

**INVESTIGATING TEACHERS' PERCEIVED CHALLENGES
IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AS
MANDATED BY *KURIKULUM MERDEKA***

THESIS

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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Differentiated Instruction As Mandated By *Kurikulum Merdeka***

Adalah benar-benar karya saya, kecuali semua kutipan dan referensi yang
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maka akan sepenuhnya menjadi tanggung jawab saya. Demikianlah surat
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Saya yang membuat pernyataan



Risha Seftiana Situmorang

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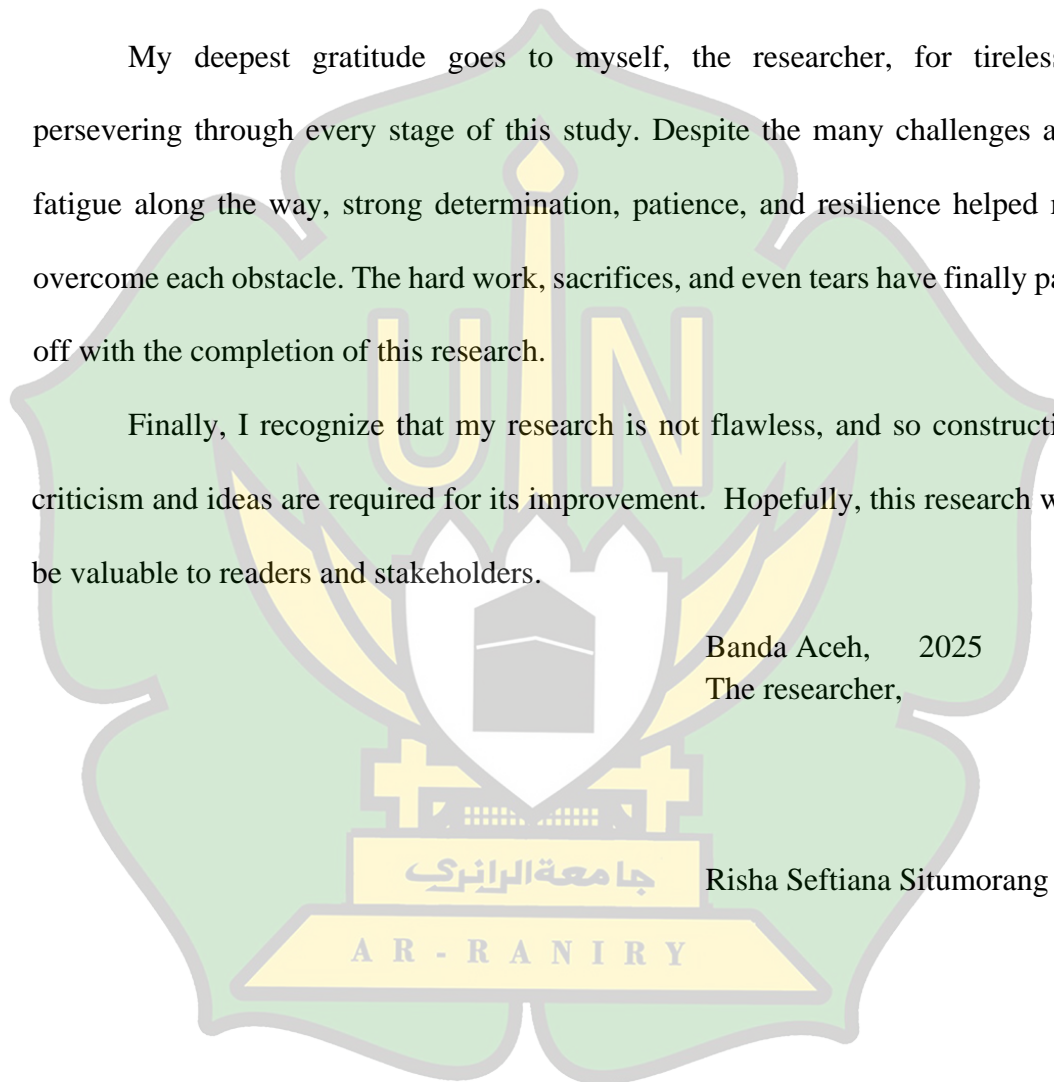
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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the perceived challenges experienced by English teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI) as mandated by the Kurikulum Merdeka at MAN 6 Aceh Besar. Differentiated Instruction, which aims to address students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, is a core strategy within the student-centered framework of the new curriculum. Despite its potential to improve educational inclusivity and learning outcomes, the implementation of DI faces several obstacles in real classroom settings. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research involved semi-structured interviews with three English teachers. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that the main challenges include limited understanding and training on DI, time constraints in lesson planning and delivery, inadequate learning resources, and student misconceptions about fairness. Teachers also noted a gap between the theory of DI and its practical application. To overcome these challenges, the participants emphasized the importance of continuous professional development, collaboration among teachers, administrative support from schools, and access to varied learning materials. This study contributes to a better understanding of how differentiated practices can be more effectively supported and implemented in Indonesian classrooms, particularly within the framework of Kurikulum Merdeka.

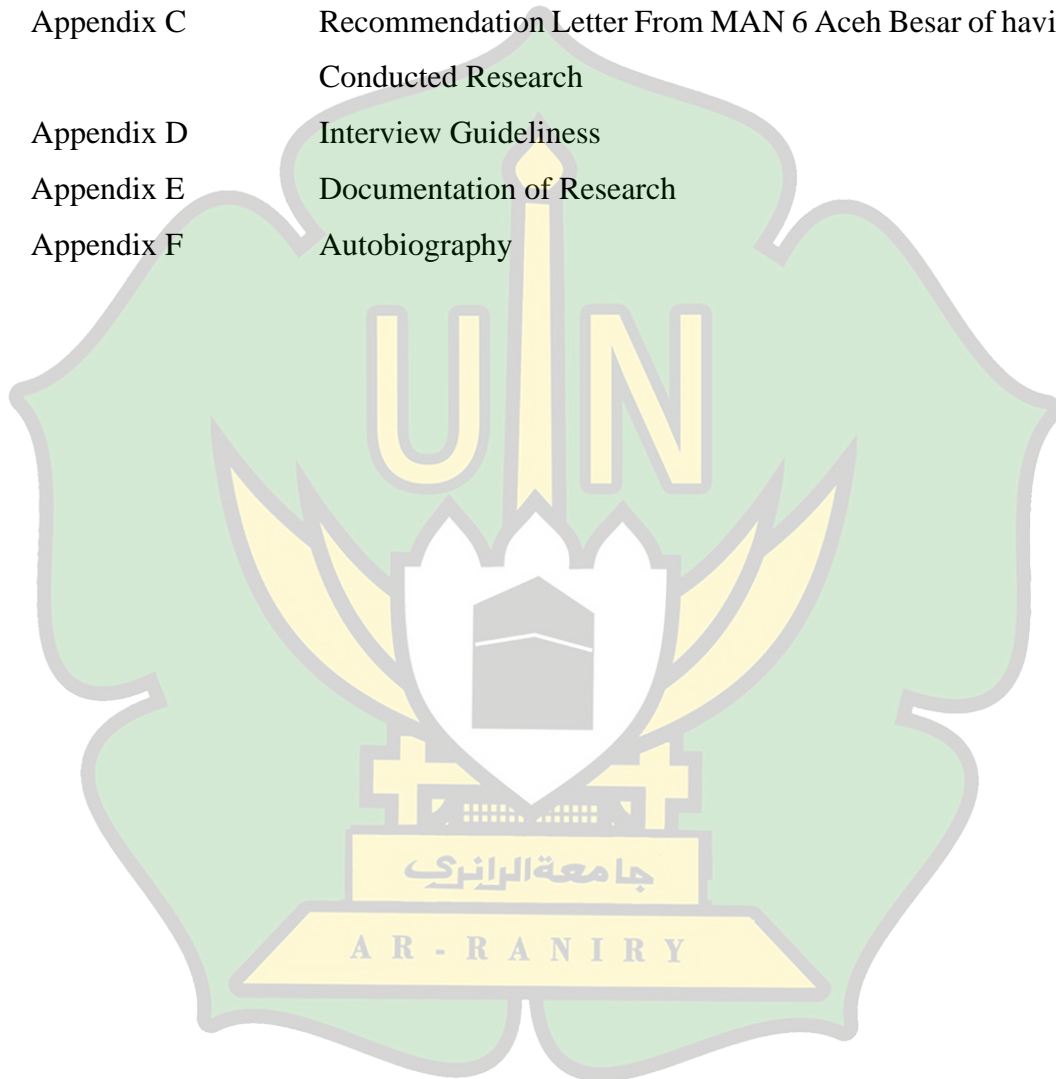
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the study

Education in Indonesia is currently undergoing a significant period of transformation in response to the demands of the 21st century and the increasingly diverse needs of students. One of the most notable innovations in this reform is the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka, officially launched in 2021. This curriculum represents a shift towards greater teacher autonomy and student-centered learning, with a focus on flexibility, contextual relevance, and the development of essential 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving.

The Kurikulum Merdeka is designed to address the challenges of globalization and the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution while remaining rooted in local values and culture. One of its core principles is the implementation of differentiated instruction, an approach that seeks to tailor teaching methods, content, and assessment strategies according to students' individual readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. In theory, this model aims to foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment that can enhance student motivation and academic outcomes.

In the context of English language education, differentiated instruction is especially pertinent. As English serves not only as a subject but also as a tool for global communication, it requires both teachers and students to engage in dynamic

and interactive learning processes. However, despite its promising goals, the implementation of differentiated instruction under the Kurikulum Merdeka presents a variety of challenges, particularly for English teachers.

Several studies have highlight that many teachers feel unprepared to apply the principles of differentiated instruction. According to Lailiyah and Mas'ud (2023), key barriers include difficulties in understanding and applying differentiation strategies, limited infrastructure, and a lack of suitable pedagogical models. Furthermore, insufficient training and weak institutional support are identified as major impediments to effective implementation.

In addition, Supriana et al. (2024) identified eight major challenges faced by teachers in practicing differentiated instruction, including time constraints, the need for additional human resources, the complexity of lesson planning, large class sizes, teacher anxiety and distrust, students' perceptions of unequal treatment, limited applicable topics, and communication barriers among diverse learners.

Similarly, Rahmawati I (2023) emphasizes that despite the availability of various instructional strategies, many teachers continue to struggle with practical implementation due to time limitations and a lack of preparedness in designing individualized learning activities and modules. Recent research by Mardiah and Fernandes (2025) further reveals that many educators' understanding of differentiated instruction remains ambiguous, leading them to rely on traditional teaching models. The study also finds that most schools have yet to commit seriously to implementing differentiated practices, and that existing facilities are often inadequate to support such approaches.

Beyond teacher-related concerns, student readiness is also a crucial consideration. Differentiated instruction within the Kurikulum Merdeka is often linked to project-based learning (PBL), which requires students to take greater ownership of their learning, engage in collaborative tasks, and solve real-world problems. However, research by English and Kitsantas (2013) shows that project-based learning can effectively support student engagement and achievement when teachers are able to design flexible learning experiences. Their study highlights that successful implementation requires teachers to adapt instruction to students' diverse needs, which aligns closely with the principles of differentiated instruction.

In this regard, the teacher's role as a facilitator becomes increasingly important. Teachers are expected not only to deliver content, but also to guide students in developing critical and creative thinking skills. Hidayat and Patras (2024) underscore the need for professional development programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills to foster active participation and student engagement.

To overcome these challenges, some educators have adopted collaborative approaches, such as professional learning communities, where teachers share experiences, resources, and solutions to common problems. Findings by Hidayat and Patras (2024) suggest that such collaboration enhances teacher competence and morale, creating a more supportive professional environment.

Technology integration has also emerged as a critical tool in supporting differentiated instruction. Platforms like Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and applications such as Kahoot and Quizizz enable more interactive and engaging

lessons. Faznur et al. (2020) argue that technology not only enriches instructional delivery but also serves as an effective tool for formative assessment, allowing for real-time feedback and personalized learning paths.

Formative evaluation is an essential component of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*, as it allows teachers to monitor student progress continuously and adjust their instruction accordingly. According to Achmad et al. (2022), ongoing assessments help identify learning gaps early and enable targeted interventions, thus creating a dynamic feedback loop between teaching and learning.

Policy-level support is also vital in ensuring the success of this curriculum. Sinulingga et al. (2022) highlight the importance of collaboration among formal and non-formal educational institutions, as well as government support in providing adequate infrastructure and professional development opportunities. Furthermore, Widyastuti et al. (2023) stress the need for systematic data-driven evaluations of the curriculum's impact on student achievement to ensure it remains relevant and effective.

The success of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* also depends on school leadership and institutional culture. Subagio et al. (2023) find that principals who actively support teaching innovation positively influence teaching quality and student performance. Meanwhile, Andriani and Firdaus (2023) emphasize that a school culture fostering creativity, collaboration, and reflection plays a critical role in supporting educational transformation.

Moreover, parental involvement is another essential factor. Research by Yuliani, Sari, and Rahman (2023) shows that students whose parents are actively

involved in the learning process tend to achieve better academic outcomes. Their study emphasizes that parental support, alongside the collaboration of teachers and students, is fundamental to the effective implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

Finally, effective implementation of differentiated instruction requires teachers to develop a deep understanding of each student's unique characteristics. As stated by Hartono and Surya (2023), personalized learning strategies contribute significantly to meaningful learning experiences and improved academic achievement. However, this requires substantial training and professional development to ensure that teachers can accommodate diversity in their classrooms.

Although previous studies have discussed the challenges of implementing differentiated instruction such as time constraints, lack of training, and limited resources most of them remain general in scope and do not specifically examine English teachers' perspectives. In particular, little is known about how English teachers perceive and navigate the implementation of differentiated instruction under the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. This absence of focus leaves an important gap in the literature, as English language teaching presents unique demands in terms of student diversity, curriculum expectations, and classroom practice. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by investigating English teachers' perceptions of the obstacles they encounter and the strategies they employ in applying differentiated instruction as mandated by the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and sustainable implementation strategies for future curriculum development.

B. Research Questions

From the description above, the researcher formulates the problem formulation as follows :

1. What are the perceptions of English teachers in using Differentiated Instruction in their classrooms?
2. What challenges faced by English teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction ?
3. What solutions used by English teachers in overcoming the challenges?

C. The Aims of Study

The aims of this study are:

1. To investigate English teachers' perceptions of using differentiated instruction in their classrooms.
2. To identify the challenges faced by English teachers in implementing differentiated instruction within the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka.
3. To explore the solutions and strategies employed by English teachers to overcome these challenges.

D. Significance of Study

The result of the study is expected to give contributions as follows:

1. For Teachers

This study helps English teachers understand challenges in implementing the DI and offers practical strategies to improve teaching effectiveness. It highlights solutions to enhance lesson planning, classroom management, and professional development.

2. For Students

By addressing teaching challenges, this research indirectly improves students' learning experiences. It ensures a more tailored and engaging learning environment, promoting critical thinking and holistic development in line with curriculum goals.

3. For Researchers

The study provides a foundation for future research on curriculum implementation, particularly in local contexts. It contributes empirical data, highlights practical gaps, and fosters comparative studies in educational reforms.

E. Terminology

The terminology utilized in this study will be explicitly specified as follows:

1. Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) in this study refers to an instructional approach that proactively modifies the content, process, product, or learning environment based on students' individual readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. The concept of DI is grounded in the belief that students learn in different ways and that effective instruction must be flexible to address these variations (Tomlinson, 2014).

In the context of the Kurikulum Merdeka, DI is not only recommended but mandated as part of a student-centered learning paradigm. Teachers are expected to adjust their teaching strategies to meet the diverse academic, emotional, and social needs of students. This involves designing lessons that offer multiple paths to learning, such as varying levels of complexity in assignments, providing choices

in learning tasks, and using different assessment formats to measure learning outcomes (Hartono & Surya, 2023).

Moreover, DI is implemented with the goal of promoting equity in education, allowing each student to access the curriculum in a way that is most meaningful and effective for them. It demands that teachers engage in ongoing formative assessment to monitor student progress and make instructional decisions accordingly (Achmad et al., 2022).

In this study, DI specifically refers to how English teachers interpret, understand, and apply differentiated strategies in their teaching practice under the framework of the Kurikulum Merdeka. It includes their ability to plan lessons that reflect differentiation principles, manage diverse classrooms, and assess student progress through varied approaches. The focus is on the perceived challenges faced by these teachers in translating the theoretical foundation of DI into practical classroom action.

2. Solutions

To overcome the challenges of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka, the most important solution is to increase teacher training, which must be done on an ongoing basis. Hands-on training programs that emphasize practical experience in the field are essential for teachers to understand and master the skills needed to implement the new curriculum. This training should include materials on projectbased learning, formative assessment, and the use of technology in education, all of which are part of the more flexible and contextualized approach of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Maba & Mantra, 2018; Ayçiçek, 2021).

In addition, it is important for governments and schools to provide adequate support resources, both in terms of teaching materials and infrastructure. Providing teaching materials that are appropriate to local characteristics and technology-based can improve the effectiveness of learning. The use of digital media and online learning platforms can help overcome access limitations in remote areas, so that all students have an equal opportunity to receive a quality education. It also reduces reliance on traditional textbooks, which do not always meet the needs of adaptive education in the digital era (Ilma et al., 2023; Gunawan, 2017).

Another effective solution is to strengthen collaboration among teachers at the school level and among schools at the regional level. This collaboration allows teachers to share experiences, challenges and solutions they have encountered during the process of implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. The formation of teacher learning communities can enrich teaching practices and accelerate the adaptation to the new curriculum. In addition, peer support in the form of mentoring can also help new teachers develop their teaching skills, thereby accelerating the process of adapting to change (Fifani et al., 2023; Jonker et al., 2019).

By adopting this inclusive and collaborative approach, it is hoped that the Kurikulum Merdeka can be more successfully implemented across Indonesia. Support from various stakeholders, including the government, schools, and communities, is key to achieving significant and sustainable educational change. As a result, the learning process will be more relevant to the times and able to produce learners who are prepared to face global challenges (Maba & Mantra, 2018; Hidayah et al., 2022).

3. Kurikulum Merdeka

The Kurikulum Merdeka is an educational innovation designed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology to provide flexibility to teachers and students in the learning process. This curriculum is designed to be more responsive to the needs of the times, competency-based, and to prepare students for global challenges. In addition, the Kurikulum Merdeka removes rigid boundaries in learning methods so that teachers can design learning activities according to the characteristics of students and their local environment (Hidayah et al., 2022; Kemdikbud, 2022).

As part of the educational transformation, the Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on developing the Pancasila Learner Profile, which emphasizes values such as integrity, critical thinking, gotong royong, and self-reliance. This is done through a project-based learning approach that allows students to learn from practical experiences relevant to their daily lives. In practice, this approach not only increases student engagement, but also instills the analytical skills needed in today's digital age (Ilma et al., 2023; Ayçiçek, 2021).

However, the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka has not been without its critics, especially with regard to the disparity in educational facilities between urban and rural areas. Teachers in resource-poor areas often face challenges in accessing relevant training and teaching materials. Therefore, it is important for the government to ensure an equitable distribution of facilities to support this curriculum to achieve the goal of educational equity (Gunawan, 2017; Fifani et al., 2023).

In general, Kurikulum Merdeka is a progressive step in Indonesian education, but its success depends on how consistently the policy is implemented across regions. Ongoing technical support and teacher training are needed to ensure that every teacher can understand and apply the curriculum optimally. It also emphasizes the importance of synergy between government, schools and communities to support an inclusive and innovative education transition (Maba & Mantra, 2018; Hidayah et al., 2022).

