

# Implementing Process Differentiation Through Tiered Tasks in an ESP Mixed-Ability Classroom

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**Abstract:** This study examined the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks in a mixed-ability English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classroom and explored students' perceptions of the activities. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the study involved 30 university students in an ESP class in the Islamic Education Department. Data were collected through classroom observations, reflective teaching notes, documentation of students' work, and a questionnaire with closed- and open-ended items. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, and quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings showed that process differentiation was implemented through adjusted task responsibilities, scaffolded instructional support, and mixed-ability collaborative roles while maintaining common learning objectives. The qualitative findings indicated that practice-based learning and group collaboration supported students' understanding and participation, whereas language production and group dynamics remained key challenges. Quantitatively, students reported highly positive perceptions, with an overall mean score of 3.36 (Very High). The highest scores were found for Individual Contribution ( $M = 3.49$ ), Task Integration ( $M = 3.47$ ), and Group Collaboration ( $M = 3.46$ ). However, challenges related to pronunciation, speaking performance, communication, and unequal group participation persisted. These findings suggest that tiered tasks offer a practical strategy for implementing differentiated instruction in mixed-ability ESP classrooms, particularly in higher education contexts.

**Keywords:** differentiated instruction, process differentiation, tiered tasks, ESP

## INTRODUCTION

University-level English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms are often characterized by mixed-ability groupings. This condition creates challenges because students have diverse levels of language proficiency and varying degrees of motivation to engage in the learning process (Fitria, 2023). Students with low proficiency tend to be less motivated because they cannot cope with learning activities as quickly as higher-achieving students (Stoichkova, 2024). This situation highlights the need for instructional approaches that can accommodate learner diversity without compromising learning objectives. In this regard, Tomlinson

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(2014) proposes differentiated instruction as a pedagogical approach that adapts teaching activities based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Through this approach, students are provided with learning opportunities that are more suitable for their individual needs through four types of modification: content, process, product, and learning environment.

The implementation of differentiated instruction provides equal opportunities for all students to demonstrate their abilities by allowing adjustments in materials, tasks, and levels of support, despite differences in proficiency level (Titus, 2025). Students may become more engaged in the learning process and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Widayanti et al., 2024). Differentiated instruction benefits not only individuals but also classroom dynamics because it improves cooperation and collaboration among students (Mardhatillah & Suharyadi, 2023). However, in practice, differentiated instruction has its own complexity because the classroom requires continuous adjustments by teachers to meet learners' diverse needs (Van Geel et al., 2019).

These complexities often become significant obstacles within the Indonesian context. Research indicates that larger class sizes lead to more diverse student needs, which significantly increases the time required for preparation (Mirawati et al., 2022). Furthermore, successful implementation depends heavily on students' readiness to accept varied activities (Suryati & Ratih, 2023). Time constraints and heavy administrative burdens further discourage teachers from fully adopting differentiated instruction, despite its recognized benefits (Beladinna et al., 2025). Other studies highlight a persistent gap between awareness of differentiated instruction and its daily practice in Indonesia.

Although differentiated instruction is a growing global research trend, Indonesia still ranks among the lowest in its application (Maulana et al., 2021). Similarly, among various teaching behaviors, differentiated instruction often receives the lowest scores because of insufficient adaptation in actual classroom settings (Irnidayanti & Fadhillah, 2023). Although these challenges are often documented in secondary schools, a similar situation exists in higher education. Lecturers encounter increasing student diversity, limited time, prescribed content requirements, and administrative duties that constrain the effective implementation of differentiated instruction (Subban et al., 2025). As a result, lecturers may face challenges in translating the principles of differentiated instruction into actual classroom practice.

To address these challenges, this study examines the implementation of differentiated instruction in a mixed-ability ESP classroom by focusing on process differentiation through tiered tasks. In process differentiation, students work toward the same learning objectives but complete tasks with varying degrees of difficulty (Tomlinson, 2014). By differentiating the learning process rather than the curriculum content or assessment system, tiered tasks provide a practical and feasible approach to inclusive instruction without requiring major changes to existing curricular frameworks. The findings may offer insights that can be adapted across different educational levels in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to examine the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks in a mixed-ability ESP classroom and to investigate students' perceptions of this approach.

## METHOD

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design to examine the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks and students' perceptions of the learning process. Qualitative data were used to explore how process differentiation was implemented during classroom activities, while quantitative data were used to measure students' perceptions of the differentiated learning experience. Both sets of data were collected during the same instructional period and interpreted together to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). This research adopted a teacher-researcher perspective, in which the first researcher was directly involved in the teaching process while maintaining reflective documentation of classroom practices (La Velle, 2024). To reduce potential bias, the second researcher independently reviewed and interpreted the data.

The study was conducted in one ESP class in the Islamic Education Department (*Prodi Pendidikan Agama Islam*) at the university level over six meetings. The class consisted of 30 students with different levels of English proficiency. Students' proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, and advanced) were determined using a combination of a diagnostic task and students' previous English course performance, with equal weight assigned to each data source. In line with Tomlinson's concept of readiness, English proficiency was used as an indicator of students' learning readiness in this study. This categorization guided the design of tiered tasks and grouping strategies during the implementation.

Data were collected using several instruments, namely classroom observations, reflective teaching notes, documentation of students' work, and a questionnaire distributed to the students. The questionnaire contained 28 items consisting of 22 closed-ended questions and six open-ended questions. Before distribution, the questionnaire items were reviewed by two lecturers in English Language Teaching to ensure content relevance and clarity. The use of multiple data sources enabled data triangulation and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

During the first meeting, a diagnostic task was administered to identify students' proficiency levels. From the second to the fifth meetings, differentiated learning activities and tiered tasks were implemented through individual and group activities. Classroom observations and reflective teaching notes were recorded throughout the implementation process. Students' work in the form of procedure texts and video projects was collected as supporting documentation. At the end of the sixth meeting, questionnaires were distributed to gather students' perceptions of the differentiated learning activities.

Responses to the six open-ended questionnaire items and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to the implementation of learning activities. Thematic analysis was conducted through the following procedures as shown in the Figure 1 below.

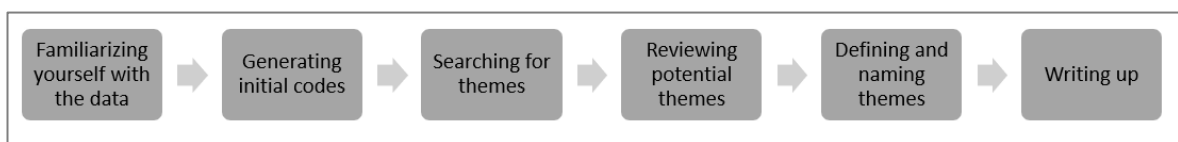


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The qualitative data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to students' learning experiences, participation, collaboration, and challenges during differentiated learning activities.

The closed-ended questionnaire section consisted of 22 items and employed a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). The closed-ended items were grouped into six categories: Learning Preparation, Task Appropriateness, Task Integration, Perceived Benefits, Individual Contribution, and Group Collaboration. These categories were designed to capture students' perceptions of the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks, in which all students received the same instructional input, completed tasks matched to their abilities, and worked collaboratively to produce one integrated final product.

*Table 1. Questionnaire Items*

| Category                       | Item Numbers | Focus                                                                     |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Learning Preparation</b>    | 1–4          | Students' understanding of the common input and preparation for the tasks |
| <b>Task Appropriateness</b>    | 5–7          | Suitability of differentiated tasks and availability of support           |
| <b>Task Integration</b>        | 8–11         | How individual tasks contributed to one integrated group product          |
| <b>Perceived Benefits</b>      | 12–14        | Students' perceived learning gains and engagement                         |
| <b>Individual Contribution</b> | 15–18        | Students' evaluation of their own contributions                           |
| <b>Group Collaboration</b>     | 19–22        | Students' perceptions of peer participation and teamwork                  |

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate the mean score for each item. The mean score was calculated using the following formula:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

Where X = the mean score,  $\sum X$  = the total sum of all individual scores given by the respondents for a particular item, and N = the total number of respondents. Mean scores were calculated at both the item and dimension levels by averaging multiple related items. The use of the mean is considered appropriate when multiple Likert-type items are combined into a composite score, which can be treated as interval data (Boone & Boone, 2012).

*Table 2. Quantitative Data Interpretation*

| Mean Range         | Interpretation |
|--------------------|----------------|
| <b>1.00 – 1.75</b> | Very Low       |
| <b>1.76 – 2.50</b> | Low            |
| <b>2.51 – 3.25</b> | High           |
| <b>3.26 – 4.00</b> | Very High      |

The mean scores were categorized using equal interval ranges for interpretation. The interval width was calculated by dividing the scale range (4 - 1) by the number of categories (4), resulting in an interval of 0.75. The interpretation criteria are presented in Table 2.

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings on the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks in a mixed-ability ESP classroom. The findings are drawn from classroom observations, students' work, and questionnaire responses. They describe the process differentiation implemented through tiered tasks in the ESP classroom and students' perceptions of the differentiated learning activities.

### A. Implementation of process differentiation

The implementation of process differentiation in this study was carried out gradually over six meetings in an ESP classroom in the Islamic Education Department, consisting of 30 students with mixed levels of English proficiency. The learning topic focused on procedure texts. In the first meeting, all students received the same instructional input to establish a shared understanding of the concept of procedure texts. The lecturer explained the social function, generic structure, language features, and examples of procedure texts through whole-class instruction. To identify students' proficiency levels, the lecturer conducted a diagnostic task and reviewed students' previous classroom performance. Based on the results, students were categorized into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. The grouping was conducted implicitly to maintain an inclusive classroom atmosphere and avoid visible labeling among students.

The diagnostic task consisted of a reading exercise followed by several short-answer questions designed to assess students' comprehension of procedure texts. In addition to the diagnostic task, students' previous classroom performance was considered based on their final English course scores from the previous semester. To determine students' proficiency levels, equal weight was assigned to both sources of data, with 50% derived from the diagnostic task and 50% from previous academic performance. The classification was divided according to the combined score as follows:  $\leq 60$  for the beginner level, 61-80 for the intermediate level, and  $\geq 81$  for the advanced level. Based on the combined results, six students were categorized as advanced learners, 11 as intermediate learners, and 13 as beginner learners. The students were then organized into six heterogeneous groups consisting of five members each.

Process differentiation was introduced through tiered scaffolding during classroom activities in the second and third meetings. Students completed individual tasks related to procedure texts with variations in complexity and instructional support. Beginner students received vocabulary lists, sentence models, guided questions, and structured instructions. Intermediate students completed partially guided activities that required more independent idea development. Advanced students were encouraged to elaborate ideas, vary sentence structures, and complete tasks with minimal lecturer assistance. The lecturer also provided individual consultation and feedback during task completion. Some students required clarification of instructions and vocabulary support, while others needed assistance with

grammar accuracy and content development. In the fourth and fifth meetings, all group members worked collaboratively to develop the final product.

The final product, consisting of a procedure text and a video related to a topic in Islamic Education, was presented in the sixth meeting. Although the final learning product was the same for all groups, different roles and responsibilities were assigned based on students' abilities. Beginner students were mainly responsible for collecting vocabulary items, identifying procedural steps, and organizing simple information. Intermediate students focused on developing the draft, arranging the text structure, and revising language use with guidance. Advanced students were assigned more complex responsibilities, such as editing the final text, ensuring coherence, and delivering narration for the video project.

Throughout the project work, the lecturer continuously monitored group discussions and provided support when necessary. Beginner students generally required more frequent assistance with language comprehension and task understanding, while advanced students tended to work more independently and required only occasional feedback. Short consultation sessions were also conducted to help groups complete the project successfully. The final project submission in the sixth meeting was followed by classroom reflection on students' learning experiences.

### B. Process differentiation through tiered tasks: Qualitative findings

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeated readings of students' responses and observation sheets, followed by initial coding, categorization, and theme generation. The findings resulted in four interconnected themes that reflect students' experiences and perceptions of process differentiation in the ESP classroom. The data are represented anonymously using "R(number)" to refer to different respondents and proficiency levels: A for advanced, I for intermediate, and B for beginner students.

Table 3 presents the process of theme development from the initial coding stage to the final themes generated from the data. The themes reflect students' experiences of learning activities, collaborative learning, language-related difficulties, and group dynamics during the implementation of process differentiation.

Table 3. Initial Coding and Theme Development

| Initial Codes                                                                                                | Categories                           | Themes                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Direct practice, easier understanding, learning by doing, procedural steps</i>                            | Practice-oriented learning           | Practice-Based Learning Improved Understanding   |
| <i>Sharing tasks, helping each other, learning from peers, teamwork, responsibility</i>                      | Collaborative learning support       | Group Collaboration Supported Learning           |
| <i>Pronunciation difficulty, speaking difficulty, arranging English text, memorizing English expressions</i> | Language production difficulties     | Language Production Became the Main Challenge    |
| <i>Lack of communication, scheduling problems, unequal contribution, difficulty coordinating groups</i>      | Group coordination and participation | Group Dynamics Influenced Learning Effectiveness |

The initial coding process was refined into four major themes that summarize students' perceptions of the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks. Table 4 presents the final themes along with representative evidence from students' responses.

*Table 4. Themes Generated from Thematic Analysis*

| Themes                                                         | Description                                                                                                                    | Representative Evidence<br>(translated into English)                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><i>Practice-Based Learning Improved Understanding</i></b>   | Students perceived direct practice activities as helpful for understanding ESP materials more concretely.                      | "Direct practice made it easier to understand" (R12-I); "when practicing directly, I understood much better" (R29-B) |
| <b><i>Group Collaboration Supported Learning</i></b>           | Collaborative activities helped students share responsibilities and support each other during tasks.                           | "Everything was divided so we could work together" (R1-A); "we could learn from one another" (R8-B)                  |
| <b><i>Language Production Became the Main Challenge</i></b>    | Students still experienced difficulties in speaking-related tasks, particularly pronunciation and text production.             | "English pronunciation" (R20-B); "arranging the text and pronouncing it" (R27-I)                                     |
| <b><i>Group Dynamics Influenced Learning Effectiveness</i></b> | The effectiveness of differentiated activities depended on communication, coordination, and participation among group members. | "Lack of communication" (R8-B); "not everyone really contributed" (R22-I)                                            |

The findings indicate that students generally perceived process differentiation positively. Students frequently mentioned that the activities helped them understand the material more easily, for example, "direct practice made it easier to understand" (R12-I) and "when practicing directly, I understood much better" (R29-B). Collaborative learning also emerged as a dominant pattern in the data. Students described group work as beneficial because responsibilities could be shared among members. Responses such as "everything was divided so we could work together" (R1-A) and "we could learn from one another" (R8-B) reflected positive perceptions of collaborative activities. The findings further showed that differentiated responsibilities allowed students to contribute according to their proficiency levels. Students with lower proficiency levels completed simpler responsibilities, while advanced students handled more complex tasks. One student explained that the task distribution matched "each member's ability" (R5).

Despite these positive responses, students still experienced several difficulties during the learning process. Common challenges included pronunciation, speaking performance, and arranging procedure texts. Some students stated that they struggled with "English pronunciation" (R20-B) and "arranging the text and pronouncing it" (R27-I). Classroom observations also revealed differences in the amount of lecturer assistance required by students. Beginner students generally required more structured guidance and examples, whereas advanced students tended to work more independently and mainly required feedback during task completion. Another finding concerned the influence of group dynamics on learning effectiveness. Although collaborative learning was viewed positively, some students reported problems related to communication, unequal participation, and

scheduling difficulties. Students mentioned "lack of communication" (R8-B) and situations in which "not everyone really contributed" (R22-I).

Overall, the findings show that process differentiation through tiered tasks created learning experiences that combined practical activities, collaborative learning, and differentiated responsibilities. Students with different proficiency levels were able to participate in the same learning activities through adjusted responsibilities and varying levels of instructional support.

### C. Students' perceptions: Quantitative findings

To complement the qualitative findings, students' perceptions were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. The questionnaire data were calculated by determining the mean score for each dimension based on students' responses to the Likert-scale items. The mean scores were then interpreted using interval categories ranging from Very Low to Very High. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Table 5.

*Table 5. Students' Perceptions Toward the Implementation of Process Differentiation*

| Category                | Mean | Interpretation |
|-------------------------|------|----------------|
| Learning Preparation    | 3.41 | Very High      |
| Task Appropriateness    | 3.23 | High           |
| Task Integration        | 3.47 | Very High      |
| Perceived Benefits      | 3.08 | High           |
| Individual Contribution | 3.49 | Very High      |
| Group Collaboration     | 3.46 | Very High      |
| Overall Mean            | 3.36 | Very High      |

Based on the interpretation criteria, the overall mean score of 3.36 falls within the "Very High" category, indicating that students generally had positive perceptions of the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks. The highest mean score was found in Individual Contribution ( $M = 3.49$ ), followed by Task Integration ( $M = 3.47$ ) and Group Collaboration ( $M = 3.46$ ). These findings indicate that students perceived the differentiated task distribution as effective in enabling participation according to their abilities while supporting collaborative learning. Learning Preparation ( $M = 3.41$ ) was also categorized as "Very High," indicating that the common instructional input helped students prepare for subsequent learning tasks. Meanwhile, Task Appropriateness ( $M = 3.23$ ) and Perceived Benefits ( $M = 3.08$ ) were categorized as "High," suggesting that students generally considered the tasks appropriate to their proficiency levels and beneficial to their learning process.

## DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings in relation to the research objectives and previous studies on differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms. The findings demonstrate that process differentiation through tiered tasks enabled students with different proficiency levels to participate in the same ESP learning activities through adjusted responsibilities and varying levels of instructional support. Rather than simplifying learning objectives, the

differentiation focused on modifying the learning process according to students' readiness levels, as represented by their English proficiency levels. This indicates that differentiated instruction functioned as a strategy to increase students' access to learning while maintaining common academic goals (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Langelan et al., 2024; Tomlinson, 2014). The findings are consistent with the principles of differentiated instruction, which emphasize equitable participation through adaptive instructional processes rather than reduced academic expectations.

The study also revealed that practice-oriented learning activities helped students understand ESP materials more effectively. Students frequently associated direct practice with a clearer understanding of the material. This suggests that experiential and practice-based activities supported students in connecting language forms with meaningful real-life actions and contexts (Rahmawati & Mar'an, 2024). In ESP learning, contextualized practice allows students to engage more actively with language use because the learning activities are directly connected to authentic communication purposes. In addition, collaborative learning in the mixed ability grouping system encouraged peer interaction, shared responsibilities, and collaborative problem-solving. Students perceived group work as beneficial because they could learn from one another and divide responsibilities according to their abilities. The findings imply that differentiation was implemented through collaborative participation within heterogeneous groups rather than through separation between high- and low-achieving students (Dosoitei & Alexa, 2024). This supports perspectives on collaborative differentiation, in which peer interaction becomes an important source of support in mixed-ability classrooms (Schürmann et al., 2024).

The role distribution within tiered tasks also reflected scaffolded learning processes. Beginner students completed simpler responsibilities, intermediate students managed partially guided tasks, and advanced students handled more complex aspects of the project. The varying levels of support indicate that scaffolding occurred not only through lecturer assistance but also through peer interaction within groups (Van Hoe et al., 2024). Classroom observations further showed that beginner students required more structured explanations and examples, while advanced students could work more independently. This finding aligns with perspectives on scaffolding that emphasize adaptive support and adjustment of teacher assistance based on students' readiness and learning needs (Ertugruloglu et al., 2023). In this context, tiered tasks supported process differentiation not only through task variation but also through peer-assisted learning processes (Tomlinson, 2014).

However, the findings also show that productive language skills, particularly pronunciation and speaking performance, remained challenging for several students. Although differentiated instruction supported participation and task completion, differences in learning readiness, as reflected in students' English proficiency levels, still influenced students' confidence and performance during speaking-related activities. Students continued to experience difficulties in pronunciation and text production, especially during direct speaking tasks. Nevertheless, collaborative activities helped reduce students' anxiety because they could rely on support from other group members during the learning process. This reflects the role of peer scaffolding in supporting language learning through social interaction and collaborative assistance (Van Hoe et al., 2024).

In addition, the effectiveness of differentiated collaborative learning was strongly influenced by group dynamics. Some students reported communication problems, unequal participation, and scheduling difficulties during group projects. These findings suggest that successful implementation of process differentiation depends not only on instructional design but also on students' willingness to collaborate actively within their groups (Primana et al., 2017). Although differentiated support and scaffolding were provided by the lecturer, ineffective communication and unequal participation could still reduce the effectiveness of collaborative learning activities.

The quantitative findings further strengthened the qualitative results. The overall mean score categorized as "Very High" indicates that students generally perceived process differentiation positively. High scores in individual contribution, task integration, and group collaboration demonstrate that students felt capable of participating meaningfully according to their abilities while working toward shared learning outcomes. The consistency between qualitative and quantitative findings strengthens the conclusion that process differentiation through tiered tasks created an inclusive, supportive, and adaptive learning environment for mixed-ability ESP students (Hasanuddin et al., 2024; Li, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the implementation of process differentiation through tiered tasks in a mixed-ability ESP classroom and to investigate students' perceptions of its implementation. The findings show that process differentiation was implemented by adjusting task responsibilities, levels of instructional support, and collaborative roles according to students' proficiency levels while maintaining common learning objectives for all students. The differentiated activities were carried out through scaffolded individual tasks and mixed-ability group projects that allowed students to participate according to their proficiency levels. The study also found that students generally responded positively to the implementation of tiered tasks. Both qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that collaborative learning, task integration, and differentiated responsibilities supported students' participation and understanding of ESP materials. However, challenges related to pronunciation, speaking performance, communication, and unequal participation were still identified during the learning process.

This study contributes to the fields of ESP and differentiated instruction by demonstrating that process differentiation through tiered tasks can be implemented within standardized university classrooms without requiring major curricular modification. This approach may provide a practical strategy for accommodating learner diversity in mixed-ability ESP contexts, particularly in higher education classrooms where students demonstrate varying levels of English proficiency. However, this study has several limitations. It was conducted in only one ESP classroom with a relatively small number of participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the implementation period lasted only six meetings, so the study could not fully examine the long-term effects of process differentiation on students' language development. Future studies are recommended to involve larger participant groups, longer implementation periods, and different ESP contexts to provide broader insights into differentiated instruction practices.

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