

# Experiencing Differentiated Instructions as the Effort of Promoting Reading Comprehension Level

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## Abstract

The current study explored the usefulness of differentiated instruction in the promotion of English learners reading comprehension in higher educational system. One TOEFL preparation class of a language center at University of Muhammadiyah Jember was chosen as the research participants. The students were taught through the strategies of differentiated instruction, viz. flexible grouping, tiered instruction, and tiered assignments, in the areas of content, process, and product. The outcomes of descriptive statistics from comparing pre-test and post-test results indicated that the students were having a positive experience with differentiated instruction in relation to their reading comprehension level. Further, the results also revealed that students also performed better in literal and inferential reading comprehension after experiencing differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, reading comprehension.

For many years, constructing a specific instruction based on the learner's needs has been the main focus of educators and instructional designers (Summerville, 1999; Raven et.al., 1993). Basically, it comes from a very simple logic, a logic based on a fact that each individual must be different in every aspects of their profile as learners. There has been many research and theories over the individual differences of learning. Felder and Brent (2005) specifically point out three facets of students' diversity; learning styles, approaches to learning and orientation to studying, and intellectual development.

Learning styles has been attributed to a variety of student's differences. Some students prefer studying in a quiet environment while others can fully digest the material with headphones on their ears. Some students like visual presentation of information and others lean more on verbal explanations. Still, one

learning style can never be superior against the others, nor that it is more preferable than other styles. Simply saying, they are just different, with different weaknesses and strengths.

Entwistle (1988) propounds the view that approaches to learning can be classified into three ways; surface approach, where learners tend to just copy the information with little or no effort to understand the material (reproduction orientation), deep approach, in which learners probing, questioning and exploring the material (meaning orientation), and strategic approach, which is effectively applies the previous two approaches to get the highest score. In intellectual development, learners are considered to have different level of progress, proficiency and knowledge. Teachers, in this case, have to systematically construct an instruction providing the learners a chance to reach the highest level of their proficiency and knowledge. Ideally, Teachers need to consider

each aspects of their students' profile when designing the instruction. On logical grounds, there is no compelling reason to argue that learners' differences lead to different needs and, thus, require a variety of treatment.

Differentiation is based on a set of beliefs that (a) students who are at the same age differ in their readiness to learn, their experiences, and their life circumstances, (b) the differences are significant enough to impact what students learn, how fast they learn, and also the support they need from teachers, (c) students will be able to learn at their best if connections can be made between the curriculum and their interests or life experiences, (d) it is the teachers' duty to do their best effort to maximize each student's learning. Thus, it can be said that differentiated instruction is proactive, dynamic, student centered and rooted in assessment. Differentiated instruction also emphasizes multiple approaches to teaching content and the use of flexible grouping (Tomlinson, 1999).

Differentiated instruction is a concept that is closely related to adaptive teaching. However, it is more detailed. By using differentiated instruction as an approach in designing a course or lesson, teachers will be able to strategically meet the needs of every students. Teachers can strategically and effectively differentiate any element used in classroom teaching, like content, assessment tools, performance tasks, or instructional strategies (Smit and Humper, 2012). Research suggested that differentiated instruction can benefit students with a wide range of ability levels (Neber, Finsterwald, & Urban, 2001; Clark, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999), as well as learning styles, also cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Convery & Coyle, 1993). However, there has never been any research that explores the effectiveness of differentiated instruction to Indonesian English language learners (ELL) ability, especially in their reading comprehension level.

Differentiated instruction is grounded in cognitive psychology and is supported by

research on student achievement. Differentiated instruction has four guiding principles to help teacher in designing their lessons. Those are (1) a focus on essential ideas and skills in content areas, (2) responsiveness to individual student differences, (3) the integration of assessment and instruction, (4) an ongoing adjustment of content, process and products to meet individual needs (Tomlinson, 1999). Teachers who differentiate instruction believe that all students are unique and have different learning styles and preferences for learning. They also believe that the curriculum is a driving force in what students learn, therefore, for the purpose of addressing the students who have learning problems, teacher must have the competence to modify, expand or enrich the curriculum with appropriate learning experiences that acknowledge students' strength, rather than their incompetence in learning (Noble, 2004). Teacher should also be able to provide students with choice to develop products, maximizing the students' involvement in the process of learning that will later expand their knowledge. In general, teachers must be able to adjust the curriculum to maximize learning for all the students (Anderson, 2007).

The goal of differentiated instruction is to ensure that teachers focus on process and procedures that promote effective learning for varied individuals (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Therefore, Teachers should be able to design a good lesson that could meet the specific needs of each students through a carefully arranged instructions and materials. Tomlinson's framework for differentiating the activities and tasks in the classroom is based on Content (what the teacher provides as learning input), Product (what the students are expected to produce) and Process (how the teacher has structured the activity). It has been widely used by educators to organize the many different ways an activity can be modified to accommodate different learners.

Furthermore, Smit and Humpert (2012) give a more elaborative explanation on the characteristics of a differentiated classroom

as a classroom where:

1. The teacher attends to the students' differences,
2. A formative assessment assist in identifying the next learning sequence,
3. The teacher modifies content, process and product in accordance with the learners' needs,
4. The teacher and students collaborate in learning process.
5. Differentiated instruction focuses on whom we teach, where we teach, and how we teach.

A comprehensive model of differentiated instructions proposed by Tomlinson (2005) is selected as a framework for this research because it is well established and mostly cited within the literature (Hall et al., 2003). For Tomlinson (2005), the core of differentiated instruction is generally a systematic way to conceptualize the process of teaching and learning such that each student's learning needs are considered and, hopefully, each student's learning potential and outcomes are maximized. Some of the principles that should be established for the purpose of creating an effective and defensible differentiation are as follows.

1. Respecting each student as individual
2. Assuming responsibility for the success of each student
3. Building a positive classroom community
4. Providing high quality curriculum
5. Using continual and varied assessment to inform instruction
6. Demonstrating flexibility with classroom routines and resources
7. Sharing responsibility for teaching and learning
8. Ensuring that all students have equally important and engaging tasks
9. Creating varied avenues to learning

Within the context above, Tomlinson's model suggests that teacher's knowledge of students' interest, readiness, and learning profile characteristics should be appropriately used to differentiate content, product, process and learning environment.

In relation with reading, Early and Sawyer (1991) explain that reading as reasoning is more than seeking meaning, connecting meanings with words the writer uses, the reader draws on prior knowledge to compose meaning suggested by the text. The closer the writer's intentions and experiences are to the reader's purpose and prior knowledge the more closely the reader's "composed meaning" will match the writer's intended message. In addition, Wilson and Grambrell in Manzo and Manzo (1995) state that reading comprehension is the process of using one's own experiences and text clues to infer the author's intended meaning. From that, we can say that reading comprehension is mostly based on one's interpretation on the text combining with one's prior knowledge. In other words, students create meaning by constructing or generating relationships between what is within the text and what they already know. So, the meaning that the readers make depends on what both the reader and the author bring the text.

Kruidenier (2002) gives a perception that reading comprehension can be described as understanding a text that is read, or the process of constructing meaning from the text. Furthermore, Lapp et.al (2004) states that being able to comprehend and critically respond to what is being read depends on the reader's ability to engage background knowledge about the text's topic and the language used and to apply skills and strategies to decode and assign meaning to words with a level of fluency that supports meaning making. Texts can be divided into three types for comprehension purposes; textually explicit, textually implicit, and implicit only (Vaughn & Thompson, 2004). Consequently, reading comprehension cannot be separated from gaining the message of the text, whether it is explicit or implicit. It is very

important to know how well the students get the information from the text. The more they find the information in the text, the better they understand the text. It deals with the students' achievement in comprehending the text. Furthermore, the process of constructing meaning from the text is quite challenging because it involves many skills that readers will have to work more to be able to comprehend texts. Harris and Hodges (Block et.al, 2004) states that to understand text, reader must comprehend the literal meaning printed on the page, Interpret authors' implied meanings, and Evaluate and apply ideas in printed materials to their lives. To ensure that students able to work with their comprehension, teacher, therefore, should accommodate all their students' needs and differences with a suitable treatment. Differentiated instruction, in this case, might be a good strategy to assist teachers differentiating their students' needs and differences in promoting their reading comprehension to a better level.

In recent years, the idea of one-size-fits-all instruction has been criticized by authors and researchers (e.g. Heacox, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999) and multitude studies proved the efficacy of various strategies of differentiated instruction on the students' achievement; yet, the majority of teachers in Indonesia employ the traditional methods of teaching and no differentiation is incorporated in EFL classrooms. Therefore, the investigation of differentiated instruction and its efficacy in the attainment of Indonesian English language learners will fill the gap between instruction and learning. A primary aim of the present study was to clarify whether incorporating differentiation among Indonesian English language learners could enhance the students' reading comprehension more favorably in comparison with traditional-based teaching. Hence, the study sought answer for the following research questions:

To what extent implementing differentiated instruction impact the promotion of Indonesian English language

learners' reading comprehension, either in literal and inferential comprehension level?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The participants of the study were chosen from The Language center of Muhammadiyah University of Jember, Indonesia. There were one TOEFL preparation class (B class) selected as the participants for this study. Before taking the TOEFL course, the students of this class had little exposure to English because they were actually taking Biology Education as their major at the university. The students of this class attended the classroom on Mondays every week. The time allocated for every session of the two classes was 90 minutes. The participants in the classroom were comprised of 26 students, 15 females and 11 male. Additionally, one qualified teachers with three years of experience of teaching English in EFL context implemented the strategies in the control and experimental group.

### *Instruments*

Two achievement tests were used as the instrument. For each of the achievement test, 15 literal and 15 inferential questions were included in the test instrument. All the questions used in this research were taken from the TOEFL test. Therefore, it also helped in maintaining the validity and reliability of the test instrument. All students participated in this research were asked to do a pretest as well as a posttest during the research. The goal of the pretest and the posttest was to investigate the achievement of the students after the study.

### *Procedure*

This study applied the design of descriptive research. To provide answer for

the research question, one TOEFL preparation class of the Language Center at University of Muhammadiyah Jember, Indonesia were chosen as the research participants. The study started in October 2016, as soon as the researcher found participants and the Head of the language center concurred with performing the study. The researcher together with experienced and qualified teacher of the language center realized the appropriate complementary materials and books for students. Then, in two sessions the teachers became familiar with the essential components of differentiated instruction and were trained to implementing the strategies. The teachers were asked to deliver instruction in four sessions and take a final exam in the

## Result and Discussion

The students gained a significant increase from the pretest to the posttest. The total average score they have for the pretest is 63 and posttest is 84. Consequently, it confirms that differentiated instruction gave a positive experience for the students in relation to their reading comprehension level in general. With all the effort done by the instructor to differentiate the instructions based on the students' competence, the result was satisfying. Considering that all the questions used as the research instrument were taken from the TOEFL, there was no doubt that the difficulty level of the questions was high (see figure 1).

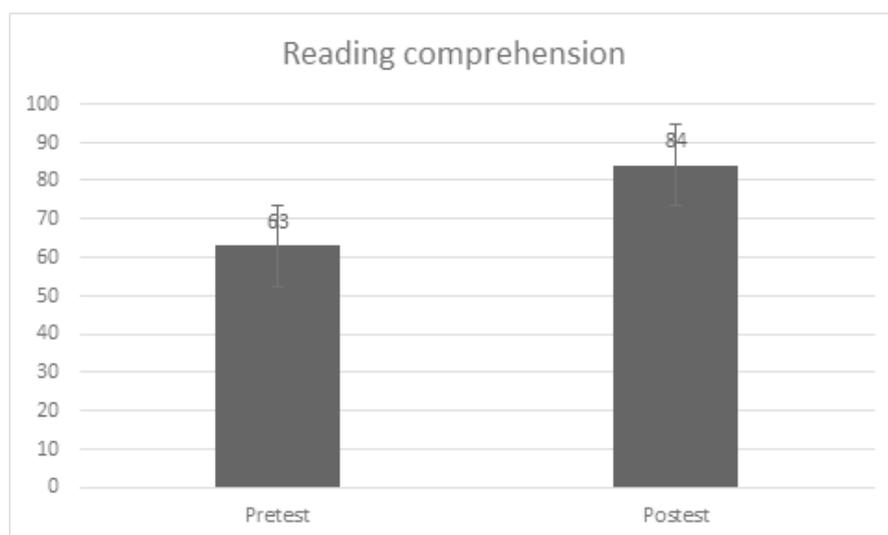


Figure 1. Total Average Score of Reading Comprehension from Pretest and Posttest

last session of the class. To analyze the results of this research, descriptive statistics is applied. The total average score from the research participants was compared based on the pretest and posttest score. For literal and inferential comprehension, the exact same procedure was applied after dividing the score based on the literal questions and inferential questions score.

The increase of the post test score in comparison to the pretest from 58 to 68. In line to the result of the students' reading comprehension, the result of literal reading comprehension seemed to also support differentiated instruction as a good strategy to be implemented for promoting the students' literal comprehension. Considering the convincing result, the researcher believe that with more time given for the instruction to

be implemented in the classroom we would gain a more profound and remarkable insight over the positive experience of differentiated instruction to the students' literal reading comprehension level (see figure 2).

taken from the TOEFL, all the positive results described previously were very satisfying. Moreover, the students were also able to gain a positive results in their inferential reading comprehension which is, by any means, is

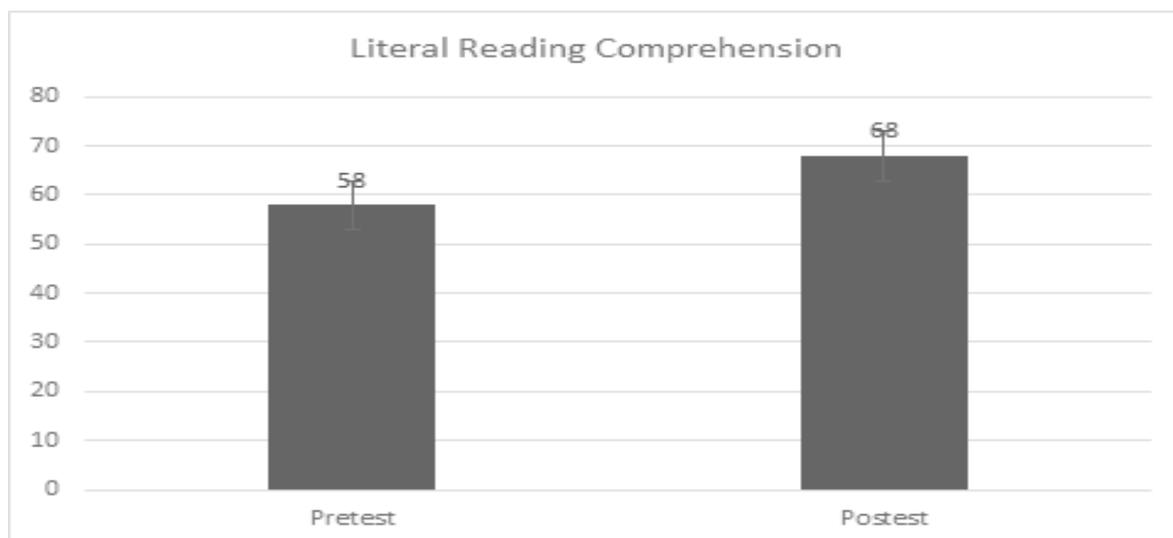


Figure 2. Total Average Scores of Literal Reading Comprehension in Pretest and Posttest

In figure 3, the average score of the research participants follows the positive trend gained in reading comprehension and literal comprehension, there was an increase in the students' inferential comprehension average score which is about 8 points. Thus, the result confirmed that differentiated instructions strategy gives a very positive experience for the students in relation to their reading comprehension level, both in their literal and inferential reading comprehension.

The results reported in the previous section are interesting. Regarding the result on reading comprehension, the result helps us to understand about the efficacy of differentiated instruction on students' reading comprehension. In line to that, the result of the students pretest and posttest in literal and inferential reading comprehension were also positive. Considering the fact that all the questions used as the research instrument were

more difficult than literal comprehension.

Although there were many valuable information gained from this research, this research has some limitations that could be omitted in future research. We had a small number of participants which was a total of 26 participants in one classroom. The test items were only about 30 test items, 15 literal and 15 inferential test items for pretest and posttest. The time of instruction was also limited to 4 times due to the limitation in time that we have for the research. The university was also about to hold a midterm test at the time when the research was conducted, the particular condition might also affect the students' attention and focus during the research.

**Conclusion**

This research gave good contribution

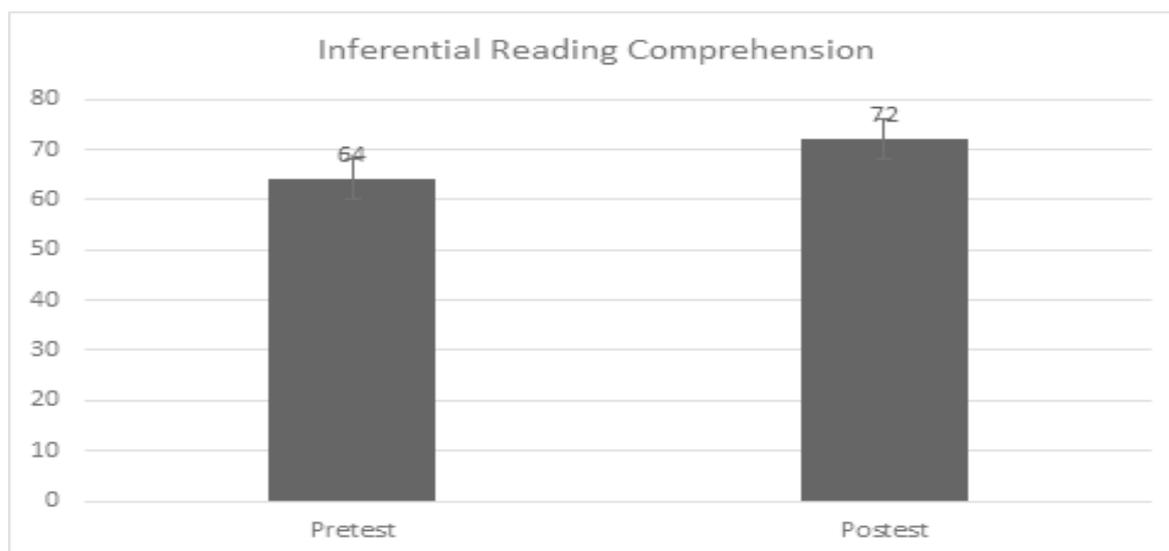


Figure 3. Total average scores of Inferential Reading Comprehension in Pretest and Posttest

regarding differentiated instruction and reading comprehension, especially in how the students experience differentiated instruction in relation to their literal and inferential comprehension. Moreover, there has never been any research done in Indonesia to investigate differentiated instruction and its efficacy in all areas of skills and abilities. Therefore, this research has filled the gap in that matter. Based on the research result, differentiated instruction does help the students in promoting their reading comprehension, especially to bridge their difficulty to grasp the information that is inferred in the text. It has become a major issue that students find more difficulties to get implicit information rather than of explicit information. Thus, differentiated instruction can be a good solution for the aforementioned issue. The research also showed that differentiated instruction helps the student to maintain their literal reading comprehension and inferential comprehension level and even help them to get better score in their literal reading comprehension.

Furthermore, future research need are encouraged to reveal more on the efficacy of differentiated instruction on reading comprehension or other abilities in second

language learning. A quantitative research with more quantity of participants, classes and test items is highly recommended on this matter. Having a statistical analysis for the results will surely give us a better perspective on the issue. Bigger number of participants and more quantity of test items will also give us a wider data to be analyzed. Qualitative instruments like classroom observation, note taking or interview is also valuable as additional information to have a more profound and remarkable insights on the effect of Differentiated instruction to reading comprehension, including literal and inferential comprehension

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