

TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

A Case Study of Junior High Schools in Kendal

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Abstract

This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in implementing differentiated instruction in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms as part of inclusive education practices. The research employs a qualitative case study approach using thematic analysis to examine data collected from semi-structured interviews with five English teachers in public junior high schools in Kendal. The findings reveal that implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive classrooms is a complex and dynamic process, as teachers face various challenges, including diverse student characteristics, differing proficiency levels, limited instructional time, lack of professional training, and insufficient learning resources. These challenges require teachers to adopt differentiated instruction, flexible teaching strategies, and adaptive classroom management. In addition, collaboration among teachers, school staff, and parents plays a significant role in supporting inclusive practices. The study also highlights the importance of creating a supportive learning environment that promotes respect for diversity, avoids negative comparison among students, and enhances students' motivation and confidence. Furthermore, assessment practices in inclusive classrooms emphasize equity by considering students' individual progress rather than applying uniform standards. The findings indicate a gap between the theoretical principles of differentiated instruction and their practical implementation in classroom contexts. Therefore, effective implementation of inclusive ELT requires not only teachers' pedagogical competence but also strong institutional support, adequate resources, and continuous professional development. It is recommended that future studies involve larger and more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Further research should also examine differentiated learning in inclusive ELT classrooms.

Keywords – differentiate instruction, teacher's challenge, teacher's strategies, inclusive classroom, case study

Introduction

Inclusive education is increasingly prioritized in global and national educational reforms aiming at providing equal access and participation of every learner regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning needs. Among others, this principle is emphatically promoted by UNESCO, which sees a key to quality and inclusive education that is equitable for all (UNESCO, 2017). Indonesia too has shown its commitment through programs such as Kurikulum Merdeka and the Guru Penggerak, which fundamentally advocate student-centered

and diversified responsive learning. These educational innovations call on the educators to develop learning settings that are conducive to students' differences and offer equal learning opportunities to all learners, including those with special educational needs.

Inclusive education in English as Foreign Language (EFL) contexts carries some unique issues with it. Language proficiency, learning readiness, motivation, and socio-emotional states of students represent just very few of the ways in which EFL students might differ. Public junior high schools are especially

noteworthy in this regard, as it is there
that inclusive students such as those with

learning difficulties get to learn with their peers under the same roof. Initial observations in 5 public junior high schools in Kendal, Central Java show that teachers have tough times dealing with this diversity in the sense of both managing mixed-ability classes and helping those who have difficulties with English skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and speaking confidence (they are struggling in that regard). This underlines a significant disconnect between the policy of inclusive education and the practice of it in the classroom.

The variety present in inclusive EFL classrooms would count as a strong argument for teachers to introduce several methods of instructions responsive and flexible to learners' needs. Students are generally considered to be in a challenging situation when learning English as they have to master four hearing, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Nonetheless, these challenges are likely to be exacerbated for inclusive learners who, due to differences in cognition, communication skills, attention span, and learning pace, are more vulnerable. Hence, teachers are not required to simply teach but also to make adaptations so that all students can participate meaningfully.

Differentiated instruction, as one of the pedagogical approaches, has gained recognition for being able to effectively address the needs arising from students' diversity. Tomlinson (2014) points out that differentiated instruction means changing the three major components of a lesson, i.e. content, process, and product, according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This allows the teacher to offer different ways of learning, which makes it possible for everyone not only to access but also be engaged with the curriculum (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). In classrooms practicing differentiation, teachers tailor to students' individual needs the learning materials, teaching methods, classroom activities,

and assessment. Adaptability is a key to inclusive education since it facilitates to break down learning barriers and encourage equal access/participation.

In Indonesia, the idea of differentiated instruction finds a supporting text in *Modul 2.1: Memenuhi Kebutuhan Belajar Murid Melalui Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi*, a module that underscores differentiated teaching as identifying student diversity including readiness, interest, and learning. This module also points out that differentiated instruction is beyond a collection of recipes and strategies, but rather a complete and flexible approach that integrates planning, instruction, and assessment to support all learners. Therefore, differentiated instruction has become an important aspect of current educational reform in Indonesia, especially within the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka.

Difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction are still present in inclusive classrooms despite its strong theoretical foundation. Some of the issues teachers face include large classes, limited instructional time, lack of skills in inclusive pedagogy, absence of teaching resources, etc. (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Pozas et al., 2020). Besides, many teachers, even though they acknowledge student diversity, are not able to regularly provide instruction that purposefully addresses this diversity. Therefore, differentiated instruction is partial and pragmatic rather than systematic.

Learning, as Vygotsky (1978) in line with his sociocultural theory, is a mediated process happening in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where a learner with the help of a more knowledgeable peer is able to reach beyond his/her unaided potential, and this point to the need for instructional support in enabling a learner in overcoming a learning difficulty. Differentiated instruction can be seen as scaffolding

whereby the student is supported so that learning objectives can be achieved within one's capabilities. Also, ICT integration has been recognized as a great aid to making differentiated learning possible through the provision of flexible and personalized learning experiences (Chapelle, 2017). Teachers may find it easier to cater to diverse learning styles and abilities through digital learning media and interactive platforms.

However, research on differentiated instruction in the framework of inclusive education appears to be concentrated on individual classrooms or specific interventions without expanding the scene to the understanding of how teachers in different schools interpret and implement such approaches. Also, there is a lack of empirical studies from Indonesia EFL context, especially in the public junior high schools, that illustrate teacher experiences with inclusive students through differentiated instruction. This presents a call for research to be more grounded and explore both strategies and challenges across different school environments.

Therefore, this study is intended to uncover teachers' challenges and the strategies that they experience while assisting inclusive students in English learning at public junior high schools in Kendal, Central Java. More specifically, this study intends to find out what instructional strategies the teachers employ in supporting inclusive students as well as the nature of difficulties faced by them in implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive EFL classrooms. By engaging teachers from different schools, this study offers a wider outlook on differentiated learning across different education contexts.

Methodology

This study using qualitative research aimed to uncover teacher experiences about implementing differentiated instruction in inclusive

English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms using a case study framework. Creswell and Creswell (2019) describe qualitative research as a strategy for probing the meanings individuals or groups attach to social or human problems. It permits researchers to engage with participants face-to-face for detailed information and profound understanding of the phenomena under study. In the same vein, Handayati and Alhaleh (2021) highlight that qualitative research enables gathering information and ideas through direct interaction with participants, which further explain and analyze research problem.

A case study approach focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of a particular case within its real-life context. This approach enables researchers to explore complex educational phenomena comprehensively by examining participants' experiences, actions, and interactions in a specific setting. According to Nuryana et al. (2019), a case study approach investigates a bounded system or specific case through detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information. Through this approach, researchers are able to understand the uniqueness, complexity, and contextual conditions of the case being studied without relying excessively on preconceived assumptions. In addition, case study research allows researchers to gain holistic and contextualized insights into real-life situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A case study approach was appropriate for this research because the study aimed to investigate how teachers implement differentiated instruction in inclusive ELT classrooms, including the challenges they encounter and the strategies they employ. By using this approach, the researcher was able to gain a detailed and holistic understanding of teachers' practices and experiences in real classroom contexts. Furthermore, the case study approach provided opportunities to

examine inclusive teaching practices deeply within their natural settings, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of classroom realities and instructional processes (Yin, 2018).

This study took place in five public junior high schools in Kendal, Central Java, Indonesia. These schools were purposely chosen because they practice inclusive education and have students with different types of diverse needs including those with learning difficulties and special educational needs. Moreover, these schools are a reflection of different educational settings and classroom conditions, thus offering the researcher new insights on differentiated instruction in inclusive ELT classrooms.

The participants for this research were five English teachers who were teaching in inclusive classrooms. As a method of sampling, purposive was used to select those participants who met the predetermined criteria that were relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data Collection was mainly done through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection instrument because they offer a good level of freedom to the participants to explain themselves while also allowing the researcher to keep the conversation focused on the research objectives. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that a semi structured interview is a good way to get detailed account of participants' perspectives because it provides for open-ended questions as well as for spontaneous follow-up questions.

The data that were obtained through the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) position thematic analysis as a qualitative data analysis approach that seeks to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data. This method facilitates researchers in organizing and describing their data set in rich detail.

With a view to interpret and understand teachers' challenges and

strateggies the research was about, thematic analysis was most suitable because it can systematically handle the complexities of qualitative data, categorize the recurring themes, and signify their relationships.

Finding and Discussion

A. Findings

This research's discoveries were based on semi-structured interviews with five English teachers from public junior high schools in Kendal, Central Java. Thematic analysis uncovered that the teachers' challenges and the strategies they adopt to implement differentiated instruction in inclusive English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms are exposed with several related themes. Based on the results, the process of inclusive ELT is complex and dynamic because various factors affect it such as student diversity, institutional constraints, issues with classroom management, assessment methods, and the teachers' ability to change their teaching methods.

1. Challenges in Teaching Students with Diverse Learning Needs

Table 1. Challenges in Teaching Students with Diverse Learning Needs

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Differences in students' abilities and learning needs	R2, R5	2
2.	Limited time and attention	R2	1
3.	Lack of inclusive teaching modules and guidance	R4	1
4.	Family background and health conditions	R1, R3	2

The findings showed that teachers in inclusive classrooms faced challenges related to students' diverse abilities, limited time, lack of training, and insufficient support. R2 emphasized the need for extra attention in teaching students with different learning needs,

while R4 highlighted limited inclusive modules and professional guidance. R1 and R3 noted the influence of family and environmental factors, and R5 stressed inadequate support systems. Overall, inclusive teaching requires pedagogical competence and institutional support.

2. The Influence of Students' Differences on the Teaching Process

Table 2. The Influence of Students' Differences on the Teaching Process

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Different learning styles and abilities	R1, R2, R3	3
2.	Differentiated instruction	R4	1
3.	Flexible teaching methods	R5	1

The findings showed that differences in students' abilities, learning styles, and educational backgrounds influenced teachers' instructional decisions in inclusive classrooms. R2 explained that some students required repeated explanations and varied approaches, while R4 emphasized differentiated learning based on students' needs. R5 highlighted the importance of flexible teaching methods to support participation. In addition, R1 and R3 noted that adapting instruction was necessary to accommodate diverse learners effectively in inclusive learning environments.

3. Difficulties in Managing Classroom Behavior

Table 3. Difficulties in Managing Classroom Behavior

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Emotional control difficulties	R1, R3	2
2.	Hyperactivity and lack of focus	R2	1
3.	Need for special approaches	R4	1

4.	Diverse student behavior	R5	1
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The findings indicated that managing students' behavior was one of the major challenges in inclusive classrooms. Teachers frequently encountered students with emotional difficulties, hyperactivity, lack of focus, and low learning motivation.

R2 explained that hyperactive students often disrupted classroom activities and required additional supervision. Likewise, R4 stated that students with mental disabilities needed special approaches, patience, and long-term observation to identify suitable treatments. In addition, R1 highlighted that emotional control and students' perseverance significantly affected their learning progress.

Overall, classroom management in inclusive settings requires flexibility, empathy, and individualized approaches.

4. The Impact of Limited Facilities and Learning Resources

Table 4. The Impact of Limited Facilities and Learning Resources

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Limited facilities and teaching media	R2, R4, R5	3
2.	Lack of special assistant teachers	R2	1
3.	Facilities considered sufficient	R1, R3	2

The findings revealed that limited facilities and learning resources affected inclusive teaching effectiveness. R2 explained that schools lacked visual media, teaching tools, and special assistant teachers, while R5 stated that teachers often searched independently for additional English learning resources. R4 emphasized maximizing available facilities despite limitations. In addition, R1 and R3 highlighted that inadequate institutional support constrained learning activities. Overall, the findings indicate

that adequate facilities and institutional support are essential for successful inclusive education.

5. Challenges in Assessing Students' Learning Progress

Table 5. Challenges in Assessing Students' Learning Progress

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Difficulty creating fair assessment standards	R2	1
2.	Focus on individual progress	R4	1
3.	Flexible and process-based assessment	R5	1
4.	Students' motivation and parental support	R1, R3	2

The findings showed that teachers faced difficulties in assessing students with diverse abilities fairly in inclusive classrooms. R2 explained that different learning needs made it challenging to establish equal assessment standards, while R4 emphasized the lack of clear assessment guidelines and the importance of focusing on students' individual progress. R5 highlighted that assessment should consider both learning outcomes and processes. Additionally, R1 and R3 noted the need for flexible and individualized assessment practices in inclusive education.

6. Support from Schools, Parents, and the Community

Table 6. Support from Schools, Parents, and the Community

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	School and parental support	R2, R3, R4, R5	4
2.	Inclusive school policies	R2, R3	2
3.	Limited disability services	R1	1

The findings revealed that support from schools, parents, and communities played an important role in inclusive education. R2 explained that schools implemented inclusive policies, parents monitored learning at home, and institutions provided occasional training. R4 highlighted collaboration among teachers, peers, parents, and the education office in supporting inclusive students. However, R1 noted that disability support services remained limited, while R3 and R5 emphasized the importance of shared responsibility among stakeholders for successful inclusive learning.

7. Collaboration with Teachers and School Staff

Table 7. Collaboration with Teachers and School Staff

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Strong collaboration among teachers and staff	R3, R4	2
2.	Sharing teaching strategies	R5	1
3.	Lack of concrete institutional support	R1	1

The findings showed that collaboration among teachers, special assistant teachers, and school staff positively supported inclusive teaching practices.

R3 explained that collaboration among teachers, school staff, and educational authorities helped create a conducive inclusive school environment. Similarly, R4 stated that strong collaboration made it easier for teachers to guide and support inclusive students. In addition, R5 mentioned that discussions with colleagues allowed teachers to exchange teaching experiences and strategies.

Overall, collaboration emerged as an important supporting factor in inclusive education.

8. The Need for Additional Support in Inclusive Education

Table 8. The Need for Additional Support in Inclusive Education

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Establishment of Disability Service Unit (ULD)	R1, R4	2
2.	Additional facilities and special teachers	R3	1
3.	Teacher training and professional development	R5	1

The findings revealed that teachers required additional institutional and professional support to improve inclusive teaching practices.

R1 emphasized the importance of establishing a Disability Service Unit (Unit Layanan Disabilitas/ULD) to provide professional assessment and support services. Similarly, R3 highlighted the need for additional facilities and more special assistant teachers to support inclusive students effectively. Meanwhile, R5 stated that teachers needed special training to improve their competence in managing inclusive classrooms.

These findings suggest that professional support, facilities, and teacher training are essential for strengthening inclusive education.

9. Effective Teaching Methods in Inclusive Classrooms

Table 9. Effective Teaching Methods in Inclusive Classrooms

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Active learning and games	R2	1
2.	Multisensory and project-based learning	R3	1
3.	Individualized task adaptation	R1	1
4.	Flexible teaching methods	R5	1

The findings showed that teachers applied various adaptive teaching methods to attract students' attention and improve classroom engagement.

R2 explained that active learning, educational games, discussions, visual media, and differentiated instruction were effective in increasing students' participation. Similarly, R3 emphasized the use of multisensory approaches, cooperative learning, and project-based activities to support students' understanding. In addition, R1 described adapting tasks according to students' disabilities and individual needs.

Overall, the findings indicate that flexible and adaptive teaching strategies are important in inclusive classrooms.

10. Strategies for Motivating Students with Learning Difficulties

Table 10. Strategies for Motivating Students with Learning Difficulties

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Praise and positive reinforcement	R2, R3	2
2.	Personal mentoring and empathy	R2, R3, R5	3
3.	Inclusion in social activities	R4	1

The findings revealed that emotional support and positive reinforcement played important roles in motivating students with low confidence or learning difficulties.

R2 explained that praise, rewards, empathy, and personal approaches helped students feel more confident and motivated. Similarly, R3 stated that gradual tasks and consistent positive reinforcement encouraged students to experience success. In addition, R4 highlighted that involving inclusive students in the same activities as their peers increased their confidence and sense of belonging.

These findings suggest that emotional support is essential for

improving students' confidence and motivation.

11. Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environment

Table 11. Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environment

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Respecting differences and fairness	R2, R3	2
2.	Creating safe and comfortable classrooms	R3	1
3.	Encouraging peer acceptance	R4	1
4.	Simple classroom rules and participation	R5	1

The findings showed that teachers attempted to create safe, supportive, and non-discriminatory classroom environments.

R2 explained that teachers encouraged students to respect differences and avoid comparing classmates. Similarly, R3 emphasized the importance of creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere that provided equal opportunities for all students. In addition, R4 highlighted the importance of helping students accept and support their peers with disabilities.

Overall, the findings indicate that inclusive learning environments are built through empathy, acceptance, and fairness.

12. Maintaining Students' Participation During Classroom Activities

Table 12. Maintaining Students' Participation During Classroom Activities

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Active learning and games	R2	1
2.	Varied learning activities	R3	1
3.	Inclusion in classroom participation	R4	1

4.	Interesting and student-centered methods	R5	1
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The findings revealed that teachers used various strategies to maintain students' participation during classroom activities.

R2 explained that active learning, discussions, games, and visual media helped increase students' engagement. Similarly, R3 stated that varied learning activities and group participation encouraged students to become actively involved in classroom learning. In addition, R4 emphasized the importance of involving inclusive students in all classroom activities to strengthen their confidence and participation.

These findings suggest that varied and student-centered activities help maintain classroom participation.

13. Handling Students with Different Levels of Ability

Table 13. Handling Students with Different Levels of Ability

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Differentiated instruction	R2	1
2.	Initial assessment and diagnostic analysis	R4	1
3.	Simplified explanations and translation	R5	1
4.	Inclusive classroom strategies	R3	1

The findings showed that teachers used differentiated instruction and flexible classroom management strategies to handle students with varying English proficiency and learning abilities.

R2 explained that teachers implemented differentiated learning, flexible pacing, tiered assignments, and student grouping based on students' abilities and needs. Similarly, R4 highlighted the importance of conducting initial assessments to identify students' abilities before planning instruction. In

addition, R5 emphasized simplifying explanations, using translation, and encouraging dictionary use to support students' understanding.

Overall, the findings indicate that adaptive classroom management strategies are essential in inclusive learning contexts.

14. Ability Grouping as a Classroom Management Strategy

Table 14. Ability Grouping as a Classroom Management Strategy

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Heterogeneous grouping	R1, R2, R4	3
2.	Flexible grouping strategies	R3	1
3.	Grouping based on student responses	R5	1

The findings revealed that teachers frequently grouped students based on their abilities to support collaborative and inclusive learning.

R1 explained that heterogeneous grouping was commonly used so that students with higher abilities could help classmates with lower abilities. Similarly, R3 stated that grouping strategies were flexible depending on instructional goals, including homogeneous grouping for focused learning and heterogeneous grouping for peer tutoring and collaboration. In addition, R4 highlighted that mixed-ability groups helped reduce discrimination and learning gaps.

These findings suggest that flexible grouping strategies can support inclusive learning when implemented appropriately.

15. The Impact of Ability Grouping on Learning Outcomes and Interaction

Table 15. The Impact of Ability Grouping on Learning Outcomes and Interaction

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Improved interaction and peer support	R3, R4	2

2.	More focused learning activities	R5	1
3.	Potential stigma and dependency	R3	1
4.	Increased student confidence	R1	1

The findings showed that ability grouping had both positive impacts and potential challenges in classroom learning.

R3 explained that ability grouping improved targeted instruction, student understanding, and peer teaching opportunities. However, the respondent also warned that poorly managed grouping could create stigma, dependency, and unequal participation. Similarly, R4 stated that mixed-ability grouping increased classroom interaction and helped lower-achieving students improve their learning. In addition, R5 emphasized that grouping made learning activities more focused and comfortable for students.

Overall, the findings indicate that ability grouping can positively influence learning outcomes and classroom interaction when managed carefully

16. Ensuring Equal Learning Opportunities for All Students

Table 16. Ensuring Equal Learning Opportunities for All Students

No.	Code	Respondents (R)	Frequency
1.	Fair and equitable learning	R3	1
2.	Peer teaching and collaboration	R4	1
3.	Differentiated feedback and monitoring	R5	1
4.	Focus on learning process	R1	1
5.	Reflection and flexible standards	R2	1

The findings revealed that teachers promoted equitable learning through differentiated instruction and flexible

assessment practices. R3 explained that fairness meant providing support according to students' needs rather than treating all students equally. R4 highlighted peer teaching as a strategy to support both high-achieving and low-achieving students, while R5 emphasized varied teaching methods, individualized feedback, and continuous monitoring. In addition, R1 and R2 noted that adaptive learning strategies were necessary to ensure all students benefited from instruction.

B. Discussion

1. Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

a. Diversity of Students' Characteristics and Learning Needs

According to the study, one of the main issues that the teachers have to deal with is the difference in the students' characters, skills, and learning needs. They mentioned that learners in the inclusive classrooms are at a wide range of levels of English proficiency, motivation, learning styles, emotional states, and behavior. Some students understand new things fast and are very active in class, whereas some others need several times of explanation and continuous support. This finding supports Tomlinson's (2014) argument that classrooms are inherently heterogeneous and require responsive instructional approaches to accommodate learner diversity.

The largest extent of the problem was reported by teachers when it comes to teaching students who are weak at vocabulary, poor at grammar, or are very shy when it comes to speaking. Also, the students who have short attention or are emotionally unstable are the ones who seem to affect the classroom interaction the most. On top of that, teachers mentioned that family background and students' psychological conditions are factors that affect students' motivation and participation in class.

"In one class, there are students who understand quickly, but there are also students who need repeated explanations many times. Sometimes I have to explain the same material differently because not all students can follow at the same pace", said one teacher.

The results show that teachers have to change their instructional methods and classroom activities in order to ensure that each students' participation is significant, in spite of being in a mixed-ability classroom.

b. Limited Time and Professional Preparation

Teachers also raised limited teaching time as one of the main factors obstructing the effective implementation of differentiated instruction, especially in inclusive classrooms, since they are composed of students with very diverse requirements. Therefore, teachers need more time to explain the subject matter, give the necessary support, and keep track of each student's progress. In reality, the lack of time often causes teachers to remain at the surface of differentiated instruction.

One of participants stated "Differentiated learning takes more time because we have to prepare different activities and give more attention to certain students. Sometimes the lesson time is not enough."

Besides that, the participants voiced a lack of professional training which combines inclusive education and differentiated instruction as an obstacle. The majority of teachers have learned inclusive teaching techniques through their own experience and have not attended professionally developed courses. They further elaborated that these teachers are in need of practical guidance, teaching modules, and workshops, especially those tailored to inclusive ELT situations.

Another participant added, "There is still a lack of practical guidance. We

need examples of strategies specifically for English learning because handling inclusive students is different from regular classes.”

These findings support Ainscow (2020), who argues that teachers require continuous professional development and institutional support to implement inclusive education effectively.

c. Classroom Management and Behavioral Issues

Classroom management was cited as a significant challenge by many teachers. They even shared that their students' hyperactivity, emotional regulation problems, and low learning motivation, made them lose control over the situation at times. According to some respondents, the reason for these disruptions is that certain students cannot focus on the lesson activities and are always inclined to cause disturbance in them, as stated below:

“Sometimes there are students who cannot stay focused for long. When one student becomes disruptive, other students also lose concentration.”

Teachers firmly believe that the management of inclusive classrooms takes not only the teachers' ability to hold their ground in difficult situations but also their ability to understand others' feelings as well as offering a tailor-made solution. One participant commented:

“Handling inclusive classrooms requires extra patience because students have different emotional conditions. Some students become sensitive easily, so teachers must be careful in communicating.”

This made the approach towards classroom management far from being preventive and more reactive.

d. Limited Facilities and Institutional Support

Another challenge that was raised has to do with lack of facilities to aid teaching and institutional support. Several

participants commented that schools find it very difficult to procure an adequate amount of assistive technology, visual learning media, and special education support staff. Teachers are known to create or modify learning materials independently because schools typically do not supply sufficient resources for inclusive classrooms. One teacher stated:

“Facilities are still limited. Teachers often need to create or modify learning materials independently because the school does not provide enough resources for inclusive learning.”

Another teacher explained:

“We need more support from the school, especially special education teachers or counselors who can help us handle students with specific needs.”

At most, communication and collaboration still largely depend on the personal initiative of the individuals involved. These findings support previous research showing that inadequate facilities and institutional readiness remain major barriers to successful inclusive education implementation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Ainscow, 2020).

e. Assessment Difficulties

The assessment of students in inclusive classrooms was equally singled out as a difficult task. Teachers reiterated the challenge of implementing assessment criteria that are just and equitable to students of different abilities. Most educators are inclined to support assessment that is flexible and process-based rather than one which is based on standard evaluation systems, as one teacher stated below:

“Assessment in inclusive classrooms cannot be the same for every student. Sometimes we focus more on students' progress and effort rather than only the final score.”

Teachers stated that assessment should also take into consideration students' progress, participation, effort,

and confidence. Nevertheless, the lack of clear assessment policies sometimes causes discrepancies in the evaluation of students' performance.

2. Teachers' Strategies in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Teachers have explored and implemented a range of differentiated instruction strategies addressing all four dimensions of differentiation: content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2014).

a. Differentiation of Content

Teachers altered the content of the lessons by changing the materials based on students' readiness and needs. Some teachers simplified texts, translated instructions into Indonesian, increased font size for students with visual impairments, and offered visual learning stimuli to enhance understanding.

One teacher explained, "For students who struggle with English vocabulary, I usually simplify the text and use more pictures so they can understand the meaning easier."

Another participant stated, "Sometimes I explain difficult instructions in Indonesian first before asking students to do activities in English."

The teachers also took advantage of multimedia materials such as videos, pictures, PowerPoint presentations, and interactive digital media, as stated below:

"Students are usually more interested when I use videos, games, or interactive media because they can learn visually and actively."

They found these not only to be good learning materials but also contributed greatly to increasing students' motivation and engagement. These findings support Chapelle (2017), who argues that ICT integration can facilitate differentiated learning by providing flexible and personalized learning experiences.

b. Differentiation of Process

Process differentiation was realized through adaptation in the teaching procedures and the designing of the learners' activities. Methods like peer tutoring, group discussions, cooperative learning, project-based learning, games, and multi-sensory approaches were introduced. These approaches align with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of social interaction and collaborative learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

One of the most recurrent features of problem-solving activities was the use of flexible grouping. In some cases, students' grouping was heterogeneous with a view to providing peer support, while in others, homogeneous grouping was employed to facilitate the provision of instruction based on students' proficiency levels.

One teacher explained, "I often group students with different abilities together so they can help each other during activities."

Another teacher stated, "Peer tutoring is effective because some students feel more comfortable asking their friends rather than directly asking the teacher."

Teachers used scaffolding commonly when explaining things to students who have difficulties in learning. This involves giving guiding explanations and instructions in a graded manner.

c. Differentiation of Product

Teachers provided different options for the students to showcase their knowledge and skills. For instance, a student might do a presentation, write a paper, create a visual project, or conduct an experiment. This practice reflects product differentiation, where students are provided multiple opportunities to express understanding (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Some of the participants stated that for some students, writing tasks are preferable since the students do not have to face the fear they feel during oral presentations.

“Some students prefer speaking activities, while others are more confident in writing. I usually give flexibility so students can show their understanding in different forms”, said one teacher.

Teachers also selected the level of task and the criteria for assessment based on students' learning progress and abilities as stated below:

“I focus not only on perfect answers but also on students' effort and progress.”

This flexibility not only eased the student anxiety levels but also led to the students becoming more actively involved.

d. Differentiation of Learning Environment

Besides instructional strategies, creating the right atmosphere for learning is one of the most overlooked aspects of differentiation. Teachers aimed to develop inclusive classrooms that focused on respect, acceptance, giving emotional support, and promoting equal participation.

One teacher stated, “I always remind students not to laugh at their friends' mistakes because every student learns differently.”

They persuaded the non-disabled children to lend support to the disabled ones and tried not to make comparisons among students publicly.

Furthermore, clear, simple classroom rules were established and teachers worked hard in creating classroom environments that inspire the students and reduce their anxiety.

Conclusions

This study explored teachers' experiences in implementing inclusive practices and differentiated instruction in English Language Teaching (ELT)

classrooms in public junior high schools in Kendal, Central Java. The findings indicate that inclusive ELT is a complex and dynamic process that requires teachers to address diverse student needs, abilities, learning styles, and socio-emotional conditions. Inclusive classrooms consist of students with different levels of English proficiency, motivation, confidence, and behavioral characteristics. Therefore, teachers are expected not only to deliver learning materials but also to create supportive and equitable learning environments for all students.

One of the major findings of this study is that learner diversity remains the primary challenge in inclusive ELT classrooms. Teachers reported significant differences in students' learning readiness, vocabulary mastery, grammar understanding, speaking confidence, and classroom participation. Some students are able to understand materials quickly, while others require repeated explanations, simplified instructions, and additional support. These findings support Carol Ann Tomlinson's (2014) perspective that classrooms are inherently heterogeneous and therefore require instructional adaptation based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles.

The findings also reveal that teachers face several additional challenges, including limited instructional time, insufficient professional training, inadequate teaching resources, and classroom management difficulties. Teachers explained that implementing differentiated instruction requires more preparation and flexibility because students learn at different paces and demonstrate varying behavioral and emotional conditions. However, many teachers admitted that they still lack practical guidance and professional development related to inclusive ELT practices. As a result, teachers frequently rely on personal initiative and teaching

experience rather than systematic institutional support. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that inclusive education often depends more on teacher effort than on institutional readiness (Ainscow, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Another important finding concerns classroom management in inclusive settings. Teachers emphasized that some students experience emotional instability, low motivation, or attention difficulties that influence classroom interaction and learning effectiveness. Consequently, teachers need to apply patience, empathy, and individualized approaches when managing inclusive classrooms. This finding aligns with Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and supportive environments in the learning process.

To overcome these challenges, teachers implemented various strategies related to the four dimensions of differentiated instruction: content, process, product, and learning environment. In terms of content differentiation, teachers modified learning materials, simplified texts, translated instructions into Indonesian, and used visual or digital media to support students' understanding. Regarding process differentiation, teachers implemented flexible grouping, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, discussions, and scaffolding strategies. These approaches allowed teachers to adapt classroom activities according to students' learning needs and abilities. The findings also show that teachers differentiated products by allowing students to demonstrate learning in different ways based on their abilities and confidence levels. Some students preferred written assignments, while others felt more comfortable with oral presentations or practical tasks. Teachers focused not only on academic achievement but also on students'

progress, effort, and participation. In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments by encouraging respect for differences, avoiding negative comparisons among students, and providing emotional support to increase students' confidence and motivation.

Furthermore, collaboration among teachers, parents, school staff, and guidance counselors was identified as an important factor in supporting inclusive education. However, collaboration practices remained largely informal and depended on individual initiative rather than structured institutional systems. Therefore, stronger collaboration mechanisms and professional support systems are still needed.

Overall, this study concludes that effective inclusive ELT requires not only teachers' pedagogical competence and adaptability but also institutional support, adequate resources, and continuous professional development. Although teachers demonstrate creativity and commitment in implementing differentiated instruction, inclusive education cannot rely solely on individual teacher effort. Therefore, collaborative support from schools, policymakers, and educational institutions is essential to create more equitable, accessible, and sustainable ELT classrooms for all students.

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