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# EXPLORING DIGITAL ENGLISH TEACHING STRATEGIES THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS IN SOUTH SUMATRA

**Dodi Irawan[1]*, Hadiyanto[2], Bunga Ayu Wulandari [3], Eddy Haryanto[4]**
[1,2,3,4]*Universitas Jambi, Indonesia*

**Corresponding author:** dodiirawan35@guru.smk.belajar.id

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the implementation of digital English teaching strategies with a differentiated learning approach at Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra. The research aimed to explore how teachers integrate differentiated learning strategies into their teaching practices, focusing on content, process, and product differentiation. Data was collected through observations, teacher questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews. The results show that the integration of differentiated learning has been effective in meeting the diverse needs of students, with content being adapted to students' interests and learning styles. Process differentiation was implemented through grouping students based on their learning pace, and product differentiation encouraged collaboration and student presentations. However, challenges such as limited digital literacy, inadequate teaching resources, and a lack of infrastructure were identified as barriers. The study suggests that further professional development, better digital resources, and enhanced infrastructure are essential to maximize the potential of differentiated learning strategies.

**Keywords:** *digital English teaching; differentiated learning; vocational high schools; South Sumatra; emancipated curriculum.*

## INTRODUCTION

English has become a vital subject in schools worldwide due to its significance in global communication, business, science, and technology (Salomone & Salomone, 2022; Al Awlaqi & Ghozali, 2023; Christou et al., 2024). In Indonesia, the importance of teaching English is emphasized through the implementation of the Emancipated Curriculum *(Kurikulum Merdeka)*, which promotes flexibility in learning to accommodate students' diverse needs (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). English Language Teaching (ELT) in vocational high schools (VHS) plays a crucial role in equipping students with the necessary communication skills for the global workforce, especially in industries that require international interaction (Williyan et al., 2025; Kaharuddin & Rahmadana, 2020; Seraj et al., 2024; Fadilah, Jaya and Uzer, 2023).

To address diverse learning needs, differentiated learning has been introduced as a strategy to enhance students' engagement and outcomes (Suwastini, 2021; Purnamaningwulan and Purwanto, 2025; Suryati, Ratih and Maryadi, 2023; Shen, 2025; Errabo *et al.*, 2024). This approach tailors the educational process to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, allowing them to meet the same minimum competencies in ways that suit their individual needs (Dewi, Kusuma and Puger, 2025; Amalia and Ulva, 2024; Syofyan *et al.*, 2024). This strategy is particularly important in vocational schools where students have varied backgrounds, learning styles, and career aspirations (Sun *et al.*, 2024; Taheri *et al.*, 2022; Rosadi, Nuraeni and Priadi, 2020' Peng, 2025;

Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2020).

The Emancipated Curriculum encourages differentiated learning in Vocational High Schools to ensure learning experiences are adaptable to student needs (Susanti *et al.*, 2024; Wijaya, Netiasih and Mahayanti, 2024; Endeshaw, 2023). By incorporating differentiated content, processes, and products, this curriculum aims to create an inclusive and engaging environment, particularly in mastering English as a tool for students' future careers (Mustaqim *et al.*, 2025; Agustiani, Lukman and Setiani, 2024; Song, 2025; Kallio *et al.*, 2024).

Despite its theoretical benefits, the practical implementation of differentiated learning in English language teaching within VHS in South Sumatra remains underexplored (Jubaedah and Wirza, 2022; Ma'fiyah and Sumardiono, 2023; Ferdaus and Novita, 2023). Challenges such as large class sizes, limited teacher training, and resource constraints often hinder effective implementation (Santoso and Widodo, 2023; Rahmawati, 2022; García-Lázaro, Colás-Bravo and Conde-Jiménez, 2022). Teachers face difficulties adapting methods to meet diverse student needs, particularly when English proficiency is directly linked to career opportunities (Jin, 2023; Liu and Yang, 2025; Nurhidayat *et al.*, 2024; Pontillas, 2020; Lebo, Odigbo and Iheanacho, 2021).

This research aims to investigate digital English teaching strategies that incorporate differentiated learning in vocational high schools in South Sumatra. It will explore the strategies used by teachers, the barriers they face, and potential solutions. The findings aim to contribute to developing more effective teaching practices aligned with the Emancipated Curriculum, ensuring that each student has the opportunity to succeed based on their unique learning profiles.

The general aim of this study is to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in English subjects within vocational high schools, specifically examining: 1) the strategies teachers use to implement differentiated learning in ELT, 2) the barriers faced by teachers, and 3) solutions for improving differentiated learning implementation. This study is expected to provide insights that enhance the quality of digital English teaching in vocational schools, fostering a more inclusive and adaptive learning environment.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach to explore the implementation of digital English teaching strategies using differentiated learning in Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra. Qualitative research is particularly suited to studying the natural conditions of educational contexts, where the researcher is the key instrument for data collection and interpretation. According to Tisdell, Merriam and Struckey-Peyrot (2025), qualitative methods are used to obtain in-depth data that carry significant meaning, making them ideal for understanding complex phenomena, such as differentiated learning in vocational education.

As Sugiyono (2021) explains, qualitative research is employed when the research problem is unclear, complex, and full of meaning. This study aims to provide a holistic understanding of differentiated learning strategies in English Language Teaching (ELT) within SMKs in South Sumatra. Through this approach, the researcher does not aim to identify the influence of specific variables but instead seeks to understand the context and dynamics of teaching practices in these settings.

Descriptive Research aims to collect detailed information about the current phenomenon here, the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in digital English teaching. According to Arikunto (2021), descriptive research provides an understanding of the status or current state of the phenomenon being studied. In this research, the initial stage involved observing and identifying the challenges in differentiated learning in ELT classrooms in SMKs in South Sumatra, which then formed the basis of the research focus. After identifying the problem, the researcher proceeded with in-depth exploration through data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis.

The research was conducted in Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra, focusing on schools that have implemented differentiated learning strategies in their English language teaching. The selection of these schools was based on their commitment to adapting digital teaching strategies that cater to the diverse learning needs of students in vocational education. Access to these schools was obtained through formal agreements with school administrators and English teachers, ensuring ethical standards for data collection (Mauliddiyah, 2021; Susanto, Risnita and Jailani, 2023).

The purposive sampling method was used to select English teachers from Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra for this study.

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The inclusion criteria for selecting teachers were as follows: (1) At least three years of teaching experience in English. (2) Familiarity with the Emancipated Curriculum *(Kurikulum Merdeka)*, especially its approach to differentiated learning in English instruction.

Based on these criteria, the population consisted of 267 English teachers from 120 SMKs across South Sumatra. This purposive sampling ensures that the participants have relevant experience and exposure to the curriculum changes being investigated. For this qualitative study, a total of 20 teachers were selected as key informants for semi-structured interviews, with 10 teachers from public SMKs and 10 from private SMKs. The selection ensured a balance between public and private institutions, allowing for a variety of perspectives on differentiated learning implementation. Interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing differentiated learning strategies.

This study relied on qualitative data collection techniques to gain rich insights into the differentiated learning strategies used in digital English teaching. The data collection methods included:

Semi-structured Interviews. These interviews allowed for an open-ended exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding differentiated learning. The interviews focused on how teachers adapt their teaching methods, materials, and assessments to meet the diverse needs of students. These interviews also aimed to uncover challenges and barriers to the effective implementation of differentiated learning (Kvale, 2021; Haq, 2024).

Classroom Observations. The researcher observed ELT classrooms where differentiated learning strategies were implemented. This allowed the researcher to directly assess how these strategies were applied in real-time and to gain insights into teacher-student interactions, student engagement, and the use of digital tools in instruction (Van Maanen, 2025; Zens, 2021).

Document Analysis. Relevant documents, such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and assessment tools, were analyzed to determine how differentiated learning principles were embedded into curriculum planning and teaching practices. The analysis of these documents provided additional context to the interviews and observations (Subandiyah *et al.*, 2025; Wulandari, 2020).

Additionally, the researcher employed triangulation techniques, which involve combining various existing data collection methods and sources. In this study, source triangulation was utilized, meaning that data was gathered from multiple informants, all of whom are engaged in differentiated learning strategies. After field data were collected, data analysis was conducted to identify key insights, understand them, and address the research questions while formulating conclusions. The analysis of questionnaire data was conducted separately using descriptive statistics to quantify the responses, and the findings were then integrated with qualitative data by comparing trends and identifying recurring themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the differentiated learning strategies. The data analysis technique employed in this study was the Daruhadi and Sopiati (2024), which consists of three stages: 1) data reduction, which involves summarizing and selecting the most significant and relevant data; 2) data presentation (data display), which organizes the data into concise, narrative descriptions; and 3) drawing conclusions (conclusion drawing), which involves interpreting the research findings to answer the research questions, ultimately leading to implications and recommendations that can be used by relevant stakeholders (Sugiyono, 2021).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explore the implementation of digital English teaching strategies with a differentiated learning approach in Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra. Based on the analysis of data obtained through observations questionnaire, teacher interviews, and document review.

English teachers in SMKs engaged in lesson planning by developing teaching modules that integrated differentiated learning strategies. Teachers also conducted diagnostic assessments to identify students' interests, learning styles, and readiness levels, which helped them determine how to map students' learning needs and adjust teaching materials and methods accordingly. Furthermore, teachers performed a curriculum analysis to determine the content to be taught. In this study, the selected content was the recount text.

Table 1. *The teachers' perception about the use of teaching syllabus, instructional material, and assessment*

| Aspect | Dominant Findings | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Familiarity with Differentiated Learning | Familiar with differentiated learning in teaching syllabus. | 53.2% strongly agree |
| Emancipated Curriculum Alignment | Aligns well with differentiated learning principles. | 56.9% strongly agree |
| Use of Differentiated Learning Strategies | Frequent integration of differentiated learning strategies in teaching (content, process, assessment). | 53.2% for content, 57.7% for assessment, 57.7% for instructional materials |
| Encouraging Active Student Involvement | Differentiated learning promotes active student participation. | 41.9% strongly agree |
| Challenges in Implementation | Difficulty in incorporating differentiated strategies, especially with digital resources and designing assessments. | 57.7% for lack of resources, 43.4% for difficulty in assessments |
| Assessment Practices | Differentiated assessments help understand student progress and foster deeper content understanding. | 58.4% for effectiveness, 57.3% for deeper understanding |
| Professional Development Needs | Need for professional development to effectively implement differentiated learning strategies. | 52.1% agree |
| Barriers | Challenges related to digital resources, teacher competence, and assessment design. | 46.8% for diverse learning levels, 55.8% for resource issues |

The survey results reveal that a majority of teachers in vocational high schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra recognize the importance of differentiated learning in their teaching practices. Specifically, they agree that differentiated learning strategies significantly contribute to student engagement, better learning outcomes, and flexibility in lesson planning. Most teachers feel confident in integrating differentiated learning strategies into their syllabi, with a strong belief that it fosters a student-centered approach and enhances critical thinking skills. However, challenges remain, such as the difficulty in finding suitable resources for differentiation and the limited availability of instructional materials, which hinders the effective implementation of these strategies. Regarding the use of instructional materials, teachers believe that adapting resources to cater to students' different learning styles is crucial, and they often use a variety of materials, including technology-based resources. Despite this, there are concerns about the adequacy of materials for differentiated learning, especially for students with diverse learning needs. When it comes to assessment, teachers emphasize the importance of differentiated assessments in providing a fair and comprehensive evaluation of students' abilities. They believe that these assessments allow for a more personalized approach to student learning. However, designing assessments that effectively differentiate according to students' abilities remains a challenge for many teachers. Overall, the findings suggest that while differentiated learning is being implemented positively in SMKs, there is a need for further professional development, better resources, and support to address the challenges faced by teachers in executing differentiated strategies effectively.

In the implementation stage, differentiated learning strategies were applied using three main approaches: content differentiation, process differentiation, and product differentiation.

Content Differentiation: Teachers adapted the learning materials to meet students' interests and learning styles based on diagnostic assessment results. Differentiated learning was carried out in two ways: (a) adjusting the content being taught to students' readiness and interests, and (b) adjusting how the content was delivered according to students' learning profiles. Teachers used various methods, such as providing diverse materials, learning contracts, mini-lessons, and presenting content in different modes to enhance student engagement. One teacher stated,

> "I use various materials, including online resources, to ensure that students with different abilities can engage with the content. This way, each student can learn in a way that suits them." (T1, SMK Negeri)

Process Differentiation: Teachers divided

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students into groups for discussion or independent work based on their learning pace. For students with slower learning styles, teachers provided more intensive guidance. Meanwhile, for students who grasped the material more quickly, teachers provided additional, more challenging material.

> "I make sure students work in groups according to their abilities. For those who need more time, I give extra help, while others move on to more advanced tasks." (T2, SMK Swasta)

During the learning process, the teacher created a conducive and enjoyable learning environment by organizing student seating well, whether in groups, pairs, or independently.

> "Classroom seating arrangements are crucial. It creates a comfortable environment where all students can interact, whether in groups or individually," (T3, SMK Swasta).

Product Differentiation: Teachers asked students to create procedure texts in groups and then present them in front of the class. The goal of this activity was to train students' courage and independence in speaking publicly, as well as to develop their self-confidence. One teacher explained,

> "This task encourages students to collaborate and take responsibility for their learning. By presenting in front of the class, they gain confidence and independence." (T4, SMK Negeri)

Values from the Pancasila Student Profile, such as collaboration and independence, were evident in this activity. Another teacher added,

> "It's important to see students not only working together but also becoming independent in their learning. Activities like this really build their confidence." (T5, SMK Negeri)

These differentiated learning strategies align with the goal of creating an inclusive and personalized learning environment where every student can progress according to their individual needs and abilities.

Teachers assessed the products created by students. The evaluation focused on content, processes, and products, with ongoing feedback provided throughout the learning process. The feedback was qualitative in nature, focusing on areas that needed improvement in students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills. This form of evaluation ensured continuous learning and adjustment in teaching strategies based on student performance.

*Barriers in implementing differentiated learning strategies*

Several challenges were identified in the implementation of differentiated learning in English teaching using the Emancipated Curriculum, including:

Teacher Competence. Teachers' ability to understand and implement differentiated learning strategies was found to be lacking. To address this, it is essential to conduct intensive socialization and training on differentiated learning strategies. A significant challenge faced by teachers was their low level of digital literacy, particularly with the Independent Teaching Platform, which connects teaching resources and information. This issue requires teachers to adapt to technological advancements and improve their digital skills.

Facilities and Infrastructure. Limited facilities, such as the absence of a dedicated English language laboratory, hindered the smooth implementation of learning activities. English language instruction in SMKs requires the mastery of four key skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, all of which require adequate infrastructure to be effectively taught.

*Solutions for implementing differentiated learning in the independent curriculum*

To overcome these barriers, several solutions were proposed:

Improving Teacher Competence: Schools should improve teacher competency by organizing outreach activities on differentiated learning strategies and providing opportunities for teachers to participate in training and seminars. These activities can take place both within the school environment and externally, aiming to enhance teachers' professionalism in applying differentiated learning in their classrooms.

Facilities and Infrastructure: Efforts to improve school infrastructure can be made by coordinating with the education office and school committees to find joint solutions. This collaboration can help ensure that the necessary resources are available to support differentiated learning, particularly for English instruction.

The research shows that the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in English teaching at SMKs in South Sumatra is effective, although challenges remain, especially regarding

teachers' competence in implementing differentiated learning and the lack of supporting facilities. Differentiated learning within the Emancipated Curriculum framework can enhance learning outcomes by addressing the diverse needs of students and helping them develop the skills needed to succeed in their vocational careers. The findings highlight the importance of continuous professional development for teachers and improvements in infrastructure to support differentiated teaching methods.

The research findings indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in English teaching at Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra has been largely effective. This section will provide a discussion of the results, highlighting the strengths and challenges faced by the teachers in applying these strategies, as well as proposed solutions.

Differentiated learning, as described in the study, involves adjusting content, processes, and products to meet the diverse needs of students. In this research, content differentiation was carried out by adapting learning materials to cater to students' interests and learning styles, based on diagnostic assessments. Teachers used a variety of strategies, such as learning contracts and mini-lessons, to enhance student engagement and make learning more personalized. As one teacher noted, *"I use various materials, including online resources, to ensure that students with different abilities can engage with the content. This way, each student can learn in a way that suits them"* (T1, SMK Negeri). This aligns with Purnamaningwulan (2024) principle of differentiating content to meet students' individual learning needs.

Process differentiation involved organizing students into groups or assigning them independent tasks based on their learning pace. Slower learners received more direct assistance, while faster learners were given more challenging material. This strategy reflects Omid (2023) and Duru & Obasi (2023)concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where instruction is targeted at students' current capabilities and extended to their potential development with the right level of support. A teacher stated, *"I make sure students work in groups according to their abilities. For those who need more time, I give extra help, while others move on to more advanced tasks"* (T2, SMK Swasta).

In product differentiation, teachers encouraged students to work collaboratively to produce texts and present them in class. This activity not only enhanced students' speaking and collaboration skills but also promoted their independence and self-confidence. One teacher explained, *"This task encourages students to collaborate and take responsibility for their learning. By presenting in front of the class, they gain confidence and independence"* (T4, SMK Negeri). This approach aligns with the Pancasila Student Profile, emphasizing collaboration and independence.

Despite the positive implementation of differentiated learning, several barriers were identified. First, teacher competence was a significant challenge. Many teachers struggled with understanding and effectively applying differentiated learning strategies. This issue was compounded by the lack of digital literacy, particularly in using the Independent Teaching Platform, which made it difficult for teachers to access necessary resources. According to Mandouit and Hattie (2023), effective teaching strategies, including differentiation, require continuous professional development and adequate resources. Teachers expressed a need for more training and support in digital literacy to overcome this barrier.

Second, limited facilities and infrastructure hindered the full implementation of differentiated learning. The absence of dedicated language laboratories and adequate classroom resources made it challenging for teachers to implement the strategies effectively, especially for subjects like English that require mastery in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Amalia and Ulva (2024) emphasized that the success of educational reforms, such as differentiated learning, is often dependent on the availability of proper infrastructure and resources. In vocational contexts, where students often have specific career aspirations, these barriers are more pronounced. Vocational students typically need more practical exposure to the subject matter and tools that align with their future careers, making the need for appropriate infrastructure even more critical.

To address these challenges, the research suggests the following solutions:

Improving Teacher Competence: Schools should invest in professional development activities that focus on differentiated learning strategies. This includes offering training and seminars to help teachers develop their skills and confidence in using these strategies effectively. As one teacher mentioned, *"Schools need to provide better professional development*

*opportunities, especially focusing on differentiated learning"* (T5, SMK Negeri). This is supported by Pan, Chen and Wiens (2022), who highlighted that ongoing professional development is critical for teachers to successfully implement new teaching methods. Incorporating strategies tailored to vocational education is crucial, as vocational teachers often need specialized training that aligns with their students' future career needs.

Enhancing Facilities and Infrastructure: Schools should collaborate with the education office and school committees to improve infrastructure, particularly in the provision of language laboratories and technology resources. This collaboration can help ensure that teachers have access to the necessary tools to implement differentiated learning effectively. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020) argue that improving school resources is essential for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. However, the lack of consistent support from educational authorities across different institutions may hinder the smooth implementation of these improvements in some schools, especially in more rural areas.

In conclusion, the research shows that while differentiated learning is being implemented effectively in SMKs in South Sumatra, challenges such as teacher competence and limited infrastructure remain. The implementation of differentiated learning, especially in the context of the Emancipated Curriculum, has the potential to significantly improve student engagement and learning outcomes. However, addressing the identified barriers through professional development and resource enhancement is crucial to ensure the sustainability and success of differentiated learning strategies. The findings also emphasize the need for continued support from educational stakeholders to foster an inclusive and student-centered learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in English teaching at Vocational High Schools (SMKs) in South Sumatra has been largely effective. Teachers have successfully adapted content, processes, and products to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Content differentiation was carried out by aligning learning materials with students' interests and learning styles, while process differentiation involved grouping students based on their learning pace. In terms of product differentiation, students were tasked with working collaboratively to produce and present texts, enhancing their speaking skills, collaboration, confidence, and independence. However, the study also identified several challenges, including teachers' limited competence in implementing differentiated learning strategies, low digital literacy, and limited facilities, such as the lack of language laboratories.

One of the limitations of this study is that it primarily focuses on a specific region (South Sumatra), so the findings may not be fully representative of all vocational high schools across Indonesia. Additionally, the study does not directly measure the impact of differentiated learning on students' academic performance or long-term learning outcomes, which could provide a more detailed understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies.

The findings of this study imply that differentiated learning, within the context of the Emancipated Curriculum, can significantly enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and flexibility in lesson planning. It is essential for schools to provide more training and support for teachers, particularly in the areas of digital literacy and utilizing online learning platforms. Additionally, improving facilities and infrastructure, such as providing adequate language laboratories and technological resources, is crucial for the effective implementation of differentiated learning strategies. Digital tools and platforms should be integrated into the teaching process to enhance the personalization and adaptability of lessons.

These findings can have significant implications for national vocational education and training (VET) practices. By supporting the integration of differentiated learning strategies into the broader ELT curriculum, policymakers can enhance teaching effectiveness and improve student outcomes. The implementation of digital tools and resources could also be encouraged at the national level to ensure that all vocational high schools have access to the necessary infrastructure for effective teaching.

Future research could explore how the use of digital tools and online learning platforms can further improve the implementation of differentiated learning in SMKs. Studies can also focus on developing and evaluating more effective teacher training models for implementing differentiated learning, with an

emphasis on digital literacy and the integration of digital tools. Moreover, research that directly measures the impact of differentiated learning on students' academic performance across various subjects in SMKs would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these strategies. Further investigation into the use of digital resources for differentiated assessment methods could also help in tailoring assessments to the diverse learning needs of students.

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