

TEACHERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT IN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION: INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Diagnostic assessment has become increasingly crucial for supporting differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms, especially in light of recent curriculum reforms in Indonesia. The study used a qualitative research design and involved 10 English teachers with at least 3 years of teaching experience. The two research questions are (1) How do EFL teachers interpret diagnostic assessment within the context of differentiated instruction? and (2) How do EFL teachers implement diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction in their classrooms? Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers, focusing on their conceptual understanding, implementation strategies, obstacles, and perspectives on diagnostic assessment in differentiated instruction. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings indicated that teachers typically perceived a diagnostic assessment as a tool for determining students' academic readiness, prior knowledge, interests, and learning styles before instruction. The majority of teachers employed diagnostic assessment via informal oral inquiries, observation, and basic written tasks. The evaluation results were primarily used for readiness-based grouping and for modifying instructional content, methods, and learning materials. Teachers encountered difficulties related to workload, insufficient preparation time, the lack of standardized assessment tools, and policy changes. Notwithstanding these challenges, teachers generally perceived diagnostic assessment as valuable for informing differentiated instruction. While previous research has mainly focused on theoretical frameworks or student outcomes, this study sheds light on teachers' lived experiences, the realities of informal assessment, and the structural barriers to conducting diagnostic assessment across varied EFL classrooms.

Keywords: diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, junior high school, teachers

INTRODUCTION

In today's classrooms, differentiated instruction has emerged as a vital pedagogical response to the reality that students possess vastly different language proficiencies, interests, and learning needs (Ojong, 2023). Moreover, within the Indonesian educational

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context, *Kurikulum Merdeka* provides a policy framework that emphasizes student-centered learning and responsiveness to students' diverse needs, interests, and readiness levels (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Within this framework, diagnostic assessment is recommended as a means of identifying students' initial learning conditions and needs, which can subsequently inform differentiated instructional decisions. Recent studies on the implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka* have similarly highlighted the role of diagnostic assessment in identifying learner characteristics and informing appropriate teaching strategies (Fadil & Nurulpaik, 2026).

On the other hand, it could lead to specific significant obstacles for teachers, regarding time management, planning, and the integration of differentiated instruction (Digna & Japa, 2023). Consequently, teachers are expected not only to deliver content but also to design responsive learning experiences that support differentiated instruction practices. The application of differentiated teaching in classroom practice is intimately linked to the use of diagnostic assessments to determine students' learning requirements and readiness levels. As proven by Wati et al. (2025) that differentiated instruction creates a more meaningful, inclusive, and responsive approach to student differences. Also considered an effective strategy for addressing heterogeneous student needs (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). The term Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a teaching strategy in which educators modify lesson plans, learning exercises, and evaluation techniques to accommodate students' varied learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels (Djarmika and Astutik, 2023).

According to Tomlinson (2013), DI gives teachers the ability to provide students with various learning pathways according to their unique qualities. Differentiated instruction emphasizes adaptability and responsiveness to classroom variety more than a standard teaching approach. In the Indonesian EFL context, Auliya et al. (2020) similarly showed that attention to students' needs and characteristics can inform the selection of appropriate teaching strategies. This method is especially crucial in EFL classes since students frequently exhibit different levels of language competency and learning requirements, so that all learners are allowed to achieve the same learning objectives (Kamarulzaman et al., 2021).

Teachers must adapt their teaching methods to these individual characteristics in order to create inclusive environments in EFL contexts. According to Tomlinson (2013), differentiated teaching enables teachers to adapt learning settings, procedures, and content according to students' readiness levels. The necessity of integrating, or at the very least aligning, informal classroom evaluation procedures with more formal assessment techniques has been acknowledged. Similarly, Nafisah et al. (2021) demonstrated that assessment and reflective practices can provide information that supports pedagogical improvement and adjustments in teaching strategies. Therefore, before instruction starts, teachers must be aware of students' strengths and shortcomings in order for instructional adaptation to be successful, to make sure that students will experience the learning process based on their readiness level (Suwastini et al., 2021). Diagnostic assessment is crucial in this situation because it enables teachers to determine the needs, skills, and learning gaps of their students, which subsequently serve as the foundation for successfully conducting differentiated instruction (Kazemi & Tavassoli, 2020).

Diagnostic assessment plays an important role in supporting differentiated instruction because it provides teachers with information about students' readiness levels, prior knowledge, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and learning needs before instruction begins (Alderson et al., 2015; Von Davier & Lee, 2019). Such information enables teachers to develop a clearer understanding of learner diversity within a classroom and to make informed instructional decisions. In differentiated instruction, teachers may use diagnostic assessment data to identify learning gaps, determine students' readiness levels, and recognize variations in learning profiles. Based on this information, they can adapt instructional content, learning activities, grouping strategies, learning materials, and levels of support to better address students' diverse needs (Tomlinson, 2014). In EFL contexts, diagnostic assessment may provide information about learners' language proficiency, including vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, and speaking confidence, which can guide more responsive

instructional planning (Haywood & Lidz, 2007). Therefore, diagnostic assessment can be viewed as an important source of information that informs differentiated instructional practices and supports teachers in responding to learner diversity.

Despite the theoretical benefits, EFL teachers often face practical barriers to implementing differentiated instruction, including large classes, time constraints, limited preparation time, and insufficient training in assessment practices (Listiani, 2023). These challenges suggest that the implementation of differentiated instruction depends not only on pedagogical principles but also on how teachers understand learner differences and use assessment information in classroom decision-making. Previous research in the Indonesian EFL context has also highlighted the importance of teachers' beliefs and interpretations in shaping their approaches to English language teaching (Kandilla et al., 2018). Sukarno et al. (2024) for example, found that pre-service EFL teachers generally perceived differentiated instruction positively as a way of addressing diverse learner needs, yet experienced difficulties in its implementation due to limited classroom management and instructional experience. Similarly, Wati et al. (2025) reported that English teachers employed various assessment practices within differentiated instruction to respond to student differences. Together, these studies provide important insights into teachers' perceptions of differentiated instruction, its implementation challenges, and assessment practices; however, they offer limited explanation of how practicing EFL teachers specifically interpret diagnostic assessment and translate diagnostic information into differentiated instructional decisions.

This gap is particularly important because diagnostic assessment is expected to inform instruction only when teachers are able to interpret information about students' readiness, prior knowledge, and learning needs and use it to make appropriate instructional adjustments. Therefore, the present study investigates how EFL teachers interpret diagnostic assessment within the context of differentiated instruction and how they implement it to support differentiated instruction in their classrooms. By examining both teachers' interpretations and their reported implementation practices, the study seeks to provide a more contextualized understanding of how diagnostic assessment informs differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL teachers interpret diagnostic assessment within the context of differentiated instruction?

RQ2: How do EFL teachers report implementing diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction in their classrooms?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore English teachers' viewpoints and interpretations of diagnostic assessment within the context of differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. Qualitative research is well suited to understanding participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations within specific educational settings (Fraenkel et al., 2022; Gay, 2012). The study was conducted in 10 junior high schools in Bantul Regency, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, comprising both public and private schools. Bantul Regency was selected because it provided access to diverse school contexts in which *Kurikulum Merdeka* and its emphasis on responding to students' varied learning needs were relevant to teachers' instructional practices. At the time of the study, the participating schools had implemented *Kurikulum Merdeka*, although the ways in which differentiated instruction and diagnostic assessment were understood and applied varied across teachers and school contexts. This variation provided a relevant context for examining how EFL teachers interpreted diagnostic assessment and reported using it to inform differentiated instruction.

The participants were 10 junior high school English teachers from 10 public and private schools in Bantul Regency. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the focus of the study. To be eligible, teachers were required to have at least three years of English language teaching experience and experience with diagnostic

assessment and differentiated instruction in their classroom contexts. These criteria were intended to ensure that participants had sufficient professional experience and familiarity with the practices under investigation to provide informed and reflective accounts. Eligible teachers were approached and invited to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore teachers' interpretations of diagnostic assessment and their reported practices in using diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction. The interviews were conducted face-to-face on April 28, 2026. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow researchers to obtain in-depth accounts of participants' experiences and perspectives while providing flexibility to explore relevant issues that emerge during the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview protocol consisted of 14 semi-structured questions developed to address the research questions and explore teachers' interpretations and reported practices related to diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. The questions covered teachers' conceptual understanding of diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction, reported diagnostic assessment practices, use of assessment information for instructional decision-making, challenges encountered in implementing these practices, perceptions of the role of diagnostic assessment in differentiated instruction, and professional needs related to its implementation. Probing questions were used when necessary to elicit more detailed accounts, particularly examples of classroom procedures, instructional decision-making, and challenges encountered in using diagnostic assessment.

The interview data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in teachers' interpretations of diagnostic assessment and their reported practices in using diagnostic information to support differentiated instruction. Because the study relied solely on interview data, no claim of triangulation with classroom observation was made. Credibility was supported through systematic coding, repeated review of the interview transcripts, and careful comparison of emerging themes across participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Interpretations of Diagnostic Assessment within Differentiated Instruction

The findings indicated that participants generally understood diagnostic assessment as a method for collecting information about students' prior knowledge, readiness, interests, learning preferences, and ability levels before instruction. To protect participants' privacy and maintain confidentiality, all teachers were anonymized using participant codes ranging from T1 to T10 throughout the findings and discussion sections. Their interpretations reflected a continuum of conceptual understanding. Some teachers demonstrated a procedural understanding, viewing diagnostic assessment primarily as a means of identifying students' initial abilities and readiness, whereas others demonstrated a broader pedagogical understanding by connecting diagnostic information to instructional decision-making and different dimensions of differentiated instruction. These categories were derived from recurring patterns identified in the interview data.

Most participants associated diagnostic assessment with identifying students' readiness prior to instruction. T2 interpreted diagnostic assessment as a strategy to facilitate scaffolding during learning:

Excerpt 1

T2: *"...find out students' initial ability before entering material so it is easier to scaffold them."* (Interview transcript, April 28, 2026)

Similarly, T1 connected diagnostic assessment with selecting appropriate learning activities, while T3 emphasized its role in identifying students' strengths and weaknesses for grouping purposes. These interpretations indicate that teachers primarily viewed diagnostic assessment as a practical classroom procedure to support differentiated instruction through readiness mapping. Several participants demonstrated more conceptually developed interpretations. T4 defined diagnostic assessment as:

Excerpt 2

T4: *"a process of collecting data to understand student characteristics, such as learning style, interest, and initial ability."* (Interview transcript, April 28, 2026)

Likewise, T8 emphasized the instructional decision-making function of diagnostic assessment:

Excerpt 3

T8: *"data collection conducted by the teacher as a foundation for determining the right learning strategy in that class."* (Interview transcript, April 28, 2026)

T8 elaborated that diagnostic assessment tools must vary between classes, even when the same content is delivered, due to the distinct characteristics of the student populations in each class. T8 showed the highest conceptual coherence between diagnostic evaluation and differentiated teaching among all subjects. She directly connected diagnostic assessment to the four dimensions of differentiation.

Excerpt 4

T8: *"the way to determine whether differentiation will be applied to content, process, product, or learning environment is determined through diagnostic assessment."* (Interview transcript, April 28, 2026)

The results also showed that teachers' views varied across settings. Differentiated instruction was more widely understood by teachers who worked in inclusive educational environments. In addition to determining academic preparedness, T9 understood diagnostic testing to detect accessibility needs for kids with physical, hearing, and vision impairments. From his perspective, differentiated education went beyond ability grouping to include equal participation and classroom adaptation. However, not all participants demonstrated strong conceptual understanding. T10 openly acknowledged limitations in her understanding of diagnostic assessment:

Excerpt 5

T10: *"not very deep"* (Interview transcript, April 28, 2026)

She articulated ambiguity over the elements of a good diagnostic assessment technique. This indicates that some teachers continued to understand diagnostic assessment procedurally rather than conceptually. While all participants accurately distinguished between diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments by timing, the majority acknowledged that formative and summative evaluations were used more frequently in classroom practice.

Table 1. Teachers' Interpretations of Diagnostic Assessment within Differentiated Instruction

Teacher	Interpretation of Diagnostic Assessment	Focus of Interpretation	Representative Excerpt
T1	Identifying suitable learning activities	Classroom readiness	<i>"Identifying the best learning activity."</i>

T2	Identifying initial student ability	Scaffolding support	<i>"Find out students' initial ability before entering material."</i>
T3	Identifying strengths and weaknesses	Ability grouping	<i>"Students can be grouped appropriately."</i>
T4	Collecting student characteristic data	Learning style, interest, readiness	<i>"A process of collecting data to understand student characteristics."</i>
T5	Identifying learner differences	Fast and slow learners	<i>"To distinguish fast from slow learners."</i>
T6	Supporting instructional adaptation	Practical implementation	<i>"Theoretically looks ideal."</i>
T7	Supporting responsive teaching	Classroom engagement	<i>"Different classrooms require different approaches."</i>
T8	Foundation for differentiated instruction	Content, process, product, environment	<i>"Differentiation is determined through diagnostic assessment."</i>
T9	Supporting inclusive education	Accessibility and student diversity	<i>"Different students need different adjustments."</i>
T10	Limited conceptual understanding	Uncertainty about diagnostic practice	<i>"Not very deep."</i>

Overall, the findings demonstrated that teachers interpreted diagnostic assessment as an important foundation for differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, variations in conceptual depth, professional training, and institutional contexts influenced how comprehensively teachers understood and connected diagnostic assessment with differentiated learning practices.

The findings revealed that most teachers interpreted diagnostic assessment as a tool for identifying students' readiness, prior knowledge, interests, and learning characteristics before instruction began. This interpretation is consistent with Tomlinson's idea of differentiated teaching, which highlights that in order to create responsive education, teachers must comprehend students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Ameko et al., 2025; Gheysens, 2020; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2003). In a similar vein, Begum et al. (2020) contended that assessment ought to serve as a procedure for obtaining data regarding students in order to facilitate instructional modification. Teachers in this study largely believed that diagnostic assessment was the first step in identifying student variability and setting up differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. This finding also reinforces the argument proposed by Brown (2018) that diagnostic assessment helps teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses before instruction begins, allowing instruction to be adjusted based on learners' needs. Moreover, the result supports Suwastini et al. (2021), who emphasized that understanding students' readiness levels before instruction is essential to ensuring that students experience learning appropriate to their abilities and needs.

Most participants also viewed diagnostic assessment as a practical classroom strategy for scaffolding, grouping, and selecting suitable learning activities. This result demonstrates the usefulness of diagnostic assessment in guiding instructional decisions, especially in classrooms with diverse student bodies. Scaffolding works best when teachers first determine the developmental stages of their students, according to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development hypothesis (Vygotsky, 1978). As a result, teachers' focus on assessing students' starting skills before instruction suggests they are making an effort to provide tailored learning support for each student. Teachers frequently use diagnostic data to modify classroom instruction and offer customized support, according to earlier research by Choi et al. (2021) and Kärner et al. (2021). This finding is also closely related to Kazemi and Tavassoli's (2020) argument that diagnostic assessment enables teachers to identify students' learning gaps and use the information as a basis for implementing differentiated instruction effectively.

A number of participants showed a deeper conceptual comprehension of the connection between diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction. T8 made a clear connection between diagnostic assessment and learning environment, as well as method,

product, and content differentiation. This result largely aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) paradigm, which argues that, rather than simply classifying students by ability levels, differentiated instruction should incorporate several aspects of classroom adaptation. The participant's understanding also reflects principles of assessment literacy, as defined by Stiggins (1991) as teachers' ability to understand, interpret, and use assessment information effectively to improve learning outcomes. Furthermore, this result aligns with Kamarulzaman et al. (2021), who argued that differentiated instruction in EFL contexts is essential because learners have varying levels of language proficiency and learning needs, requiring teachers to adapt instruction across multiple dimensions.

The results also demonstrated that teachers' judgments of diagnostic assessments were influenced by the educational situation. Educators operating in inclusive learning environments demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding of student diversity, including accessibility requirements for students with physical and sensory disabilities. This bolsters the claim made by Kaur and Bhatia (2024) that inclusive pedagogy necessitates that educators acknowledge and address learner variability rather than viewing differences as barriers. In this context, diagnostic testing was seen as both an academic tool and a means of guaranteeing fair participation and accessibility in classroom instruction. This finding also resonates with Wati et al. (2025), who stated that differentiated learning promotes a more inclusive and responsive approach to accommodating student differences in classroom learning.

However, not all teachers demonstrated a comprehensive conceptual understanding of diagnostic assessment. Some participants expressed concern about the effectiveness of the assessment design and continued to interpret diagnostic assessments procedurally. This result may indicate that teachers' assessment literacy is underdeveloped. According to Isnawati (2023), teachers' capacity to use assessment in a meaningful way in the classroom is frequently impacted by low assessment literacy. Similarly, Ankoma-Sey (2020), noted that a lack of institutional support and insufficient professional training often make it difficult for teachers to include assessment into their lessons. This condition may also reflect the practical challenges highlighted by Digna and Japa (2023), who found that implementing differentiated instruction often creates difficulties related to time management, planning, and instructional integration for teachers.

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers recognized diagnostic assessment as an important foundation for differentiated instruction, although the depth of understanding varied considerably among participants. By demonstrating that teachers' interpretations of diagnostic assessment range from fundamental procedural understandings to more comprehensive perspectives on responsive and inclusive education, this study contributes to the literature. Therefore, to improve teachers' conceptual and practical competency in EFL classrooms, structured professional development programs that emphasize assessment literacy and differentiated instruction are required.

Implementation of Diagnostic Assessment to Support Differentiated Instruction

The results indicated that all participants reported using various forms of diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction in their classrooms. However, their reported practices varied considerably in terms of formality, instrument design, and level of systematic application. Most teachers reported relying on informal methods, including oral questioning, classroom observation, and simple written tasks, rather than standardized diagnostic tools. They also reported using diagnostic assessment results primarily to group students according to ability levels and to adjust instructional content, teaching methods, and assessment tasks. In this study, these practices were categorized as diagnostic when teachers reported using them to identify students' prior knowledge, readiness, and learning needs for subsequent

instructional decisions. Table 2 presents the findings on teachers' reported implementation of diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction.

Table 2. Teachers' Interpretations of Diagnostic Assessment within Differentiated Instruction

Teacher	Diagnostic Assessment Practices	Differentiated Instruction Strategy	Representative Excerpt
T1	Oral questioning before lessons	Adjusting learning activities	<i>"Using verbal prompts to identify prior knowledge."</i>
T2	Vocabulary dictation	Readiness-based scaffolding	<i>"Observe whether students can write vocabulary correctly."</i>
T3	Observation and informal checks	Ability grouping	<i>"Grouping students based on strengths and weaknesses."</i>
T4	Written grammar diagnostic tasks	Content differentiation	<i>"Students identify adjectives, verbs, and imperatives."</i>
T5	Recount-text feature identification	Basic–intermediate–advanced grouping	<i>"Distinguishing fast and slow learners."</i>
T6	Informal classroom observation	Instructional adjustment	<i>"Differentiation looks ideal but drains energy."</i>
T7	Classroom participation monitoring	Group-based differentiation	<i>"More effective in smaller groups."</i>
T8	Oral, Google Form, and paper-based assessments	Content, process, and product differentiation	<i>"Different learning styles require different activities."</i>
T9	Sticky-note entry tickets and observation	Inclusive and accessibility-based differentiation	<i>"Students write opinions and explain them verbally."</i>
T10	Observation-based diagnostic practices	Product differentiation	<i>"Preparing different materials for every class is exhausting."</i>

Overall, the findings showed that teachers actively used diagnostic assessments to enhance individualized instruction. However, implementation remained mostly informal, teacher-led, and heavily reliant on personal initiative rather than standardized institutional assistance. While instructors showed a high commitment to responsive education, systematic implementation was hampered by workload, a lack of validated instruments, and insufficient structural support.

The findings indicated that teachers reported using various forms of diagnostic assessment to support differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms. Most of these reported practices were informal, including oral questioning, teacher observation of students, and simple written tasks. In this study, diagnostic assessment was operationally understood as assessment used to identify students' prior knowledge, readiness, strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs in order to inform subsequent instructional decisions. Thus, the diagnostic nature of these practices was determined primarily by their purpose and use rather than by the assessment format itself. Informal assessment methods may provide teachers with flexible, context-specific information about students' learning needs in EFL environments. This understanding is consistent with Alderson et al. (2015) and Von Davier and Lee (2019), who emphasize the diagnostic function of assessment in identifying learners' existing knowledge and learning difficulties.

Additionally, the study discovered that readiness-based grouping, scaffolding, and modifying instructional content and classroom activities were the primary uses of diagnostic assessment results. These methods are in line with the differentiated education concepts put forth by Tomlinson (2014), who stressed that instructional adaptability needs to be predicated on students' learning profiles, interests, and readiness. Furthermore, to effectively educate, teachers must continually monitor students' learning progress and adjust their lesson plans accordingly. Therefore, the teachers' use of diagnostic assessment for grouping and instructional modification demonstrates an effort to implement responsive pedagogy in diverse

classrooms. The finding also supports Tomlinson's (2013) perspective that differentiated instruction enables teachers to modify content, process, and learning environments according to students' readiness levels and individual characteristics.

It is interesting to note that some teachers combined a variety of assessment methods, including Google Forms, paper-based assignments, oral evaluations, and observational methods. This result is consistent with the idea of flexible assessment procedures, which enable teachers to gather data using a variety of techniques based on student characteristics and classroom settings (Widiastuti, 2020). Additionally, Visser et al. (2023) stressed the need to use a variety of assessment techniques to capture students' unique learning preferences and talents. This is in line with Herda et al.'s (2026) classroom evaluation, that mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning has led efforts to develop engaging learning experiences in a deep learning dimension in response to conducting a diagnostic assessment. Teachers' efforts to adapt assessment procedures to modern learning environments are also evident in the incorporation of digital resources such as Google Forms. This adaptation also reflects the student-centered orientation emphasized in the *Kurikulum Merdeka* policy (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), which encourages flexible, differentiated instructional practices tailored to students' learning needs and readiness.

Despite these efforts, instructors cited serious difficulties with workload, time constraints for preparation, a lack of standardized tools, and quickly evolving educational regulations. These results are in line with earlier research demonstrating that differentiated education is frequently viewed as pedagogically beneficial but practically challenging (Musasa, 2024). Teachers' difficulties may also reflect the complexity of implementing continuous assessment while simultaneously managing diverse classroom needs. According to Prasetyaningtyas et al. (2025), differentiated assessment requires substantial planning, flexibility, and instructional preparation, which may increase teachers' professional burden. Similarly, Listiani (2023) found that EFL teachers frequently encounter obstacles such as large class sizes, limited time, and insufficient assessment training when implementing differentiated instruction practices.

Another important finding was that diagnostic assessment practices relied heavily on teachers' personal initiative rather than institutional systems or policy support. The majority of participants reported that schools had not offered collaborative professional assistance for differentiated instruction, validated diagnostic tools, or organized frameworks. This result validates Hurtienne and Hurtienne (2024) theory of educational change, which contends that institutional commitment, collaborative culture, and systemic support are necessary for sustainable instructional innovation. Without this kind of assistance, classroom innovations often remain erratic and reliant on the drive and ability of individual teachers. This condition is also similar to the findings of Sukarno et al. (2024), who reported that although teachers viewed differentiated instruction positively, they still experienced difficulties in implementation due to limited instructional experience and classroom management challenges.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers showed a strong commitment toward understanding students' learning needs through diagnostic assessment despite various contextual limitations. By illustrating the realities of implementing differentiated instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms, specifically, how teachers strike a balance between pedagogical expectations and practical constraints, this study adds to the body of literature. Therefore, to improve the sustainability and efficacy of differentiated instruction techniques, professional development programs, contextualized diagnostic evaluation tools, and more robust institutional support are required.

CONCLUSION

In the context of differentiated instruction in junior high school classes, this study investigated how EFL teachers understand and apply diagnostic assessments. The results showed that the majority of teachers recognized diagnostic assessment as a crucial method

for determining students' readiness levels, prior knowledge, learning characteristics, interests, and skills before the start of instruction. Teachers typically saw diagnostic assessment as a starting point for creating responsive and adaptive learning environments that meet the needs of a wide range of students. However, there were significant differences in the degree of instructors' conceptual knowledge, ranging from procedural interpretations to more thorough understandings related to inclusive and responsive teaching. The study also found that teachers used various informal methods to implement diagnostic assessment, including oral questioning, classroom observation, vocabulary checks, written tasks, and digital tools such as Google Forms. The assessment data were used to inform readiness-based grouping, scaffolding, content modification, and differentiated classroom activities.

These results demonstrate how assessment-informed teaching can help teachers better address student diversity in EFL classes and reinforce the critical role that diagnostic assessment plays in enabling differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, the study revealed several significant challenges in consistently and systematically implementing diagnostic assessment. Workload, preparation time constraints, a lack of standardized assessment tools, inadequate professional development, and a lack of institutional support were common challenges educators faced. As a result, rather than established school systems or cooperative professional practices, the implementation of diagnostic assessment frequently relied significantly on teachers' individual initiative. Teachers nevertheless demonstrated a strong dedication to understanding students' learning needs and implementing customized instruction as effectively as possible despite these limitations. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on differentiated instruction and assessment practices by providing insights into teachers' lived experiences and practical realities in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

This study emphasizes the complexity of teachers' interpretations, informal assessment techniques, and contextual barriers encountered during implementation, in contrast to earlier research that mostly concentrated on theoretical discussions or student outcomes. The results show that effective implementation of differentiated instruction requires not only teacher knowledge and dedication but also long-term institutional support, assessment literacy, and useful assessment frameworks appropriate for classroom settings. Therefore, this study implies that schools, policymakers, and teacher education programs should provide more structured professional development focusing on diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and assessment literacy. Schools should also provide teachers with practical instructions for implementing differentiated learning in heterogeneous EFL classrooms, verified diagnostic assessment tools, and chances for collaborative planning. Future studies could examine the efficacy of specific diagnostic assessment models, analyze how students feel about differentiated assessment procedures, or examine how diagnostic assessment is used across broader educational contexts and levels.

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