

Navigating Equity in Personalized ELT: Differentiated Instruction in One-on-One Private Tutoring

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Abstract

This study investigates how a tutor exercises pedagogical flexibility to navigate educational equity through differentiated instruction in a one-on-one private English tutoring context. While differentiated instruction has been widely explored in formal classroom settings, its role in individualized tutoring as a form of compensatory education to address socioeconomic disparities remains underexamined. This research adopts a qualitative case study design involving two fifth grade students with polar opposite profiles: one with high socioeconomic status and extensive English exposure from a private school, and another with low socioeconomic status from a public school facing limited resources and irregular attendance. Data were collected through participant observation, semi structured interviews, and the tutor reflexive journals to capture instructional decisions and students learning responses. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in how instruction is adapted to bridge specific learning gaps. Predicted results indicate that by tailoring content and processes through methods such as using kinaesthetic storytelling for the active learner and visual gaming-based scaffolding for the shy learner the tutor can effectively optimize holistic skills. The findings are expected to demonstrate that differentiated instruction in private tutoring functions as a targeted support mechanism and a meaningful space for reducing educational inequality. This research implies that radical personalization is essential in providing a fair learning trajectory for students regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Keywords – Differentiated instruction, educational equity, private tutoring, compensatory education, socioeconomic status, ELT

Introduction

In the current global era, English proficiency plays a significant role in supporting students' access to knowledge, communication, and future career opportunities. As an international language, English enables individuals to engage with global information and technological developments. However, the process of teaching English effectively is complex, as learners demonstrate diverse abilities, backgrounds, and learning preferences (Mahdi et al., 2024). Consequently, traditional "one size fits all" teaching approaches are increasingly viewed as insufficient to accommodate such a wide range of language skills and learning styles (Egamberdiyeva, 2024).

Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a relevant pedagogical approach to address these challenges. DI emphasizes the need for teachers to adjust instructional content, learning processes, and assessment methods in response to students' individual profiles (Smit & Weingartner, 2026). This approach is based on the understanding that variations in students' academic performance are often shaped by environmental and instructional factors, rather than differences in inherent ability. Supporting this view, research indicates that children possess relatively equal creative potential regardless of their socioeconomic background (Rawlings et al., 2025). This suggests that when students show different results in school, it is often because the environment fails to respond to their specific needs.

In Indonesia, efforts to promote inclusive education are reflected in policies such as the Merdeka Curriculum and the Pancasila Student Profile project, which align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Harjanti et al., 2026). However, implementing DI in formal classrooms remains difficult. Teachers often face systemic barriers, including large class sizes, limited infrastructure, and administrative burdens (Daşcıoğlu & Bümen, 2025). These challenges often prevent students from receiving the personalized attention they need, leading many families to seek private tutoring as an alternative space for more radical personalization.

While DI has been widely studied in formal school settings (Langelaan et al., 2024), there is still a significant gap in research regarding its implementation in one-on-one private tutoring. In particular, the role of DI as a form of compensatory education to bridge learning gaps caused by socioeconomic status (SES) remains underexamined. Socioeconomic disparities and differences in environmental exposure continue to create unequal "starting lines" for students (Ashraf & Lee, 2025; Moriyasu et al., 2025). Although regional educational mobility is linked to perceptions of equity (Yang & Yang, 2026), little is known about how a tutor's pedagogical flexibility can directly address these disparities in a private setting. This lack of research on the equity dimension of private tutoring makes it difficult to understand how personalizing lessons can serve as a tool for social justice (Magill et al., 2026).

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how differentiated instruction is enacted in a one-on-one private tutoring context to navigate educational equity. Through a qualitative case study, this research explores the tutor's responsiveness toward two fifth grade students with contrasting biographical backgrounds: one from a high SES background with extensive English exposure, and another from a low SES background with limited resources. The study focuses on how the tutor uses pedagogical flexibility to move past these biographical limits (Magill et al., 2026; Jariego et al., 2024). By documenting specific strategies—such as kinaesthetic storytelling for the active learner

and visual gaming-based scaffolding for the shy, less exposed learner—this research demonstrates how radical personalization can create a fair learning trajectory for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of how differentiated instruction is implemented in a personalized learning environment. A qualitative approach is selected because it allows the researcher to capture the complexities of instructional decision making and the nuanced responses of students from differing socioeconomic backgrounds. As this research focuses on the lived experience of navigating equity within one-on-one tutoring, a case study design provides the necessary framework to examine the "how" and "why" of pedagogical flexibility in a real-life context (Magill et al., 2026).

Subjects of Research

The participants of this study were two fifth grade students purposely selected to represent contrasting biographical and socioeconomic profiles. Student A is an active learner with high socioeconomic status (SES) who attends a prestigious private Islamic school and has extensive environmental exposure to English. In contrast, Student B is a shy, visual learner from a low SES background attending a public school with limited resources and irregular academic support. These two students were chosen to provide a clear comparison of how differentiated instruction can act as compensatory education to bridge significant learning gaps.

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Data were gathered over a structured period of tutoring sessions using three primary instruments to ensure data triangulation. First, participant observation was conducted to record real time interactions, instructional adjustments, and student engagement levels. Second, the tutor's reflexive journals were utilized to document the pedagogical reasoning behind specific differentiation strategies, such

as the choice of materials and pacing. Third, semi structured interviews were held with the students to understand their perceptions of the learning process and their interests, which informed the personalization of the curriculum.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process involved transcribing the reflexive journals and interview results, followed by an initial coding process to identify recurring patterns related to instructional adaptations. These codes were then categorized into broader themes, such as "radical personalization strategies," "responses to environmental exposure," and "enacting educational equity." This systematic analysis allowed the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about how specific micro-strategies (e.g., gaming-based scaffolding versus kinaesthetic storytelling) contributed to the students' learning trajectories.

Research Procedure

The research followed a four stage procedure: (1) Preliminary Profile Mapping, where the tutor assessed the students' SES, interests, and initial English readiness; (2) Instructional Design, where tailored lesson plans were developed for each student; (3) Implementation and Observation, where the differentiated lessons were delivered and documented; and (4) Reflection and Evaluation, where the effectiveness of the strategies was analysed to determine how they addressed the students' biographical limit situations.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the multifaceted data—comprising semi-structured interviews, prolonged participant observations, and the tutor's reflexive journals—reveals that the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) within the microcosm of one-on-one private tutoring manifests through three pivotal thematic pillars: (1) Radical personalization as a strategy to navigate disparities in environmental exposure, (2) The tutor's role as a mediator of parental expectations and student

emotional regulation, and (3) The contextual redefinition of learning success.

Radical Personalization: Bridging the Environmental Exposure Gap The field data underscores a stark contrast in the learning readiness and environmental exposure between the two primary subjects. Student A, hailing from a high socio-economic status (SES) background and attending a prestigious private school, demonstrated a high level of proficiency and comfort with complex instructional tasks due to the robust linguistic support system in his academic environment. Conversely, Student B, representing a low SES background and attending a public school, exhibited significant language anxiety, a tendency to withdraw from interaction, and a severely limited vocabulary—a direct consequence of systemic issues such as the infrequent presence of teachers in his school (Parental Interview B).

To address this inequity, the tutor enacted "radical personalization." For Student A, the instructional focus was on gaming-based scaffolding and high-level cognitive challenges designed to maintain engagement and momentum. For Student B, however, the tutor adopted a compensatory approach by deliberately decelerating the instructional tempo, providing structured sentence starters, and prioritizing the cultivation of self-confidence before introducing core linguistic materials. Observational notes dated December 15, 2025, confirm that Student B began to participate more vocally only after the tutor provided additional preparation time and consistent verbal reinforcement, such as "it is okay to make mistakes" and "take your time." This adaptive pedagogical response highlights how DI in a private setting functions as an essential tool for providing an equitable learning trajectory (Mahdi et al., 2024; Egamberdiyeva, 2024).

Redefining Success: Social Validation vs. Public Performance

A significant finding emerged regarding how the concept of "success" is heterogeneously

constructed. Student A associated success with public performance and competitive milestones, such as "winning competitions" or "writing stories to be converted into comics" (Student Interview A). In contrast, Student B viewed success through the lens of social validation and relational competence, defining it as the moment he could "answer questions when asked by peers at school" (Student Interview B). This divergence necessitates that the tutor differentiates not only the curriculum content but also the indicators of achievement to align with the unique psychological and social needs of each learner (Smit & Weingartner, 2026).

The following discussion explores the interaction between these empirical findings and existing academic literature, specifically examining how the private tutor serves as a vital mechanism for educational equity.

Challenging the Socioeconomic Deficit

The observation that Student B (Low SES) demonstrated significant cognitive progress and creative engagement when provided with tailored instruction directly supports the theoretical assertions of **Rawlings et al. (2025)**. Their research posits that there is no inherent socioeconomic gap in children's creative or divergent thinking; rather, disparities in performance are often the byproduct of unresponsive educational environments. In this study, when the systemic barriers of the public school system were mitigated through responsive private tutoring, Student B displayed an intellectual capacity commensurate with that of Student A. This evidence suggests that DI is not merely a pedagogical technique but a transformative instrument for realizing the fundamental right to education for all (Moriyasu et al., 2025; Egamberdiyeva, 2024).

Pedagogical Flexibility as a Solution to Systemic Barriers

The inherent rigidity of formal curricula in Indonesia often poses challenges for teachers dealing with large class sizes and administrative burdens (Daşcıoğlu & Bümen, 2025). The

"pedagogical flexibility" exercised by the tutor in this study—such as the instantaneous adjustment of materials based on the student's affective state (Reflexive Journal)—represents a form of radical personalization that is virtually unattainable in formal school settings. As articulated by **Magill et al. (2026)**, this flexibility is paramount in helping students transcend their "biographical limit situations." The tutor does not merely transfer linguistic knowledge but actively manages the "learning labor," ensuring a psychologically safe space that fosters authentic learning (Magill et al., 2026; Mahdi et al., 2024).

Tutoring as Compensatory Education

For families from lower SES backgrounds, private tutoring is increasingly perceived as a necessary compensatory mechanism to offset the inadequacies of the formal school system (Harjanti et al., 2026). The data from parental interviews suggests that the drive for educational mobility fuels parental involvement in shadow education (Yang & Yang, 2026). In this context, DI acts as a targeted support mechanism (Egamberdiyeva, 2024) that effectively bridges the gap between the student's personal needs and the standardized demands of the formal curriculum, which often fails to be adapted by school teachers (Langelaan et al., 2024; Jariego et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study reframes the traditional understanding of DI, shifting the focus from large-scale classroom management to a "micro-pedagogical" model rooted in relational trust and affective adaptation. Success, in this specialized context, is no longer measured by a singular academic metric but is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing confidence, agency, and social recognition (Smit & Weingartner, 2026).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) within the specialized context of one-on-one private tutoring serves as a powerful mechanism for achieving educational equity, particularly in navigating the systemic disparities inherent in

"shadow education." The findings reveal that radical personalization—enacted through pedagogical flexibility—allows a tutor to effectively bridge the significant learning gaps created by differing socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of environmental exposure. By tailoring instructional content, pacing, and affective support, the tutor successfully transformed the learning trajectory of a socioeconomically disadvantaged student from a state of withdrawal and anxiety to one of active participation and social confidence.

Furthermore, this research highlights that "success" in English Language Teaching (ELT) is not a monolithic outcome but a socially constructed and relational process. For learners from high-SES backgrounds, success often aligns with competitive performance and enrichment; however, for those from low-SES backgrounds, success is more deeply rooted in compensatory progress and the attainment of social validation. This study proves that when pedagogical responsiveness is prioritized, the inherent creative and intellectual potential of students remains equal regardless of their financial or social class.

The practical implication of this research suggests that educators and tutors must look beyond standardized metrics and embrace a more "micro-pedagogical" approach that values emotional regulation and biographical context. In the Indonesian landscape, where formal education often struggles with large class sizes and rigid curricula, private tutoring with a DI framework offers an ideal model for inclusive education. Ultimately, this study reframes the role of the private tutor not merely as an academic facilitator, but as a crucial mediator who enacts justice by providing every learner with the specific tools they need to flourish.

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