

Benefits and Challenges of Differentiated Learning in Malaysian Classrooms: Literature Review

Erra Farina Adnan, Nazurah Mohd Darus, Siti Nur Farahin
Faizal, Maslawati Mohamad

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,

Rafidah Kamarudin

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: maslawati@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Differentiated learning (DL), also known as differentiated instruction, is an approach to teaching that recognizes the diversity of students' learning needs and enables teachers to adapt their instruction to meet those needs. In Malaysia, the implementation of DL in classrooms remains a challenging task due to various factors, including limited resources, large class sizes, and traditional teaching methods. This paper aims to review the benefits and challenges of implementing DL in Malaysian classrooms. The review of the literature highlights the potential benefits of DL, such as giving freedom to teachers to plan lessons based on learners' levels, promoting active engagement and motivation, being beneficial for language development, and promoting cultural inclusivity. However, several challenges exist in implementing this approach, including time constraints, teachers' lack of awareness and training, and limited resources. A critical implication of this study is the need for policymakers to provide more support for teachers in terms of training, funding for resources, and revision of teachers' workloads. Professional development opportunities must be made available to enable teachers to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to integrate DL strategies seamlessly into their lessons. It is recommended that future research should delve deeper into the efficacy of DL in Malaysia in order to provide specific insights that can shape the design of future interventions.

Keywords: SDG4, Differentiated Learning, Mixed-Ability, Students' Engagement, Quality Education.

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) aspires to ensure inclusive and

equitable quality education and to promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all people. Quality education is a fundamental part of this goal. It acknowledges the significance of offering affordable and excellent education to promote personal growth, societal advancement, and sustainable development. SDG4 focuses on quality education and emphasizes giving everyone, regardless of background, gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status, inclusive and equitable access to education. To ensure that every child and adult may access and profit from high-quality learning experiences, it advocates for the elimination of educational barriers and the provision of equitable opportunities (UNESCO, 2017a). Beyond academic learning, quality education emphasizes the holistic growth of students. It strives to promote critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and resilience while supporting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth (UNESCO, 2017a). It acknowledges the value of a comprehensive education that equips students to take an active role in society. Safe, welcoming, and supportive learning environments that encourage active and participatory learning are necessary for quality education. These settings support learners' particular needs while fostering engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking in students (UNESCO 2016). They give people access to the right tools, infrastructure, and resources to improve learning.

To achieve quality education and equal educational opportunities for all, a differentiated learning approach can be used. Differentiated learning is a teaching strategy that adjusts lessons to each student's particular needs in a classroom. Students in ESL classes come from a variety of linguistic origins, each with their linguistic difficulties and cultural viewpoints. When creating customized education, teachers must take into account these aspects, making sure to incorporate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2017). It is a method that is focused on the needs and skills of the individual pupils, and it is student-centered. As stated by Noor Azli, Aini Akmar, and Rofiza (2022), educators must create lesson and assessment plans that can accommodate a range of students' learning preferences. There are four elements that can be differentiated in teaching and learning which are content, process, product, and learning environment (Weselby, 2021).

The concept of content differentiation refers to how students will acquire the material or what they must learn. For example, when pupils are given lesser vocabulary words, mathematical equations, or a different piece of writing to read, they are provided with different input which suits their current level of understanding. For instance, if a third-grade student does not get the idea that multiplication is simply repeated addition, which they should have understood in the second grade, the current instructor will need to reteach the content in question before going on to grade-level material (Model Teaching, 2020). Process differentiation, on the other hand, relates to the tasks that the learner completes in order to comprehend or master the subject (Rosidah & Nurahimah, 2020). Even something as simple as giving written instructions or repeating instructions might differentiate an instruction. Another example is when teachers pick a small group or work individually with a student who needs more assistance, they differentiate their education process. It refers to a strategy for scaffolding so that kids can succeed with grade-level content (Model Teaching, 2020). Next, differentiation in product means what the student creates at the end of the lesson to demonstrate mastery of the content (Rosidah & Nurahimah, 2020). This can be done when teachers change a task's duration, or scope, or allot extra time for completion, they separate the students from others. When a task's scope is changed, lower-level cognitive processes

might be included, but only with the goal of supporting student development until they are eventually prepared to satisfy grade-level content demands (Model Teaching, 2020). Lastly, the element of the learning environment emphasizes the climate of the classroom which is conducive and safe to promote learning (Rosidah & Nurahimah, 2020).

Differentiated learning has been used in classrooms all over the world, including Malaysia. Differentiated learning can be implemented in Malaysian classrooms with a variety of advantages, including the chance for students to take charge of their education and achieve greater depth of understanding. However, it can also provide a number of difficulties, such as the requirement for qualified instructors, ample funding, and administrative backing. In this paper, the potential benefits and challenges of implementing differentiated learning in Malaysian classrooms will be discussed.

Literature Review

An Overview of Malaysian Classroom Setting

According to the Malaysia Education 2013-2025 Blueprint (PPPM 2013- 2025), the country's national education reform aims to close achievement disparities brought on by educational diversity (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) is still dedicated to meeting the requirements of all students and ensuring that they have improved access to high-quality education. In order to ensure that no kid is left behind in a varied classroom, MOE begins to recognize the significance of using differentiation (Ministry of Education, 2013; Mohd Ikhwan & Azlina, 2019). Therefore, in 2015, the MOE requested that differentiated learning strategies be implemented in a conventional public school (national school) as part of an educational transformation effort dubbed School Transformation 2025 (TS25). TS25 seeks to raise standards in regular public schools and student outcomes (Zubaidah & Kamarul Arifin, 2018). Since the implementations are still ongoing, the MOE is eager to hear from the stakeholders on how well the strategy is working (Mohd Ikhwan & Azlina, 2019).

Malaysian classrooms in general, however, are mostly still in big sizes with mixed-ability students due to no streaming policy. This occurred when the MoE called for the elimination of both "controlled schools" and a "streaming system" based on a student's academic proficiency in 2015 (Anon, 2018). In addition, most Malaysians do not own English as their first language and the language is made compulsory to be learned in primary and secondary schools. Thus, teachers can expect to see varying language proficiency levels, cultural backgrounds, and prior educational experiences from these students. To address the issue, there are a number of teaching strategies that have been proposed in the Malaysia Transformation School 2025 (TS25) manual to help achieve the goals. Since Differentiated Learning is an effective teaching strategy for addressing the diverse needs of students and enhancing their learning outcomes as mentioned in both the 4th Goal of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as well as Malaysia Transformation School 2025 (TS25), it is becoming one of the popular approaches that is being highlighted in the Malaysian educational practice. Teachers are expected to be able to cater to each of the student's needs according to their ability to ensure the teaching and learning process will be effective.

Benefits of Using Differentiated Learning in Malaysian Classrooms

Several benefits differentiated learning can offer to be practiced in the classroom. First, it enables teachers to modify their lessons according to learners' levels, learning preferences, and the cultural backgrounds of their pupils. By providing customized learning experiences,

teachers can better address the specific needs of each student, helping them make progress at their own pace. Next, it is beneficial for language development. Malaysian ESL students come from various language backgrounds and have unique language learning needs. With the aid of differentiated instruction, teachers can offer students specialized language support, such as vocabulary building, grammar lessons, and speaking drills, in order to help them achieve their specific language learning objectives. This strategy aids pupils in more successfully honing their English language abilities (Farooq & Syahzad, 2019). Other than that, differentiated learning promotes active engagement and motivation among students. Teachers can create a participatory and stimulating learning atmosphere by utilizing a variety of instructional tactics, such as small group activities, multimedia tools, and hands-on activities (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2021). By encouraging active participation in the learning process, this method helps students improve their language skills and general academic engagement. Last but not least, it also promotes cultural inclusivity. Malaysian classrooms somehow consist of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

By recognizing and implementing students' cultural experiences and viewpoints into the curriculum, differentiated learning promotes cultural inclusion. Moreover, in the latest Malaysia CEFR textbooks, the contents are no longer in the local context either. Students are being exposed to Western culture just so that teachers can incorporate multicultural literature, authentic materials, and culturally relevant activities to promote understanding and appreciation of the different cultures to the students. It also means fostering a positive and inclusive classroom environment. In line with the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to achieve equality and quality education, inclusive education is highly valued in Malaysia since it aims to give all students the same opportunity, regardless of their backgrounds or skills. Differentiated learning aligns with this vision by accommodating diverse learner needs and ensuring that every student receives an education that meets their individual requirements (UNESCO, 2019). It promotes equity and reduces achievement gaps among students.

Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Learning in Malaysia Classrooms

Differentiated learning is important, but there are obstacles that instructors must overcome to use it effectively in the classroom. According to a recent study by Mohd Ikhwan and Azlina (2019), differentiation is favored by TS25 school teachers as a teaching strategy that promotes more effective, fulfilling, and student-centered teaching and learning sessions. However, their findings also showed that, instead of having a structured and organized lesson plan, the task of developing, preparing, and implementing differentiated learning lessons could be just as difficult because it takes a lot of time, and teachers lack funding for creating and designing the teaching and learning materials. This study is supported by Fatin Nabilah and Muhammad Talhah (2022) studies, which found that Malaysian teachers, especially those in regular public schools, need more guidance and support when planning lessons and applying Differentiated Learning Method (DLM) to a variety of subjects because DLM is still new in Malaysia. To be able to master the skill of differentiating instruction, teachers may also require further exposure and training. Similarly, Faizah, Nur Afini & Nurin Najihah (2021) findings are also consistent as they found that environmental strain, resources constraint, and students' and parents' attitudes are the main challenges in implementing differentiated instruction while teaching in an online platform.

In short, differentiated learning requires more time and work from teachers in terms of planning and executing. It can take a lot of effort to plan customized lessons, produce a variety

of resources, and give feedback to each student. Teachers may find it difficult to adequately differentiate education for all pupils when they have a limited amount of class time. A variety of instructional materials, such as leveled texts, manipulatives, technology tools, and supplemental resources, are frequently needed to differentiate training. Lack of access to these resources might make it more difficult for teachers to fulfill all their student's unique needs with suitable materials, which can limit the implementation of differentiated learning. Teachers must have a thorough understanding of instructional strategies, and assessment methods, and the capacity to modify their teaching approaches in order to implement differentiated instruction successfully (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Teachers' capacity to successfully use this strategy may be hampered by a lack of proper training and professional development opportunities centered on differentiated instruction. Grouping students according to their needs or giving them customized assignments are both common components of differentiated instruction. It can be difficult to manage many groups or individual work, especially when teachers must simultaneously monitor and help each group and student. To guarantee effective implementation, keeping the classroom environment structured and organized becomes essential. Students may react differently when varied learning is introduced. Some pupils struggle with increasing independence and accountability, while others might object to the difficulties of working independently or in various groups (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2021). Teachers must address students' concerns, offer assistance, and aid in their understanding of the advantages of diversified instruction.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, the implementation of differentiated learning does have both advantages and limitations. The results of this study demonstrate that differentiated learning is a practical method for meeting the various learning requirements of all students and that its adoption could raise Malaysia's educational standards as a whole. It gives freedom to teachers to plan lessons based on learners' levels, promotes students' active engagement and motivation, is beneficial for language development, and promotes cultural inclusivity. However, there are a few drawbacks to applying differentiated learning practices in classrooms. The most popular issue regarding these limitations is mostly related to teachers' workloads which parallel to time and resource constraints. Other than that, teachers' understanding and readiness in making use of differentiated learning strategies gives some impacts on their effectiveness. To improve student results and guarantee that all students have access to high-quality education, Malaysian classrooms must ultimately overcome the obstacles to differentiated learning implementation.

Based on the findings and discussion, it is important for policymakers to look thoroughly into this issue, especially on teachers' efficiency in implementing differentiated learning. Quick action shall be taken by revisiting the education curriculum manual and improvising it by offering a range of sources and examples of lesson planning. If providing resources can cause a nuisance, consideration can be made on funding for classroom supplies so that teachers could easily look for or create the materials themselves. Next, teachers themselves should be provided with adequate support including professional development opportunities. Teachers must be informed about the value of differentiated learning and how to apply it to fulfill the various learning needs of every student through professional development seminars or courses. Last but not least, more studies on differentiated learning in Malaysia and other educational systems throughout the world need to be done to keep researching

and comprehending efficient teaching and learning techniques. In short, teachers can overcome the difficulties and successfully apply differentiated learning to improve student learning and achievement in Malaysia with the help of policymakers and stakeholders.

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