

# A Case Study on the Implementation of Differentiated Instruction in Bilingual Classes at Islamic Junior High School

Yulio Hady Permana<sup>1\*</sup>, Aan Erlyana Fardhina<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Universitas Jember, Indonesia

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## ABSTRAK

**Abstract:** This study investigates the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in bilingual classrooms at an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research explores teachers' understanding of DI, their instructional practices, and the opportunities and challenges encountered in a bilingual Islamic educational context. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with five teachers, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that teachers demonstrate a clear conceptual understanding of DI and integrate diagnostic assessment, observation, and student input in planning instruction. In practice, DI is implemented flexibly by differentiating content, process, and product based on students' needs and classroom conditions. Teachers reported positive outcomes of DI implementation, including increased student engagement, reduced learning anxiety, and the creation of a more inclusive learning environment. However, challenges such as limited preparation time, workload, and difficulties in managing student participation were also identified. This study contributes to the limited body of research on Differentiated Instruction in bilingual Islamic junior high schools in Southeast Asia. The findings suggest that while DI has strong potential to support diverse learners in bilingual settings, its effective implementation requires adequate institutional support and continuous professional development for teachers.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini menyelidiki penerapan Instruksi Terferensiasi (DI) di ruang kelas bilingual di sekolah menengah pertama Islam di Indonesia. Menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pemahaman guru tentang DI, praktik instruksional mereka, dan peluang serta tantangan yang dihadapi dalam konteks pendidikan Islam dwibahasa. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi terstruktur dengan lima guru, dan analisis dokumen, dan dianalisis secara tematik. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa guru menunjukkan pemahaman konseptual yang jelas tentang DI dan mengintegrasikan penilaian diagnostik, observasi, dan masukan siswa dalam perencanaan pengajaran. Dalam praktiknya, DI diimplementasikan secara fleksibel dengan membedakan konten, proses, dan produk berdasarkan kebutuhan siswa dan kondisi kelas. Guru melaporkan hasil positif dari implementasi DI, termasuk peningkatan keterlibatan siswa, pengurangan kecemasan belajar, dan penciptaan lingkungan belajar yang lebih inklusif. Namun, tantangan seperti keterbatasan waktu persiapan, beban kerja, dan kesulitan dalam mengelola partisipasi siswa juga diidentifikasi. Studi ini berkontribusi pada terbatasnya penelitian tentang Instruksi Diferensiasi di sekolah menengah pertama Islam bilingual di Asia Tenggara. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun DI memiliki potensi yang kuat untuk mendukung pelajar yang beragam dalam pengaturan dwibahasa, implementasinya yang efektif membutuhkan dukungan kelembagaan yang memadai dan pengembangan profesional yang berkelanjutan bagi guru.

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### *Alamat Korespondensi:*

Yulio Hady Permana

Universitas Jember, Indonesia

E-mail: [exhale040@gmail.com](mailto:exhale040@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing diversity in students' intelligence presents challenges for teachers in today's education. Teachers face these challenges in understanding and addressing individual student needs. One of the most effective strategies to solve these challenges is Differentiated Instruction (DI), which is getting much attention in research and practice. The beginning of this strategy was initially conceptualized by (Tomlinson, 2017), who recognized that students differ in terms of interest, readiness

level, and learning preferences. Thus, the flexibility of this approach makes teaching and learning student-centered rather than adopting one of the methodologies used for one-size-fits-all students; DI encourages students to embrace their instructional content, process, and assessment methods to accommodate the diverse needs of students.

In a bilingual classroom environment, especially in Islamic junior high schools, DI plays an essential role in learning, a practice currently widely encountered among multilingual learners. In this bilingual class, the class is not only characterized by linguistic diversity but also interrelated factors such as cultural factors, religion, and various differences in students in terms of their abilities in learning. According to (Kanapathy, 2024), this requires different learning with approaches and considerations of student readiness and interests, as well as students' cultural backgrounds. In this case, DI is not just a method but can function as a learning support that makes an effort to ensure that learning in the classroom is given fairly with consideration of student diversity cognitively. (Kusmawan et al., 2025) states that student involvement, autonomy, and achievement will be effective when aligning classroom learning methods with individual student abilities.

(Cha & Ahn, 2019) Support this idea that DI covers all instructional strategies, models, and tools designed to support student learning. These may include flexible grouping, continuous assignment, personalized learning plans, and formative assessments. All of the items aimed to encourage students' active participation and deep understanding of the material delivered by the teacher. This strategy can help students solve the problem of mastering in an academic context while simultaneously developing proficiency in a second language when applied in a bilingual classroom. Moreover, DI has the potential to encourage students' cognitive development and socio-emotional growth, as its DI can create a supportive learning environment that values students' diversity.

In the effective implementation of DI, educators still experience difficulties in the implementation process. This makes fulfilling the diversity of student needs a challenge educators face. Research (Cha & Ahn, 2014; Gibbs, 2023; Kupers et al., 2024) shows that implementing DI in the classroom often has systemic, institutional, and personal limitations. Challenges such as large class sizes and rigid curricula at the systemic level often reduce teachers' flexibility in DI implementation. (Cha & Ahn, 2014) emphasize that these systemic challenges often lead educators to adopt uniform teaching methods, even when educators believe in the benefits of DI practices.

Furthermore, at the institutional level, limited professional development opportunities, fewer resources, and inadequate planning time complicate DI efforts (Gibbs, 2023). Even when teachers want to create adaptive and responsive environments, schools may not offer the support in structural and administrative resources necessary to sustain such practices. At the personal level, individual teachers may lack the confidence, knowledge, or stamina to implement DI consistently. Still, many teachers are not equipped to develop multiple instructional strands with distinct criteria for teaching or grading students. Further, the emotional and physical strain associated with teaching, especially in under-resourced environments, can lead to teacher burnout and hamper innovation (Kupers et al., 2024). This is complicated in bilingual environments due to demands that often interweave religion and learning outcomes. This is not limited to linguistic diversity and double loads. This study examines how teachers in bilingual classrooms respond to DI and the obstacles and successes involved. In this study, the case is a bilingual classroom in Indonesia based on the national and Islamic curriculum. This situation is different because the two curricula offer linguistic, cultural, and religious fields. Exploring how DI is implemented in this setting can provide valuable insights for teaching inclusivity and responsibility in culturally diverse settings that support educational innovation in other multilingual Islamic schools.

The application of differentiated learning (DI) in this study focuses on the application in providing insight into the theory of multiple intelligences and constructivism theory in bilingual classes. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that constructivism is a learning process that actively builds on students' previous experiences and understandings in a dynamic and personalized process. In this case, teachers can adjust the strategies that will be used and applied in unique teaching to meet students' needs,

readiness, and profiles in learning when this principle is in line with differentiated learning. Tomlinson (2001) also emphasized that educators can design responsive teaching that involves and fosters students in their growth of abilities through differentiated instruction, which is based on a constructivist view of learning.

In addition, the theory of multiple intelligences, introduced by Gardner (2011), emphasizes how students process and interact in various ways to explore information. According to this theory, to influence their preferred learning style, each person must possess linguistic, spatial, and interpersonal intelligence. With these different intelligences and needs, educators must design differentiated learning activities and assessments that align with the previous concept. In addition, educators will be encouraged to make classroom learning practical and comfortable. Furthermore, research by Hall (2002) and Subban (2006) provides empirical evidence that greater academic achievement and motivation can be achieved through differentiated learning that considers individual student intelligence, especially in diverse classroom environments such as bilingual classes. In exploring the application of DI and its potential, these supporting theories and research will provide a strong foundation for improving student learning and abilities in bilingual classes.

Differentiated Instruction is a pedagogical approach in which educators adapt learning content, processes, and products to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). It ensures inclusive learning by meeting diverse needs. Effective differentiation integrates formative assessment to identify learning gaps and adjust learning strategies (Rock et al., 2008; Smets & Struyven, 2018). Teacher preparation and efficacy play an important role in effectively implementing DI in diverse classrooms.

Bilingual education seeks to balance the use of students' mother tongue and the target language to develop language and subject-matter competence. Bilingual programme strategies have been proven to enhance student learning in bilingual environments, especially in second-language learning. Differentiating instruction in this context helps address language diversity and promotes better academic outcomes (Van Casteren et al., 2017; Coubergs et al., 2013).

Teachers perceive DI as both an opportunity and a challenge. While it can promote inclusive learning, many teachers still struggle with its complexities due to inadequate training, heavy workloads, and heterogeneous classroom demands (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). Teachers need continuous professional development to effectively assess and adapt teaching to students' needs (Schleicher, 2016).

## METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study approach, which allows for a more detailed examination of complex and context-specific phenomena and is well-suited to the exploration of differentiated instruction (DI) in bilingual classrooms. The research design focuses on understanding learners' perspectives, experiences, and behaviors in their natural environment based on the principles of qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009). In addition, the case study design focuses on a 'bounded system' or a particular context. In this case, the opportunity to examine the unique dynamics of DI implementation will be greater, especially regarding teachers' perspectives on DI (Yin, 2014). This approach can provide a rich, nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges teachers face and can help answer the research questions. This study uses methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis to capture classroom interactions and practices that characterize the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Furthermore, adapting to themes and insights that may emerge during data collection and analysis will allow the researcher to be more flexible in her research (Stake, 1995). Qualitative case studies are invaluable in research, providing practical insights that inform practice and policy, because they allow researchers to dig deeper. The in-depth focus helps researchers identify patterns, relationships, and contextual factors that influence DI effectiveness.

This research will take place at an Islamic junior high school (Madrrasah Tsanawiyah) with 5 teachers as subjects, which offers bilingual classes as part of its curriculum. The school implements both the Kurikulum Merdeka (the national curriculum) and an Islamic studies curriculum, and also operates

under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Both curricula aim to provide students with a balanced education supporting academic achievement and religious development. The bilingual school program is designed to increase students' English language proficiency while preserving their cultural and religious identity. These reflect the national goal of producing globally competent learners who are spiritually rooted in their faith (Azra, 2012; Hamied, 2012). To validate the data, this study used classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, which will be presented below:

To find out how classroom observations are carried out, researchers systematically observe, record, and involve teachers in the direct implementation of DI strategies. By using this method, researchers are able to analyze teaching practices directly, such as how lessons are adjusted to meet the needs of diverse students, observe teacher engagement in the classroom, and teacher interactions. For example, a researcher wants to know in a structured way how teachers adopt material content for effective learning process activities to facilitate students' diverse abilities through important aspects such as how students participate during learning, class dynamics and teaching techniques and methods that will ensure consistent data collection in accordance with observation guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The application of DI using this observation will make it easier for researchers to understand and explore data in more depth and detail than is revealed in the interview sessions conducted by researchers with teachers during the learning process in class.

In this study, researchers used semi-structured interviews with 5 teachers. The aim was to find out how teachers' perceptions and experiences are when implementing DI. To gain a deeper understanding, researchers also combined previously prepared questions with flexible questions that might detail their understanding of their perspectives (Merriam, 2009). The interview questions have been aligned with the study's focus and adjusted accordingly. Thus, researchers document their findings on how teachers share insights, benefits, and challenges of using DI in the classroom. This approach reveals diverse perspectives among bilingual teachers, and it is expected to have a positive impact on the pedagogy of English language learning.

Document analysis by reviewing the learning modules, such as time allocation, lesson plans, student worksheets, and teacher and student reflections in each lesson, as evidence that the teacher is using the DI strategy correctly. This method offers differentiated learning in planning and implementing it in the classroom. For example, a teacher's lesson plan reveals how the content is adjusted to students' English language abilities and highlights the use of tasks to meet different knowledge levels, or even teaching materials designed to meet different learning styles. However, document analysis complements the data collection method by providing real and concrete examples of DI practices in the classroom, interpreting the context, and verifying the findings of observations and interviews (Bowen, 2009). With this statement, this study can dig deeper into how the implementation of DI in bilingual classes integrates and ensures the depth of data and the validity of the findings.

Thematic analysis will be used to identify the main themes and patterns related to the impact of DI and its implementation. This approach involves interpreting findings, creating themes, and coding data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the data coding stage, for all data, such as interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents, the researcher will read and re-read all the data to deepen the analysis. In contextualising the findings and including direct quotes from teachers and students, the researcher will draw on existing literature on DI to address differences in data sources. In theme creation, the researcher needs to refine steps, such as ensuring coherence in reviewing coded data within each theme and in presenting participants' experiences by examining the entire data set to confirm the validity of the theme (Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, the researcher will interpret the findings for the final report, which will involve writing a detailed narrative that increases trustworthiness and authenticity by illustrating each direct quote from students with the theme. During this interpretation process, the researcher will also connect the themes to existing literature relevant to DI and bilingual education.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Teachers' Understanding in Planning Differentiated Instruction

This section examines teachers' understanding of Differentiated Instruction (DI) during planning in bilingual classrooms at an Islamic junior high school. Planning is a foundational component of DI, as it shapes how instruction responds to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. The interview data indicate that teachers possess a strong conceptual understanding of DI and view learner diversity as a central consideration in instructional planning.

AF emphasized that DI requires teachers to assume responsibility for adapting the curriculum to meet individual student needs rather than applying uniform instructional approaches: "*The principle of differentiated education is that if we understand it well, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the curriculum is tailored to each student's readiness, interests, and learning profile.*" (Extract 1, AF)

This perspective reflects Tomlinson's (2014) core principle that differentiation begins with teacher responsiveness to learner variability. In bilingual Islamic classrooms, such responsiveness is particularly critical, as students differ not only in cognitive readiness but also in language proficiency and cultural background. AF's focus on student motivation further aligns with constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active process shaped by learners' prior experiences (Vygotsky, 1978).

Similarly, AT highlighted the importance of systematic assessment prior to instruction: "*It is important to do the test first. It orders us to understand the needs and abilities of students, as well as how they learn in the most effective way.*" (Extract 2, AT)

This finding supports existing research that positions diagnostic assessment as a cornerstone of effective DI planning (Rock et al., 2008; Smets & Struyven, 2018). Through pre-assessment, teachers can anticipate learning challenges and design instruction that accommodates both content mastery and language development, an essential consideration in bilingual contexts.

The emphasis on diagnostic testing was further reinforced by HS, who described how teachers categorize students based on prior knowledge: "*We use diagnostic tests so that we can understand... this child doesn't understand anything, this one already understands half of it.*" (Extract 3, HS)

This practice corresponds with assessment-driven differentiation, where instructional decisions are continuously informed by student data (Cha & Ahn, 2014). Such an approach allows teachers to respond to actual learner needs rather than assumptions, thereby enhancing instructional precision. In addition to formal assessments, teachers also utilized digital tools and observation to identify students' learning profiles. AF explained: "*There are tests for talents, interests, majors, and learning profiles... After the initial observation, you should ask the students what they need.*" (Extract 4, AF)

This finding highlights the role of technology in supporting differentiated planning. Previous studies suggest that digital platforms can enhance personalization and learner engagement by providing teachers with richer data about students' preferences and abilities (Coubergs et al., 2013). Involving students in articulating their learning needs also reflects a learner-centered approach that promotes autonomy and ownership of learning (Tomlinson, 2014).

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers demonstrate a well-developed theoretical understanding of DI planning. Their use of diagnostic assessment, observation, and learner input illustrates a deliberate effort to align instruction with learner diversity. This contributes to the literature by offering empirical insight into DI planning within a bilingual Islamic educational context, which remains underrepresented in Southeast Asian research.

### Teachers' Practices in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

This section discusses how teachers translate their understanding of DI into classroom practice. Implementation represents a critical phase in which planning decisions are enacted within real teaching situations. The findings reveal that teachers apply DI flexibly, adapting content, process, and product based on classroom conditions and student needs.

SIM explained that differentiation strategies are embedded within lesson plans or teaching modules: "*After analyzing the needs of the students, we must determine what we need... it is explained in the teaching module.*" (Extract 5, SIM)

This finding indicates that lesson planning functions as a practical bridge between theory and instruction. According to Tomlinson (2014), well-structured lesson plans enable teachers to anticipate learner variability and prepare multiple learning pathways. In bilingual classrooms, such planning supports the balance between content instruction and language scaffolding.

ES described the use of flexible grouping and instructional adaptation: *“If they are a group, then we only need to group them... if it is content, I will review it.”* (Extract 6, ES) Flexible grouping is widely recognized as an effective DI strategy for addressing diverse learner needs (Rock et al., 2008). In bilingual settings, this approach also facilitates peer support and collaborative language learning (Van Casteren et al., 2017).

HS emphasized that teachers exercise professional judgment when selecting differentiation strategies: *“Is it possible to only apply one? Yes, it is possible.”* (Extract 7, HS) This finding aligns with research suggesting that DI implementation is often selective and context-dependent rather than comprehensive (Gibbs, 2023). Teachers adapt strategies based on practical constraints such as time, curriculum demands, and classroom dynamics.

Ongoing assessment and reflection were also evident in teachers’ practices. ES explained how classroom observations inform regrouping decisions: *“This child is not very active... in the next grouping, I might group them with other groups.”* (Extract 8, ES) Such practices reflect formative assessment in action, a key feature of responsive teaching (Smets & Struyven, 2018). Continuous monitoring allows teachers to adjust instruction in real time, thereby enhancing learner engagement.

AT further described adapting instruction based on students’ abilities: *“If they are capable, I will give them the material; however, if they are not capable, I will give them the material with different teaching methods.”* (Extract 9, AT)

This approach reflects differentiated scaffolding, which supports learners at varying proficiency levels without lowering expectations (Cha & Ahn, 2014). In bilingual classrooms, such adaptation is essential to ensure that language barriers do not hinder conceptual understanding.

### **Opportunities and Challenges of Differentiated Instruction**

Teachers reported several positive outcomes associated with DI implementation, particularly in terms of students’ emotional well-being and learning engagement. SIM noted that DI reduced students’ stress and enhanced learning outcomes: *“Since they are not tense... they are expected to demonstrate their own abilities.”* (Extract 10, SIM)

This finding supports research indicating that DI can lower affective barriers and promote supportive learning environments (Roy et al., 2013). Reduced anxiety is especially valuable in bilingual classrooms, where language use often increases cognitive and emotional pressure. Teachers also observed gradual improvements in students’ attitudes and understanding. SIM stated: *“After one or two months, there were changes in their attitude and their understanding.”* (Extract 11, SIM) This aligns with Deunk et al. (2018), who found that sustained differentiated practices contribute to long-term engagement and deeper learning.

HS highlighted the inclusive nature of DI: *“It will undoubtedly provide an inclusive learning environment that is in line with needs and abilities.”* (Extract 12, HS) This perception reinforces Tomlinson’s (2014) argument that DI promotes educational equity by valuing learner diversity—an approach that aligns well with the ethical principles emphasized in Islamic education.

Despite these benefits, challenges were also identified. AT noted that DI preparation is time-consuming: *“Preparation for differentiation is quite time consuming.”* (Extract 13, AT) This finding echoes international research identifying time constraints as a major barrier to DI implementation (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018; Gibbs, 2023). Additionally, ES highlighted challenges related to student compliance: *“There are definitely one or two who don’t want to follow directions.”* (Extract 14, ES)

This suggests the need for clear scaffolding and classroom routines, particularly in differentiated and bilingual contexts where language comprehension may affect task execution (Cha & Ahn, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the implementation of Differentiation (DI) education in multilingual classrooms at the first Islamic school. Findings indicate that teachers understand the fundamental principles of education and apply them diligently, enhancing students' learning profiles, readiness, and interest throughout instruction. Depending on student needs and school conditions, DI is implemented freely through differences in content, process, and product. This implementation contributes to positive learning outcomes, such as increased student engagement, increased engagement, and more inclusive classroom environments. However, factors such as the time required to complete assignments and difficulties in identifying students are also considered.

In summary, this study adds to the body of research that is currently lacking on DI in the context of multilingual Islamic schools in Southeast Asia. This indicates that although DI has great potential to support a variety of learning styles, its effective implementation requires significant time, institutional support, and professional development for teachers.

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