
Differentiated Learning to Facilitate Students' Interests in the Content of English Language Learning

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Abstract

With the new curriculum pushing student-centered learning even further, the differentiated learning supposedly becomes the approach to be utilized. Still, students' interests were supposed to be made into consideration for the content, strategy, product, and environment, but such a notion remains to be seen. Therefore, this study aims to examine remaining issues and challenges faced by the teacher and students of grade 8 as well as to explore how the differentiated content can facilitate students' interests. Based on descriptive qualitative in nature, the data were obtained mainly from personal interviews with six grade 8 students of SMPN 12 Yogyakarta, their English teacher, and the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and partly through observation and survey of a class. The findings revealed that there were prevalent issues and challenges in the curriculum, the teaching and learning practices, the materials, and the students' interests. Then, the differentiated contents could facilitate students' interests in terms of identifying their interests, grouping them based on their interests, providing relevant topics, presenting the content in various interesting media, and utilizing technology to provide sources of learning

Keywords: Students' interest; differentiated learning; content; EFL

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a dynamic process that takes into account changes in several aspects. Masgumelar & Mustafa (2021) state that education will always change throughout the time. Thus, the needs in education will also shift following the era of the students. There has been a shift in teaching and learning process, moving away from the old way where the learning focuses on the teacher and emphasizes on one-way instruction (Nawafil & Junaidi, 2020). As for now, the tide has turned and there has been a general consensus of the importance of teaching and learning process that applies student-centered learning. In one class, there are different characteristics coming from the students. Naturally, the class will not only consist of students with equal ability and capability. The students may also have a range of varieties in characteristics and competence, and therefore it is conceivable that learning and teaching process must facilitate the diversity of the students.

The concept of student-centered learning had actually been promoted and encouraged by Curriculum 2013. Yet, even after years of the curriculum implementation, student-centered learning was not able to be fully utilized in many situations and contexts (Prasetyawati, 2016; Satriaman et al., 2019). The hindrances include the teachers' abilities, the learning resources, and the classroom facilities. However, despite the non-ideal outcome, the notion is pushed further by the new curriculum, *Merdeka* Curriculum, in which differentiated learning is vehemently operated (Pitaloka & Arsanti, 2022). Differentiated learning, or differentiated instruction, recognizes how students are not the same and that access to equal education means that, given a certain goal, each student ought to receive resources, instruction, and support to assist them meet that goal (Stroup, as cited in Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Similarly, Marlina et al. (2019) state that differentiated learning is the learning and

teaching process that is done accordingly to the interest of the students, learning style, enthusiasm to learn, so that the result of the learning will be achieved maximally.

Although, as Tomlinson & Imbeau (2010) point out, there are still misunderstandings about the concept of differentiated learning. For instance, there is a misconception that differentiation is simply a set of instructional strategies, or that effective differentiation can be designed by curriculum developers. In actuality, differentiation is a philosophy, or an approach, and it needs rethinking of the classroom practice and results from continual trial, reflection, and adjustment. Therefore, considering how the application of student-centered learning was not greatly effective in the previous curriculum, it becomes a concern when the notion is pushed by the new curriculum not only toward students in general, but also students' individual needs.

Despite how imperative the upcoming utilization of differentiated learning is, the studies looking into its implementation, or perhaps the preparation, are severely limited. For instance, Suprayogi et al. (2021) note that primary teachers' perception and belief toward differentiated learning is still below the benchmark for both public and private primary schools. Sharing a similar tone, Satyarini et al. (2022) conclude that the implementation of differentiated learning in a high school is hindered by the partial application, leading to the lack of planning, activities, and students' participation. Even, a study finds out how teachers are still confused as to how to realize differentiated learning (Hasanah et al., 2022). Hence, there is still no study in the Indonesian context that solely focuses on differentiated content. The number of studies is even more limited when the focus is in the Indonesian EFL contexts. For instance, Ayuningtyas et al. (2023), Suwastini et al. (2021), and Tanjung & Ashadi

(2019) all provide literature reviews regarding how differentiated learning may be applied, but none investigate the issues that happen in the classroom as the starting point. Thus, it appears that differentiated contents and how students' interests are involved in the differentiation have not been thoroughly explored.

Therefore, it is the aim of this study to describe the issues and challenges faced by the teacher and students of grade 8 as well as to explore how the differentiated content can facilitate students' interests. The issues and challenges could become a reflection on how English subject was conducted as well establish an expectation for the new curriculum. As for the students' interests, this study explored how they can be facilitated in the differentiated content. This study mainly focuses on a particular class at SMP Negeri 12 Yogyakarta during the teaching practice of *Pendidikan Profesi Guru* (PPG), expectantly serving as a preemptive measure in preparation for the school, or even junior high school in general, to conduct differentiated learning brought by the new curriculum in grade 8 for the next academic year.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Differentiated Learning and Students' Interests

According to Tomlinson & Moon (2013), differentiation means teachers' proactive response to learners' needs that can be done through content, process, product, and affect/environment. The differentiation or modification of these elements is based on three categories of students' need and variance, including readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The necessity of differentiated learning is highlighted by Herwina (2021), that the results may improve when the learning process caters towards the students' interest and conversely, the

interest will propel the students towards the learning process. Differentiated learning brings positive feedback from the teachers as well because it is able to facilitate the diversity of the students in terms of the students' learning styles (Ismail & Azlina, 2019).

One of the varieties that needs to be acknowledged in differentiated learning is students' interests. Interest here is defined as the push to learn based on one's liking and desire from the students (Ricardo & Meilani, 2017). Interest can also be defined as the growing effort inside oneself to do something that they want (Magdalena et al., 2020). Students' interest is important not only due to its benefits for the students themselves during the teaching and learning process but also acts as the motivational process that influences their academic trajectories (Renninger & Hidi, 2015). Therefore, the planning and the subsequent learning and teaching processes using differentiation approach need to take into account the interests of the students (Getie, 2020).

2.2. Differentiated Learning in the Indonesian Context

As previously mentioned, the studies in this matter are limited in number, but they could paint a picture as to how differentiated learning is to be expected. Suprayogi et al. (2021), for instance, finds that the disparity between differentiated learning and the application can be caused by the fund and learning resources of the school itself. This may not be an ideal situation considering the needs for varied tasks and materials (Lombardi, 2019) as well as school facilities and educational technology (Ritter, 2018). Other than that, the environment can also affect the outcome of differentiation. Hasanah (2022) determines how safe and comfortable environment can improve the application of differentiated learning. The students can be more comfortable in learning and trying out the knowledge they have learnt. Nevertheless, Satyarini (2022), highlights

a positive engagement from the students when the differentiated learning is applied in the classroom. Although, the needs for more preparation time to cater to the students' needs in various contents becomes drawbacks for the teachers.

In the Indonesian EFL context, Ayuningtyas (2023) states that differentiated learning is beneficial for the students to improve the four-skills in English. The students can improve their skills in English based on their level of competence. However once again, it also faces some drawbacks, namely the large number of the students, the unreadiness from the teachers, and the time-consuming preparation that must be done. Suwastini et al. (2021) state that the differentiated learning can help students to achieve what they should achieve with no one left behind. Differentiated learning facilitates the students to achieve the purpose of the learning in easier way. The challenges, however, happen in the support of the stakeholders about the workload, time availability for the teachers, as well as parents' cooperation towards the treatments that the students get.

3. METHODS

This study is descriptive qualitative in nature. Qualitative method is considered to be an appropriate approach to find out and examine the data in this research. Qualitative approach attempts to explore and understand a particular phenomenon or interest (Creswell, 2011). The primary steps of the approach include collecting the data through inquiry, analyzing the themes or points from the data, and interpreting the information (Packer, 2010).

This study used qualitative data that were mainly obtained through interviews and partly through observations and surveys. The interviews

were conducted with six students of 8 grade class of SMP Negeri 12 Yogyakarta, their English teacher, and the vice principal for curriculum. The students were interviewed using four basic questions regarding the difficulty in learning English and the factors affecting fun and enjoyable learning. Then, the interview with the English teacher was done using 10 basic questions regarding the teaching-learning process, the characteristics of the students, and the difficulty in teaching English. Meanwhile, the vice principal for curriculum affairs was asked 11 basic questions with the intention to know the management of the students, the curriculum, and the teachers and staffs. The interviews were recorded to obtain the most natural and detailed response while the survey was conducted to obtain additional insights. The survey was conducted to gather information from 32 students of 8E class. Additionally, this study drew the data from observations in the classroom. The observation was focused on the characteristics of the students, the learning method, the media and materials used in the teaching and learning process, the students' responses and reactions in the class, and the condition of teaching and learning process in general. The approach to the data analysis was using inductive method of analyzing interview transcripts. The method is a way to analyze from the particular or detailed data to general codes and themes (Creswell, 2011). Using a thematic content analysis, the interview transcripts and additional notes were decoded to find particular patterns that occur in the responses. The patterns were then specified into codes, also called themes or points. The main aim of this approach is to generate a larger, enhanced picture (Tesch, 1990).

Credibility of the data was ensured using multiple procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The first is triangulation which covers theory, method, and source triangulation. The second procedure is member

check. Transferability was determined through thick descriptive data. To substantiate the confirmability, the procedures of data collection and analysis were documented and checked multiple times. Additionally, dependability is achieved through the thorough tracing of methods used in data collection, analysis, and interpretation to avoid any subjectivity in the process.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Issue and Challenges Occured at School

The results of the analysis reveal several notable points, including the curriculum, the teaching and learning practice, the materials, and the students' interests. The first is related to the curriculum. According to the interview with the vice principal for curriculum at the school, the teaching and learning at SMP Negeri 12 Yogyakarta were based on the recent curriculum and rules. Considering this study was conducted during the transition of the newly-implemented *Merdeka* Curriculum, it means that grade seven has started to adopt the new curriculum while grade eight and nine still use Curriculum 2013. The transitional period has always been a demanding time for teachers. Efriza et al. (2022), for instance, note how Curriculum 2013 needed two years to finally settle and that the same trend may happen in the implementation of *Merdeka* Curriculum as it needs the integration for language skills from the previous curriculum. It is also noted in the study that there may be the need for materials development to support the four language skills. In other words, not all the materials, strategies, and assessments would be transferable to the new curriculum. To complicate the matter even further, the teachers need to adopt differentiated learning. Still, it appears that the new curriculum shows a rather positive implementation in a

kickstarter school (Kosasih et al., 2022), although the nation-wide reflection remains to be seen.

However, in the class that still implements Curriculum 2013, it is found that the students' needs and diversity were not acknowledged during the planning and the implementation of the lesson itself. This condition is despite overall positive attitude that teachers can cope with students' diversity (Suprayogi et al., 2021). Also, the teaching and learning processes were still done conventionally. It means that the teaching and learning processes still revolved around the teacher. The teacher mostly employed the lecturing method while the role that students had was mainly reduced to just the listeners. This lack of participation by students is thought to be one of the reasons why differentiated instruction may not fully work (Satyarini et al., 2022). Interactions that were built by the teacher were limited to questions around the assignment that the students were doing that time. This is despite how Curriculum 2013 intends to shift the paradigm from "students have knowledge because of being taught by a teacher" to "students have curiosity to get knowledge by themselves" (Tantra, 2015) and that the teacher's role is limited to be a facilitator in the teaching and learning activities (Efriza et al., 2022). Still, this issue is still generally prevalent at junior high schools (Songbatumis, 2017), which would be an interesting issue to see considering *Merdeka* Curriculum intends to push the student-centered approach even further (Pertiwi et al., 2022). Student-centered learning was supposed to mean that the needs and diversity in the class must be taken into account by the teacher to develop appropriate and suitable materials and lesson for the students.

It is also found that the materials and media that were used by the teacher were mostly visual materials, such as texts and pictures, those

were displayed as a document. This will not attract the students' interest to learn and pay attention. Media is the connection between the teacher and the students that is able to attract the students' attention towards the materials (Ramli et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of uninteresting media to present content of the learning materials can make the learning and teaching process feels monotone and does not achieve the purpose of the use of media itself, capturing students' interest. Moreover, the content of the materials itself is not personalized for the student. All the students get one topic and theme for the materials despite the varieties of the interest of the students in that class. Little are engaged in the learning process because they do not connect to the content of the materials presented by the teacher.

Connecting this with the result of the observation done in the class, it is apparent that there are a lot of students who decided not to pay attention at all. They made themselves busy with anything but the materials. Many of them were doodling, playing with their mobile phone, reading a novel, and talking with their classmate when the activities were being conducted. Additionally, there were also assignments that were used to measure the cognitive improvement from the students without regarding the different characteristics that the students have. When confirming this with the English teacher, it is also found that the students who did not pay attention in the classroom were those having difficulties understanding English language. They also have low motivation towards the target language itself by claiming that they will never be able to speak English. This claim was indeed also supported by the documents provided by the English teacher.

Those things make the students have low motivation towards the process of learning English language in class. This is also proven by the

reaction of the students towards the process of the learning itself, they were busy with themselves rather than paying attention to the learning. This should be educational shareholders' worry as there must be change done in the process of teaching and learning itself. One of the solutions is utilizing the interest of the students to catch the attention of the students towards the learning process.

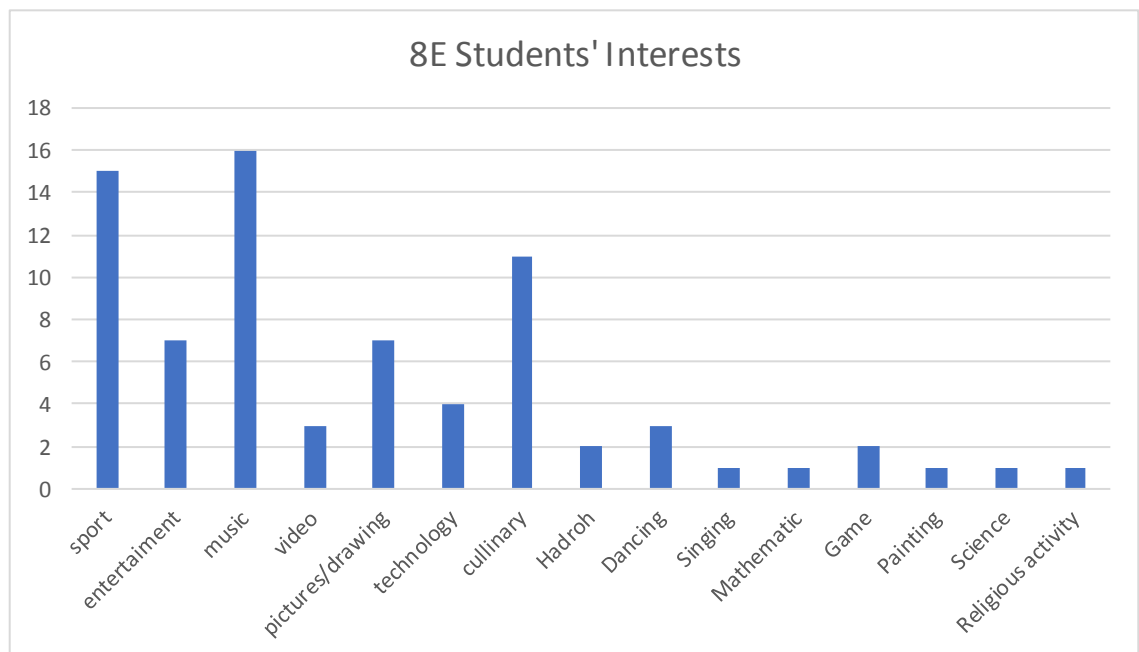


Figure 1. 8E students' interests

From the results of the survey of 8E class where they could pick one or more interests or hobbies, it is found that there were a variety of interests from the students. Half of them convey that music is very much preferred, followed by sports with 46.9%, culinary with 34.4%, as well as entertainment and photography with 21.9%. Other than those interests, there were some other categories with fewer numbers. These interests were relatively unknown to the teachers and therefore not considered further in the planning. Correlating the result of the survey of students' interest, this can be one of the considerations in choosing content of

learning for the teachers. This is due to how interest and learning motivation greatly affect learning results (Aritonang, 2008). Similarly, Farid et al. (2022) also state that students' interest is important source for the teachers to attract the students to get involved actively and effectively in the learning process. Therefore, teachers can also plan the learning that is more meaningful for the students by applying differentiated learning in the content of the learning to facilitate the students' needs.

4.2 How to Differentiated Content can Facilitate Students' Interests

Differentiated learning is one of the solutions that can be used to facilitate the variety that occurs in the class. Wahyuningsari et al. (2022) states that differentiated learning is the process where the students learn based on their readiness to learn, their interest, and their own needs so that the students can feel comfortable, safe, and happy when learning without the worry in failing. Therefore, considering how students' interests had not been fully utilized, this study attempts to explore the solution that can be done to facilitate the students' various interest in the content of differentiated learning. The solutions include knowing the interest, dividing the students in several groups based on their interest, providing materials and learning content with the topics that are based on their interest, presenting the content in various interesting media, and utilizing technology in providing source of learning for the students.

The first is about how to get to know the current interest of the students. Farid et al. (2022) state that knowing the students' interest is fairly easy. This can be done by asking the students at the beginning of the lesson, conducting interview, or doing survey. The result that can be obtained by knowing the students' interest is that teachers can plan the lesson better and more meaningful as the teachers can suit the lesson with the topic of students' interest. Like what is discussed previously,

knowing the students' interest can help improving the activeness of the students in the learning. Therefore, the learning can be meaningful for the students as they are actively participating building their own knowledge. This notion is also in line with teachers' belief that building a positive learning environment becomes an effort to provide differentiated learning (Hasanah et al., 2022),

The second is about dividing the students in several groups based on their interest. Alfares (2017) states the benefits of group discussion, which includes the improvement in the students' active participation in building their knowledge, creativity, and social skills. It is because in group work, students will not only work by themselves but also with each other. There will be feelings to take care of and some consideration played in the process (Hotmaria et al., 2019). Therefore, in that group discussion students are able to discuss, help each other, and practice their skills in socializing, think critically, and be creative. This can be the solution as well to the problems found in the 8E class about the difficulty understanding English in the lesson. In the group discussion, students can help each other and build their knowledge to achieve the purpose of the lesson. Stevens & Lingo (2013) state the similarities in the social relationship will bring positive impact to the friendship. When the students belong to the group that is match with their interest, the discussion will run smoothly. Therefore, the learning can be captured by the students more easily.

The third is about the variation on the content that fits students' interest. This can be done by providing learning source which topics are suited with the students' interest. Suhirman (2018) states that independence of the students to access the learning sources can improve their understanding in learning. However, it is affected by the students'

interest towards the materials itself to access the sources. If the students feel interested enough with the sources, the motivation to the learning will increase as well and the students can have a thought that learning itself is a fun process (Pintrich et al., 2012). This is done to fix the problem happened in the class which is about demotivated students and the students who feel bored in the process of teaching and learning. By connecting the source of learning with their interest, it is hoped that it will bring positive result in terms of their motivation in learning (Syahrozi et al., 2018). The example of the English class application of descriptive text topic, the students can get input text containing the famous person on the field of their interest. Teachers can provide various choice like a chef, a singer, a musician, or a soccer player. The students later on can analyze the text of their favorite person. Using the simple things and activity like choosing the characters on the reading materials makes the students get more interest to learn the text because they feel connected to the text that is given by the teacher. Therefore, monitoring the students' needs and interests is necessary despite needing extra time for the process. Still, it appears that teachers have positive attitude in this regard, although the lack of teaching aids still becomes a prevalent issue (Suprayogi et al., 2021).

The fourth is about interesting media. The content that is given to the students does not have to be in one form to all the students. Teachers can also vary the content in the various form of media. According to Nurrita (2018), there are several functions of media in learning. They include to give the teachers guidelines to present the learning systematically and interestingly, to improve the quality of the learning to achieve the purpose easily, and to improve students' motivation to analyze the content of the learning easily and pleasantly. Interesting

media will definitely make the learning more fun (Purinanda, 2020). Fun learning will lead to the improvement of students' motivation and interest towards learning. The example of the media that can be used are video, podcast, text, comics, etc. The teacher can also provide different media so that the students can choose according to their own interest.

The fifth is about the use of technology in learning. Afif (2019) mentions that the students in today's era are digital native that were born, grows up, and evolve around technology. This results in the speed of the information they get. The impact of the learning is that the students need to get much more information than the time provided. Maddux & Johnson (2013) also add that education cannot run statically and must follows the development of the technology and also the characteristics of the digital native students nowadays. Eggen & Kauchak (2011) emphasize that standard of school in 21st century era or digital era for the teachers and students is that technology must be applied in the learning process. Also, the students' interest towards technology is also high. This is because the current students are digital natives. They tend to cannot be separated from gadgets too long. Based on the observation done in the class, the students feel happier to learn using their mobile phone. This can be an opportunity for the teachers to provide the technology-based learning sources that can be accessed by the students. In addition, the use of technology can also be a solution to the problem that the students are using their phone inappropriately during the learning process. Rather than used to play game, students can use their gadgets for learning in the class and building their knowledge.

The sources of learning provided can also vary through existing platforms on the internet such as YouTube, Quizizz, Kahoot, Canva, and others. As an example, the research conducted by Solikah (2020) shows

that the use of Quizizz platform has a positive impact on increasing students' motivation in learning. Aside from that, Kahoot can also be used as a technology-based learning media with a form of a game that evaluate the learning (Sakdah et al., 2021). Fatima et al. (2019) also state that using game in learning can improve the understanding and interest because the learning is delivered in a creative and fun way that can attract the students. In the class the similar thing happened. The students enjoy the learning with game more and the enthusiasm in learning will have been increased (Purinanda, 2020). Based on the observation done, the use of interactive technology that wrapped in the game form for the students is effective enough to catch students' attention. This also proven by the interview with the students of 8E SMPN 12 Yogyakarta. They stated that Quizizz is very interesting and it makes them more enthusiastic to learn.

5. CONCLUSION

It appears that there are still issues and challenges regarding students' interests and the utilization of student-centered learning in 8E class of SMP Negeri 12 Yogyakarta. The problems are still prevalent despite how the new curriculum demands differentiated learning, and that the new curriculum will get into grade 8 in the next academic year. The issues and challenges happened in the transition of curriculum, the conventional teaching and learning practice, the unexciting materials, and the inadequate involvement of students' interests. Therefore, the needs for including students' interests in the content so that the materials could be relevant can inherently be started by identifying the students' interests even before the continual process of differentiation. This can be done by doing survey or by asking questions before the lesson. Then, it can be done by group discussion so that the students can learn and discuss with the topics they are interested in. In addition, providing interesting media

is also important as well. Media and technology can be varied depending on the students' interest. Additionally, this study highlights the need for proper preparation, both from the teachers and the government, in the process of utilizing an entirely new approach into the classroom practice. As this study focuses on a small set of data from a particular school, further studies into the matter are urgently needed to generalize the issues found in the classroom and to support the initial implementation of differentiated learning. It is recommended that other researchers or practitioners take into account the studies of differentiated learning in English subject from other EFL countries considering how currently, such studies from Indonesia are limited in number.

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