

MARINE CADETS' REFLECTION ON DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN THE INTENSIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING PROGRAM

Corry Hastiwi¹⁾, Sri Wahyuni²⁾

1, 2) Master's Program of English Language Education

Universitas Negeri Semarang

Semarang, Indonesia

corryhastiwi@gmail.com

sriwahyunifbs@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Differences in cadets' speaking competence that are not balanced by appropriate grouping make speaking courses less effective. This research aims to analyze the reflection of the cadets toward the implementation of differentiated learning in content, process, and learning environment of the Intensive English Speaking Program in marine higher education. A qualitative approach with the integration of a qualitative survey to collect the data and thematic analysis to analyze the data was used. The data was gathered through a questionnaire, which was carried out by a Google Form consisting of open and closed-ended questions. This questionnaire was targeted at the 15 cadets of Semarang Merchant Marine Academy who have participated in the Intensive English Speaking Program. Through the cadets' reflection, the findings showed that differentiated learning provided more relevant learning experiences for the cadets' speaking mastery level. The false beginner cadets testified that they feel more encouraged in speaking, specifically in the mastery of vocabulary and pronunciation. The beginner cadets testified that they feel more confident, participative, and able to fix the accuracy of the sentence structure and the use of vocabulary. Meanwhile, the elementary cadets felt more challenged in developing their fluency, accuracy, and complexity of the utterance. Moreover, adjusting the learning activities based on the cadets' speaking competence level helped the cadets to understand the material more effectively. Hence, the cadets still faced several challenges, such as keeping fluency in spontaneous conversation, pronunciation consistency, and a limited vocabulary to convey more complex ideas.

Keywords – Marine Cadets, Cadets' Reflection, Differentiated Learning, Intensive English Program, Speaking Skill

Introduction

Miscommunication is a process in which the delivery or conveying of messages does not occur accurately, which creates a misunderstanding. According to Gudykunst (2004), miscommunication tends to occur because of the difference background of the individuals, such as culture, experience, value, and perspective. It is also supported by DeVito (2016), who stated that miscommunication occurs when the message is differently interpreted by the receiver. Therefore, miscommunication still occurs in various professional contexts, including the international maritime industry, which requires a real-time and accurate response. This issue has become crucial and is affecting

the vessel's operational failures and sea safety. These issues show the importance of clear and effective communication, specifically related to the cadets' speaking skills.

International Maritime Organization (2001) stated that adequate English competence is needed for the safety communication, understanding the navigation information, and interacting with other vessels and stakeholders. English proficiency is also one of the competencies required by a professional seafarer, as stated in the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, in accordance with its regulation on Table A-II/1, A-11/2, and A-IV/2. It means that speaking skills, as one form of oral

communication, become the main competence in the English lesson.

Hence, in real practice, higher-education marine cadets still face struggles with speaking English, such as low confidence, limited vocabulary, and difficulty pronouncing and arranging sentences orally. It is also proven by several studies (Wahyuningsih & Joko, 2020; Fathiah et al., 2020; Barus et al., 2024; Limbong et al., 2024; Abimanto & Mahendro, 2025) that examined the cadets' multidimensional language challenges, such as linguistic and psychological factors. The global and modern era has made the challenges more complex. A learning approach that is more integrated, contextual, and practice-based is needed to enhance the cadets' English competence. Moreover, the cadets often showed diverse levels of speaking skill, so a learning approach which able to accommodate these differences is needed (Barus et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the English lesson in the classroom tends to use the same approach or strategies to be applied to all cadets who have diverse speaking skill levels. Oxford (2008) stated that to enhance the students' language learning, diverse learning strategies (social, cognitive, metacognitive, etc) are one of the techniques and actions that are needed. Moreover, Wang et al. (2023) stated that the chosen strategy needs to be adjusted according to the students' level and condition. It is also supported by Malley and Chamot (1990), who stated that each individual has diverse learning strategies as part of the active process. Hence, it was proven that many classrooms, especially for the cadets in higher education, haven't met this standard. Khoiruman et al. (2025) found that the English classroom in Banyuwangi Maritime Academy tends to be teacher-centered and only focuses on grammar. Joko and Wahyuningsih (2020) also proved that the limitation in the cadets' speaking development is caused

by the ineffective strategy, which isn't in accordance with the cadets' needs. Nurdin et al. (2023) also found that the learning approach in the English classroom wasn't differentiated based on each level.

These actions make the lesson less effective in fulfilling the demand of the cadets' needs with diverse speaking skill competence. In this matter, differentiated learning provides an approach that enables the lecturer to adjust the learning process based on the cadets' speaking skill level. Tomlinson (2001) stated that not all students learn in the same way, so teachers need to adjust their learning strategy according to the students' readiness, interest, and learning profile. It is aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development concept, which stated an effective learning will occur with the adjustment of the student's competence. Moreover, Gardner (1983) also established the multiple intelligences, which emphasize the diverse learning styles of individuals. Differentiated instruction in the speaking class also aligns with Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. In here, the cadets were able to learn directly and repetitively through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Moreover, Schon's (1983) theory also helps to strengthen the analytical analysis of the reflection. In here, the researcher can highlight the cadet's reflection on reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program provided a varied learning experience that triggered a reflection process to improve their speaking performance, which also varied depending on their level.

However, specific research that explored the marine cadets' reflection on the implementation of differentiated learning in the intensive English-speaking program at the higher education level is still limited. It is proven by studies (Febriana et al., 2023; Irawan et al., 2024; Rofiqoh, 2024; Rosyada & Wahyuni,

2025; Tundreng et al., 2025; Amanina & Hidayat, 2026) that mostly talked about the implementation of differentiated instruction in primary education or secondary education as the research subject. Moreover, the individual's reflection on differentiated learning in higher education, especially in the marine school speaking class, is still limited. The previous studies above also mainly talked about the implementation of differentiated learning rather than focusing on how the individual feels toward it. Lastly, most studies (Wahyuningsih & Joko, 2020; Siregar et al., 2021; Nurdin et al., 2023; Algofaili, 2024) examined the cadets' difficulties in speaking English rather than their personal and deeper experiences and challenges in undergoing the class

Based on the preliminary findings, the previous Intensive English Speaking Program was conducted homogeneously, although the cadets had diverse speaking competence. This condition triggered the gap between the level of speaking competence and the learning material, which was implemented in the lesson. The cadets showed their discomfort with the class material, which is sometimes too hard for the false beginner cadets and too easy for the elementary cadets. They felt that their level of competence and the speaking demand hadn't been accommodated accordingly. It also affected their learning process, which became less effective due to the passive participation of the cadets, which was caused by the gap of the speaking competence level.

To overcome these problems, the Intensive English Program tried to implement differentiated instruction in the lesson by adjusting the cadets' level of readiness or initial speaking skills. Tomlinson (2001) stated that differentiated instruction is an approach to adjust the content, process, and learning environment based on the cadets' needs, readiness, and characteristics.

Align with it, the instructors tried to accommodate each level by using differentiated content, process, and learning environment. The false beginner cadets were accommodated with an interactive lesson through a game, which focused on practicing their basic vocabulary and pronunciation in a fun and enjoyable environment. While the beginner cadets were accommodated by structured activities such as role play, guided conversation, and contextual dialogue to enhance their confidence, active participation, and accuracy of the vocabulary and sentence structure. Last, the elementary cadets were accommodated with more complex activities that require high competence in producing utterances such as discussion, presentation, and debate.

Based on the preliminary findings, this article tried to answer the research problems below:

1. How do the marine cadets reflect on their experiences towards differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program?
2. How do marine cadets' reflections differ based on their speaking ability level relative to differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program?
3. How do the marine cadets interpret the impact of differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program on their speaking performance based on their reflection?

This research is expected to give a new perspective related to the cadets learning experience from the various levels of speaking competence towards the integration of differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program.

Methodology

A qualitative approach through a qualitative survey design was used to gather the data in this research. Creswell (2014) stated that the qualitative approach is used to understand the meaning, experience, and social phenomenon in-depth. This research is done in its real or authentic setting, with the researchers as the key instrument. It aims to explore the cadets' reflection towards the implementation of differentiated learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program. This design was used to collect a deep understanding related to the cadets' experience, perspective, and response towards the research topic.

This study refers to the Tomlinson (2001) concept related to differentiated instruction, which is implemented through the differentiated content, process, and learning environment, adjusted with the level of the cadets' readiness in speaking. Differentiated content was done by providing diverse material and learning sources. Specifically, the false beginner cadets were provided with the Cambridge Interchange Intro textbook, the beginner cadets with the Cambridge Interchange 1 Level textbook, while the Elementary cadets were provided with the Interchange Level 2 Level textbook. Differentiated process was implemented with the diverse learning strategies for each level such as game for the false beginner cadets, role play and guided conversation for beginner cadets, while presentation, discussion, and debate for the elementary cadets. Moreover, a differentiated learning environment was also implemented by creating a supportive and comfortable classroom, including the grouping of the cadets based on their speaking level or initial ability to speak, and the adjustment of each level's demand. The data was collected through the cadets' written reflection.

The subject of this research consists of 15 cadets from the Marine Higher Education Academy who had studied in the Intensive English Speaking Program. The participants were chosen by a purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2014) described the purposive sampling technique as a way to choose the respondents intentionally based on a certain criterion. In more detail, five cadets from the false beginner level, five cadets from the beginner level, and five cadets from the elementary level were chosen as the sample to represent each level of competence. This categorization aims to show the diverse reflections based on each competence level towards the implementation of differentiated learning in the program.

The data was collected by using an online questionnaire through Google Forms. This questionnaire was designed to dig up the cadets' reflections on their experience during the intensive English-speaking program, specifically in the implementation of differentiated instruction. The instruments consist of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The instruments were developed by Kolb (1984), Schon (1983), and Tomlinson (2001) which already been validated with the expert. Schon (1983) was used as the main framework to analyze the reflective experience of the cadets in the program. Furthermore, Kolb (1984) was used to understand the transformation process of learning experience to be reflection, while differentiated instruction from Tomlinson (2001) was used to elaborate the learning context of the cadets, which is varied based on their speaking ability level, which will impact their reflection results too. This questionnaire was shared through WhatsApp by the researcher after asking for their consent to participate in the research first.

The data collection procedures occurred through several stages. First, the researchers conducted a preliminary research by having a small participant

interview with the cadets. Based on the preliminary findings, the instruments were constructed and followed by inputting them into the Google Forms. Then, the validity of the instruments was tested by involving an expert. Fourth, by the purposive sampling technique, the sample size of the research was chosen based on each level of competence (false beginner, beginner, and elementary). Fifth, the researchers contacted the sample size and asked for their consent through WhatsApp chat. Sixth, the participants filled in the link through the shared questionnaires of Google Forms. Then, the data was collected through the cadets' responses and organized accordingly to be analyzed for further findings.

The data was analyzed by using descriptive and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was done through the open coding, axial coding, and selective coding stages. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that thematic analysis is a method to find and analyze the themes within the qualitative data. The closed-ended responses were analyzed by using descriptive analysis to see the frequency of the answers and the response percentage. On the other hand, the open-ended response was analyzed by using thematic analysis. It is done through several steps. First, the researcher read the entire response of the participants. Then the researchers decided on the initial code of their answer in the open-coding stage. After that, the code was grouped into several categories. Then, the main theme of the cadets' reflection was decided based on the found theme. Lastly, the researchers drew a conclusion based on the found pattern. These stages were adapted from the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis stages.

Finding and Discussion

1. Cadets' Reflection on Differentiated Learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program

The findings showed that the cadets reflect on their Intensive English Speaking Program experience as a learning process that is gradual, adaptive, and meaningful. In the initial stage, most of the cadets reported the affective obstacles such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and the limitation of vocabulary, which hinder them in participating in the speaking activities.

"At first I felt nervous and a lack of confidence, but over time I felt more comfortable and confident."

Over time, the cadets started to show an increase in comfort and active participation in the lesson. It indicated that there is an adaptation process towards the learning environment that is supportive and non-judgmental. Vygotsky (1978) stated that a supportive learning environment helps individuals to develop their initial ability into a higher level. Moreover, practice-based learning was used as the learning strategy, such as discussion, role-play, and presentation. It helps to strengthen the active participation of the cadets in the direct use of language.

Furthermore, the cadets' reflection showed there is a transformation in how they see the English lesson. English is no longer perceived as a mere academic subject, but as a communication skill that is relevant to their professional demands in the future. Kolb (1984) stated that reflective observation enables individuals to interpret new experiences and create a new understanding.

"English isn't only about the exam score, it is a communication tool."

These findings indicate that the learning experience successfully produced meaningful learning where the cadets were able to correlate the lesson with the real context. It is aligned with Hattie's (2009) theory, which emphasized the importance of a lesson which oriented on the understanding and implementation in its real context. Moreover, the cadets also showed reflective ability by

identifying their strengths and weaknesses independently,

"I experience limited vocabulary and feel nervous to speak in front of people."

Moreover, the practice-based lessons, such as role-play, discussion, and presentation, become an important element in their reflection. Dewey (1993) stated that learning becomes effective when individuals are actively engaged in real activities.

"Learning activities such as role play, presentation, and group work really help me to speak in English actively."

These findings showed that experiential and contextual learning experiences enable the cadets to correlate the lesson with real-world use of English.

Theoretically, these findings align with Kolb (1984), who stated that learning starts from the concrete experience, which is followed by the reflection process to gain a new understanding. On the other side, the cadets' ability to evaluate their learning experience reflects the concept of reflection-on-action by Schon (1983), who stated that individuals reflected on their experience to improve their self-awareness and learning in the future. Hence, the cadets' reflection shows that a lesson not only results in the improvement of ability, but also in self-awareness as a language learner.

2. Reflection Differences Based on the Cadets' Speaking Ability Level on Differentiated Learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program

The findings showed that the cadets reflection towards the Intensive English Speaking Program differ significantly based on their speaking ability level. It is also strengthened that the learning process, which is adjusted with the individual readiness, results in diverse but relevant learning experiences for each group. Flavel (1979) emphasized that reflection ability is strongly correlated with metacognition, which requires

individuals to realize, assess, and develop their own thought processes.

The cadets who are in the false beginner level showed a reflection that focused more on the basic speaking aspect, mainly to produce language and overcome the initial obstacle in communication.

"I still need some time to think, but from that I have the chance to learn and feel motivated."

Moreover, the false beginner cadets also showed the early stage of gradual improvement.

"My confidence increased, my vocabulary a little bit increased, but I still find it hard to have a conversation with people."

These findings indicate that the false beginner cadets are still in the early stage of communicative competence development, where the main focus is building the linguistic resources, such as vocabulary and basic structure, as well as encouragement in speaking. On the other hand, the main purpose isn't to achieve the language complexity but the willingness to speak. MacIntyre et al. (1998) stated that willingness to communicate is the readiness of someone to start communicating at a certain time with a certain person in a second language.

Furthermore, the cadets at the beginner level showed a significant improvement in the affective aspect and speaking performance. They started to feel active and participative in speaking activities. They started to construct better sentences in this transition stage.

"I become braver in speaking English without being afraid to make mistakes. My confidence increased!"

"I started to make my own sentences."

However, their reflection also showed a more complex reflection towards the speaking challenges they encountered, especially for the spontaneity aspect, active vocabulary, and sentence structure.

"Sometimes, it is hard for me to find the proper vocabulary when speaking spontaneously."

"In pronunciation, there are still some words that I can't pronounce consistently."

Moreover, the cadets in this level are able to identify the cognitive factors that affect their performance, such as the tendency to translate from their first language.

"I often translate from Indonesian to English, so it makes the speaking process slower."

This deep reflection showed that the beginner cadets start to enter the more complex development of communicative competence. It isn't only about the language production, but also about fluency and accuracy. Moreover, they also showed the development toward metacognitive awareness, where the learner starts to understand their own learning process.

Meanwhile, the cadets in the elementary level showed a more complex reflection involving the aspects of fluency, complexity, and effective communication. The reflection isn't a mere description but also evaluative.

"I have become more fluent and confident in speaking, although I still need some practice." *"I start to speak more spontaneously and naturally."*

Moreover, some cadets also correlate their learning experience with their readiness in a professional context.

"I feel more ready mentally and technically in professional communication."

However, the cadets still face some challenges in speaking in more complex sentences and ideas.

"I lack vocabulary in conveying a more complex idea." *"I'm still struggling to keep the fluency in a long speech."*

These findings indicate that the higher the level of someone's speaking ability, the more complex the reflection produced by them. They didn't only focus

on the basic skill but also on the communication effectiveness holistically.

Hence, it is found the progressive pattern from each level that is the false beginner cadets focus more on building confidence and basic vocabulary, the beginner cadets focus more on the structure and active participation, and the elementary cadets focus more on fluency and complexity. Tomlinson (2001) stated that a lesson that is adjusted to the individual's readiness creates a relevant learning experience for each level.

Theoretically, Tomlinson (2001) highlighted that a lesson which is adjusted with the readiness of the individual makes the learning process effective. Moreover, the reflection development of each level reflects Kolb's (1984), which becomes more proficient over time.

3. Perceived Impact on Differentiated Learning in the Intensive English Speaking Program on the Cadets' Speaking Performance

The findings showed that the cadets' interpretation of the lesson in the Intensive English Speaking Program had a positive impact on their speaking performance, both in affective and linguistic factors. Most of the cadets testified that they feel an improvement in self-confidence and motivation in speaking English. Bandura (1997) stated that self-confidence is shaped through the mastery of experience.

"Now, I feel more confident in speaking English, although there are still some mistakes."

This improvement indicates that a supportive learning environment can decrease the psychological obstacles to speaking English. Krashen (1982) stated that a positive emotional condition with low anxiety and high confidence enables the individual to be more effective in processing and using the language.

Linguistically, the cadets reported the development in several main aspects, namely vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

"My vocabulary has increased, and my pronunciation has become better."

However, the improvements have not completely eliminated the cadets' speaking challenges. Some challenges still occur related to the limited vocabulary, difficulty in speaking spontaneously, and inconsistency in the use of grammar.

"I still struggle with speaking spontaneously." "Sometimes, it is hard to choose the proper word."

Moreover, the cadets showed reflective ability by identifying the causative factors of those challenges, such as a lack of practice and the use of English in daily life.

"Lack of practice and not accustomed to the use of English in daily life."

The findings indicate that although the lesson has a positive impact on the cadets' speaking ability improvement, they still need a practice that is sustainable and outside the class context. It also indicates that the lesson in the classroom needs to be supported with the chance to use the language in a real context.

Based on the cadets reflection, differentiated learning has a positive impact on the cadets' speaking performance. Differentiated instruction on the content, process, and learning environment enables the cadet to learn based on their level of readiness. The material adjustment helps them to improve their understanding, varied activities encourage them to be more confident and speaking performance, while the learning environment supports the active participation of the cadets.

Aligned with Tomlinson (2001), who stated that differentiated instruction is designed to accommodate individuals with diverse needs, readiness, and characteristics by the adjustment of content, process, and learning environment. Theoretically, this finding also strengthens Kolb (1984), who stated that learning is a sustainable process which involve experience and direct

practice. Moreover, the cadets' ability in identifying challenges showed that there is a reflection process, which, in accordance with Schon (1983).

Conclusions

This research reveals that learning to speak is adjusted according to the individual's level of ability present more relevant and meaningful learning experience. Based on the cadet's reflection, the learning process not only contributes to their development of linguistic skills, but also to their affective aspect, mainly in building their confidence and motivation to speak in English.

The finding shows that the cadet learning experience is gradual and develops along with their level of ability in speaking. The false beginner cadets tend to focus their reflection on their bravery in speaking and the mastery of basic vocabulary and pronunciation. On the other hand, the beginner cadets start to show an improvement in their active participation and the accuracy of sentence structure. In the elementary level, the reflection develops the ability to speak with a more complex structure, including fluency, accuracy, and structured idea delivery. This pattern shows that the difference in speaking level of ability produces a different quality of reflection and learning needs.

Moreover, the cadets interpret their learning to have a positive impact on their speaking performance, mainly in self-confidence, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. The implementation of differentiated content, process, and learning environment are proven to give a relevant learning experience and positively contribute to the improvement of the cadets' speaking performance. Therefore, the challenges in speaking are still found, such as keeping the fluency of spontaneous speaking, consistency of pronunciation, and limited vocabulary to convey their more complex

ideas. It indicates that the learning process needs to be supported by the real practice, which is continuous outside the classroom, to achieve more optimal development.

Theoretically, the findings strengthen the experience-based learning by Kolb (1984), a deep reflection from Schon (1983), and the importance of adjusting the lesson based on the individual's readiness align with Tomlinson's (2001) theory. Hence, this research emphasizes that an adaptive and reflective lesson has a crucial role in developing the individual's speaking ability, which is contextual and gradual.

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