data from their survey revealed that in general, the implementation of the foldable strategy based on differentiated instruction helped to develop the students' writing skill. In Malaysia, Ismail (2019) conducted action research involving 39 first-year undergraduate students who were taught writing processes following a differentiated instruction approach. The findings of his study revealed that continuous assessment plays a significant role in implementing differentiated approaches in writing. This finding was in line with the literature that indicates that on-going formative assessment is an important characteristic of differentiation strategies in an ESL classroom.

Based on the current literature, most past studies on differentiation focused more on students' and teachers' perceptions and the majority of them investigated classroom instruction. There is still a lack of studies done on differentiation in assessment. Although there are several experimental studies on the effectiveness of differentiation in comparison to the traditional approach, there is still a need for more in-depth study on actual methodological implementation and comparison between different assessment methods in real classroom settings to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the differentiation approach that teachers are required to implement in their curriculum syllabus.

Methodology

For this study, the researchers utilised an interpretive, qualitative approach using a case study research strategy. The respondents were given open-ended survey questions in a Word document virtually via WhatsApp to explain their detailed practices in the context of differentiated strategies used in their classroom formative writing assessment. The researchers used purposive sampling and, to do a comparison, the researchers selected 2 respondents from a government Islamic secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan

Agama / SMKA) and 2 respondents from a government Chinese secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan / SMJK). All 4 respondents are English teachers teaching in their respective schools. With their written consent, their answers were recorded for analysis.

Findings

The results from the survey are presented below. First, the participating teachers and respective educational background are described in Table 1. Secondly, the results are presented based on the relevant research questions in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 1

Demographic background of the respondents

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher X	Teacher Y
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	51	31	41	36
School	SMJK	SMJK	SMKA	SMKA
Teaching experience	30 years	7 years	12 years	12 years
English option	Yes	Yes	No, TESL	No, TESL

In total, four teachers participated in this study, and they are named Teacher A, B, X and Y. All are females. Teacher A is 51 years old and has over 30 years of teaching experience. Teacher B is 31 years old, the youngest among the respondents with the least amount of teaching experience, which is 7 years. Teachers X and Y, 41 and 36 years old respectively, share the same teaching experience, which is 12 years in teaching English in their secondary school. Teachers A and B teach in the same Chinese-based Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan (SMJK) in Kedah, and both entered as English optioned teachers. On the other hand, Teachers X and Y entered without the English option but with a degree in TESL and they are both employed in the same Islamic-based Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) in Penang.

Table 2

Differentiated writing activities of the respondents in ESL classroom

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher X	Teacher Y
Frequency of writing activities / assessments	Weekly	End of each skill	Once in every chapter	Two lessons per month
Writing activities	Mind mapping, short paragraph exercises	Outlining, brainstorming activities	Entry-exit ticket	Entry-exit ticket, Think-pair-share activities
Class syllabus / Scheme of work	Follow	Follow	Follow	Follow
Own method	Oral construction, peer questioning	No, follow textbook	No, follow rubrics	No, follow rubrics
Post-activity feedback	Class discussion	Feedback via system	Follow-up task	Follow-up task

Based on the summary in Table 2, the frequency of which the respondents conduct their classroom writing activities differ from each other. Teacher A conducts her writing activities weekly while Teacher B does it at the end of each skill. Teacher B explained that “after finishing reading exercises, a formative assessment is given and (her students’) performance will be graded”. Teacher X does her classroom writing tasks once in every textbook chapter as teachers “have one lesson focusing on writing as the main skill for every chapter” while her fellow colleague, Teacher Y has two writing lessons monthly. To explain her answer, Teacher Y stated that she conducts “two lessons in one week which focus on writing as the main skill every month. (She) normally conducts formative assessment during pre-lesson and post-lesson stages for each lesson”.

The teachers in SMJK also have different methods of teaching writing – Teacher A prefers to conduct writing activities using mind mapping and short paragraph exercises and blending them with speaking activities such as oral construction and peer questioning. According to her, the oral construction method lets her assess her students’ writing skills as it encourages her “pupils to use complex sentences”. The peer questioning activity encourages “questions posed by pupils to generate ideas for their peers”. It helps in their writing because “many (students) lack reading habits therefore their general knowledge is limited”. On the other hand, Teacher B uses outlining and brainstorming activities to teach and assess her students’ writing skills. According to her, this is due to the “writing assessments each differ based on the aim of each lesson” and they are done separately, “either the format or the content or the language, never all at the same time”. Both Teachers X and Y in SMKA share the same entry-exit ticket activities and analysis of students’ homework tasks in their ESL writing classroom. In addition, Teacher Y conducts think-pair-share tasks with her students.

All four respondents indicated that they follow the syllabus given to teach their respective secondary form classes. Teacher B commented that she “assesses students based on the lesson taught, which follows closely to the syllabus and uses the textbook as the main reference”. Teacher X stated that teachers “were given a scheme of work to conduct lessons” and they “only need to adjust the level of difficulty according to the students”. Teacher Y also had a similar answer in which she follows “some of the strategies in the syllabus and scheme of work” closely in her ESL classrooms. When it comes to original methods by teachers, only Teacher A seems to be using other methods to teach writing while the others stated that they only follow the activities available in the textbook and rubrics. Teacher B reasons that the textbook “is aligned with the PT3 and SPM examinations”. Teacher X “just use the rubric provided by KPM (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia) to assess writing tasks”. Teacher Y similarly responded the same as her fellow school colleague.

For post-writing activities, teachers in the SMJK have differing methods with Teacher A relying on class discussion based on the tasks given and Teacher B uses the Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah (PBD), an online school grading system to give feedback to her students. In the SMKA, both teachers use follow-up tasks based on their students’ performance during the lesson as post-writing activity. Teacher Y stated that “as for writing tasks such as drafting or paragraphing, (she) normally gives personal comments on (her students’) weaknesses and strengths before labelling their performance from 1 to 6 according to the PBD rubric”.

Table 3
Challenges faced respondents on differentiated writing activities

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher X	Teacher Y
Challenges faced during writing	Limited time, lack of preparation by students	More time use to focus on grammar errors, students lack prior knowledge	Limited preparation & time, different pacing by students when doing tasks	Time consuming in preparation & delivery, students confused by multiple instructions
Suggestions	Syllabus needs to be less exam oriented	Textbook needs to provide authentic, local (Malaysian) context as examples	Teachers are given more time to teach per lesson	Teachers are given more time to teach per lesson

Table 3 shows the challenges faced by the four schoolteachers when conducting differentiated writing activities in their respective ESL classrooms and their personal suggestions to overcome the issues. All four respondents agreed that time is a concerning issue in all three stages of classroom teaching – planning, instruction, and assessment, in which all of them stated that it is “time consuming”. Teacher Y stated that “not only teachers have to spend more time in lesson preparation, even the lesson delivery consumes more time

as teachers need to give different instructions to students as well as getting them to understand their own task.” In addition, Teacher B added that “it is difficult to ignore the other errors made by students (during writing tasks), especially glaring grammar errors, but since the lesson is focused on writing, (the teacher) must focus mainly on writing skills only”.

Another issue highlighted by all respondents is connected to their target learners. Teacher A commented that her “pupils are not prepared before they write”. According to Teacher B, “it is difficult for students to bring their prior knowledge from the last lessons and connect with the current lesson”. Teacher X observed that “due to different instructions, some students might finish their task earlier than others”. Teacher Y stated that “often, students become confused due to multiple instructions given”.

Due to the problems faced, there were several suggestions given by the respondents. According to Teacher A, the syllabus and assessment need to be standardised with less focus on examinations. She reasoned that “as it is, the (formative assessment classroom activities) is given a priority in all five secondary forms. However, at the end of their upper secondary education, (students) are required to sit for SPM which is totally exam oriented”. This shows a mismatch between the syllabus and the summative assessment system. Teacher B suggested KPM to produce more localised textbooks that can offer “more authentic examples, suiting to the Malaysian context” because currently, the textbooks used are imported from abroad. Both Teachers X and Y had similar suggestions for the authorities to increase the time for English lessons from one hour per lesson to 1 hour 30 minutes per lesson, twice a week.

Discussion

The first aim of the study is to compare the differentiation strategies used by ESL secondary school teachers during their classroom formative writing assessment. The results of the survey show that there are some similarities and differences in conducting writing activities in ESL classrooms by the respondents. The frequency in which the writing skill is focused in ESL classrooms slightly differs even between teachers from the same school. This may be caused by the rate of learning by their students as different students may grasp the writing lessons and activities slower than others. It is also interesting to note that even though all respondents stated that they are following the scheme of work or subject syllabus, the frequency of their individual writing activities differs.

The Standard Curriculum for Malaysian Secondary Schools (Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah or KSSM) for the English Language courses aims to provide pupils with positive and successful experiences with English, along with an integrated focus on grammar and varied and continued practice of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as literature. For textbook-based lessons, teachers need to use the textbook chosen by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Based on the curriculum syllabus, teachers are strongly recommended to follow a given unit sequence as each lesson of a unit will follow logically and developmentally from the previous lesson. Writing is in the 10th lesson in the sequence cycle and the skill entails 60 minutes (9.09%) out of the total 660 minutes spent for each unit.

Age and teaching experience may play a role in the differentiated teaching strategies of schoolteachers. Teacher A, who clearly has more experience than the other three

respondents, admitted that, in addition to the activities available in the standard textbooks, she also utilised her own methods of assessing her students' writing. This is a contrast with the other younger respondents with lesser experience who admitted to only use the textbook and rubrics as a safe option. According to Ramli and Yusoff (2020), although teachers cognitively understand every strategy and method in the implementation of differentiated instruction and assessment, they may not translate this knowledge into their classroom teaching practices. This may be due to lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills, thus making it difficult for teachers to tailor their teaching according to their students' particular needs. Another interesting observation is respondents from the SMJK have slightly differing methods of teaching and assessing writing while the two teachers from the SMKA have similar methods.

The second aim of the study is to identify the main challenges faced by ESL secondary school teachers during their classroom formative writing assessment. Teachers from both schools experienced the same main problem when implementing differentiated instruction and assessment in their ESL classroom which is time constraints. The issue of insufficient time given to teach ESL learners was also raised by the SMKA teachers, especially when facing learners who do not have a strong English language background. This concern also has been echoed in other studies, for example, Kaur et.al (2018) stated that the problem Malaysian teachers are facing is limited time and large classes to teach. According to Gaitas and Martins (2016), teachers feel less positive in adapting their teaching practices due to lack of planning time, inadequate time blocks in their schedule, lack of funding of appropriate materials and resources, parental resistance, grading concerns, fear of loss of control, and lack of training skills. The same notion was echoed in Ramli and Yusoff's (2020) paper which touched on teachers' self-efficacy whereby they concluded that teachers may regard the task of implementing the differentiation approach as a difficult task to do because of their own perceived low self-confidence on planning lessons.

Another factor that is interesting to note is that students also influence the smoothness of differentiated instruction and assessment practices of teachers. This can be clearly seen in the comments made by all four respondents in which highlighted the students' lack of preparedness and background knowledge of the topic for the writing task which hinder the effectiveness of the writing activities and further lead to time consuming efforts by the teachers. Similarly, due to the nature of differentiated strategy in which teachers are to give different instructions or choices of tasks to their students, students themselves may be confused by the nature of multiple different ways of completing their writing task, which leads to pacing problems. Some groups of students may complete the given task earlier than others and teachers must figure out the next steps to maintain classroom synergy. This diversity can cause problems to teachers who have lack of professional development and training on differentiated strategies. Teachers think that the training they receive (pre-service and in-service) are not sufficient in addressing the diversity in their classes (Gaitas & Martins, 2016). This corresponds to Tzanni's (2018) study which found that teachers only practise differentiation as a reaction to their students' needs due time constraints and lack of proactive strategies. The results also echoed the literature, which discloses that teacher's efficiency is a key factor in implementing the differentiation approach.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Since it is believed that differentiation in instruction is the right approach in reaching out to diverse learners, differentiation in assessment is equally important to ensure the correct report of progress is generated to inform learning (Noman & Kaur, 2014). It is, therefore, important to remember that the implementation of differentiation strategies in an ESL classroom requires major changes in teaching practices and curriculum design which include time and careful planning (Ismail, 2019). Awareness of such an approach and its practical techniques are required as part of initial teacher training as well as continuous professional development programs whether the strategies are to have any impact on English language instruction in Malaysia. The decisive factor in implementing differentiated instruction and assessment in classroom practice is the teacher's mastery and readiness for its quality (Nychkalo et. al., 2020). Actual classroom reality is a strong driver for teachers to adopt innovations, changes, modifications and helps them to meet classroom challenges (Suprayogi et. al., 2017). Teachers should have a deep understanding of differentiation strategies to adopt the approach in their ESL classroom with minimal challenges (Ismail & Aziz, 2019). Hence, there is a vital need to examine and evaluate the contemporary assessment practices of Malaysian ESL teachers for improvements in assessment literacy training development programs by highlighting the factors that would facilitate successful assessment implementation practices (Kaur et. al., 2018). As reflected in Nychkalo et. al (2020) study in Ukraine, effective implementation of differentiation approach in secondary education requires a reconsideration of teachers' education's organisational, content, and technological components and the content of training courses for teachers needs to be updated to focus on achieving the new educational standards.

Differentiated assessment as an educational structure that seeks to address differences among students by providing flexibility in the levels of knowledge acquisition, skills development and types of assessment items undertaken by students (Kaur et.al., 2018). Therefore, teachers need to have high motivation and determination because differentiation will be daunting and time consuming due to the absence of established differentiated techniques (Kamarulzaman et. al., 2015). Past studies paid little attention on which specific practices are difficult to adapt as research has mainly focused on teacher perceptions and attitudes towards differentiated instruction and assessment (Gaitas & Martins, 2016). If differentiated assessment practices are viewed as practical difficulties rather than beneficial to students, all stakeholders must understand which specific procedures are considered problematic for teachers to implement to design more appropriate professional development programs. Failure to provide structured training and guidelines may increase teachers' workload and make them become stressed.

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