



Differentiated Instruction for Slow Learner Inclusion Students in English Language Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT: Despite the growing recognition of differentiated instruction for diverse learners, its implementation for slow learner inclusion students in English language teaching within resource-constrained Indonesian schools remains underexplored. This study investigates the implementation of differentiated learning models for slow learner inclusion students at SMPN 1 Rembon, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, focusing on the challenges these students face and the impact of differentiated instruction on their learning motivation and competence. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine slow learner inclusion students, two English teachers, and two homeroom teachers, complemented by classroom observations and document analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted within Miles and Huberman's interactive framework. The findings revealed eight major challenges confronting slow learner inclusion students: negative emotional responses, perceived difficulty of English, comprehension failures, falling behind during instruction, need for extended learning time, vocabulary deficits, affective barriers, and environmental obstacles. Following differentiated learning implementation, four significant positive impacts emerged: improved comprehension and language skills demonstrated by increased ability in writing simple commands (from 20% to 75%), enhanced participation rates (from 75% to 85%), strengthened intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, and development of independent learning habits. Teachers identified five implementation challenges and employed eight effective strategies including content differentiation, discovery learning, parent collaboration, and individual learning plans. The study concludes that despite infrastructural and pedagogical constraints in peripheral educational settings, targeted differentiation strategies can substantially improve learning outcomes for slow learner inclusion students. These findings contribute original insights into differentiated instruction in the Indonesian ELT context, challenging the assumption that effective inclusion requires resource-intensive interventions while providing evidence-based recommendations for creating inclusive learning environments that advance educational equity in the Global South.

KEYWORDS: Differentiated instruction, slow learner, inclusion students, English language teaching, educational equity

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental principle of contemporary educational policy worldwide, affirming the right of all students regardless of their learning differences to access quality education alongside their peers (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022; Cavas, 2025; Pedraza-Navarro, 2025). In Indonesia, the implementation of inclusive education has gained momentum over the past decade, with increasing numbers of students with diverse learning needs enrolled in mainstream classrooms (Ediyanto et al., 2023; Mendoza & Heymann, 2024; Sari et al., 2022). Among these students, slow learners those who learn at a slower pace than their peers but do not qualify for special education services represent a significant population whose educational needs are often inadequately addressed in regular classroom settings (CATE P. RIVAS, 2025; Dayso et al., 2025; Kapici, 2025).

Slow learners characteristically require more time, repetition, and explicit instruction to master new concepts, yet they are frequently taught alongside typically developing peers without adequate curricular or instructional adjustments (Bowman & Germaine, 2022; Dash & Bhattacharyya, 2023; Serventy & Allen, 2021; Yotta, 2023). In English language teaching, where the cognitive demands of second language acquisition compound existing learning difficulties, slow learners face particularly acute challenges (Goldin et al., 2023; Thane, 2023). They struggle with vocabulary retention, grammatical understanding, and the development of all four language skills, often experiencing cumulative learning gaps that widen progressively over time (Ardayati & Ramasari, 2025; Rabi'ah Al-Adawiyah et al., 2025; Zuleha et al., 2025). Without appropriate instructional support, these students become increasingly disengaged, developing negative academic self-concepts and systematically avoiding language learning tasks.



Differentiated instruction has emerged as a promising pedagogical framework for addressing diverse learner needs in inclusive classrooms. Tomlinson and Imbeau (2023) conceptualize differentiated instruction as a proactive approach in which teachers modify content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Rather than treating all students identically, differentiated instruction provides multiple pathways for accessing curriculum and demonstrating learning (Buagas & Cabrera, 2025; Howorth et al., 2024; Rohma & Sa'adah, 2025; Verma, 2025). By adjusting language input complexity, providing varied practice opportunities, and offering flexible assessment options, teachers can create conditions enabling slow learners to experience gradual success and rebuild academic confidence (Oubibi, 2025; Sander & de la Fuente, 2022; Shan & Tong, 2024). Research has demonstrated that differentiated approaches in language classrooms can increase engagement, reduce anxiety, and improve learning outcomes for diverse learners (Akhmetova et al., 2023; Jufrianto et al., 2025; Rahmaniar et al., 2024; Yuniawati, 2024).

Despite growing international interest in differentiated instruction, limited research has examined its implementation for slow learner inclusion students in Indonesian English language classrooms. Existing studies have focused on differentiated instruction in general education contexts (Lawrence-Brown, 2004; Phan Nguyen Tra, 2022; S & Pujaningsih, 2025) or examined inclusive education policies without specific attention to English teaching (Suprihatiningrum et al., 2025; Tai, 2025; Zebuniso & Kizi, 2025). This study addresses these gaps by investigating two research questions: (1) What are the learning challenges faced by slow learner inclusion students in English classes at SMPN 1 Rembon? (2) How does the implementation of differentiated learning models impact the English competence of slow learner inclusion students? The significance of this study is threefold: theoretically, it extends theories of inclusive pedagogy into an under-researched context; practically, it offers evidence-based guidance for teachers, administrators, and policymakers; and methodologically, it demonstrates qualitative inquiry's value in capturing the nuanced effects of pedagogical interventions on diverse learners.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine differentiated learning practices for slow learner inclusion students at SMPN 1 Rembon, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The case study approach was selected for its capacity to generate rich, context-sensitive understanding of complex phenomena situated within real-world educational settings (Yin, 2018). A qualitative orientation was appropriate given the emphasis on lived experiences, subjective perceptions, and the nuanced pedagogical effects of differentiated instruction on learners with diverse cognitive profiles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design enabled in-depth exploration of how differentiated instruction operates in an inclusive junior high school context, an area that remains underrepresented in the Indonesian EFL literature (Musyarrafah et al., 2024; Laksono et al., 2024).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMPN 1 Rembon, a state junior high school implementing national inclusive education policies in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), applying the following criteria: formal enrollment in inclusive classes, identification as slow learners by subject and homeroom teachers, and voluntary willingness to participate. The study involved nine slow learner inclusion students, two English teachers with documented differentiated instruction implementation experience, and two homeroom teachers who monitored students' cross-subject progress. This multi-stakeholder design enabled triangulation of perspectives across student, subject teacher, and homeroom teacher viewpoints, thereby strengthening the credibility of findings (Sari et al., 2022).

Data Collection

Data were gathered through three complementary methods. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with all participants using protocols derived from the research questions and current differentiated instruction literature. Student interviews explored perceived learning challenges, attitudes toward English, differentiated instruction experiences, and self-reported changes in motivation and academic competence. Teacher interviews examined implementation understanding, observed student impacts, and encountered challenges. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to enable natural and full expression (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), lasted 45 to 60 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Second, structured classroom observations documented pedagogical practices, student engagement patterns, and evidence of learning progress or difficulty, with



field notes capturing contextual details (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Third, document analysis of lesson plans, teaching materials, and student work samples provided corroborating evidence of instructional practices and learning outcomes (Kartini & Aprilia, 2022).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2020) interactive model comprising three recursive processes: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts were verbatim-transcribed and read repeatedly for familiarization. Data condensation involved systematic coding using both deductive codes anchored in the research questions and inductive codes emerging from the data (Saldana, 2021), refined through constant comparison. Data display involved constructing thematic matrices presenting themes, findings, and representative participant quotations. Conclusion drawing entailed interpreting emerging patterns, returning to original data sources, and actively searching for disconfirming evidence to ensure analytic rigor.

RESULTS

Analysis of interview data from nine slow learner inclusion students, two English teachers, and two homeroom teachers, triangulated with classroom observations and document analysis, revealed four major categories of findings: (1) challenges experienced by slow learners prior to differentiated instruction implementation; (2) positive impacts following implementation; (3) teacher-identified implementation challenges and adaptive strategies; and (4) independent homeroom teacher observations confirming pre- and post-implementation differences.

Challenges Faced by Slow Learner Inclusion Students

Eight major themes emerged regarding the challenges slow learners encountered in English classes. These themes span cognitive, affective, social, and environmental dimensions and frequently interact in self-reinforcing patterns that compound over successive instructional cycles (Musyarrofah et al., 2024). Table 1 provides a structured summary of these themes and their key manifestations.

Table 1. Themes in Challenges Faced by Slow Learner Inclusion Students in English Classes

Theme	Key Findings
Negative Emotional Responses	Students reported persistent fear, anxiety, reluctance, and disengagement toward English learning. Incomprehension of lesson content generated ongoing psychological barriers that directly impaired willingness to participate in classroom activities.
Perceived Difficulty of English	All participants perceived English as highly difficult, citing the disparity between written and spoken forms as particularly disorienting. Cumulative comprehension failure reinforced the perception that English was beyond attainment, sustaining avoidance behavior.
Comprehension Difficulties with Teacher Explanations	Students consistently struggled to follow teacher explanations, particularly when instruction was delivered predominantly in English. The medium of instruction itself became an inaccessible barrier, rendering explanations effectively incomprehensible.
Falling Behind During Instruction	Students frequently fell behind when new material was introduced. Unmastered prior content compounded incoming learning gaps, creating cumulative disadvantage whereby each instructional cycle became progressively less comprehensible.
Need for Extended Learning Time	Students required substantially more time to internalize English content than peers. One participant reported needing weeks to understand material mastered by classmates in a single session, reflecting a fundamental mismatch with standardized curriculum pacing.



Vocabulary and Language Skill Deficits	Participants struggled with vocabulary retention, oral reading, simple sentence construction, and spoken English production. Limited lexical knowledge simultaneously undermined all four language skills, generating nervousness and active avoidance of oral activities.
Affective and Psychological Barriers	Profound affective barriers, including pervasive lack of confidence, fear of error, shame, and anxiety, were reported by multiple students. These barriers reinforced cognitive difficulties through systematic avoidance and disengagement from learning.
Environmental and Methodological Challenges	Noisy classroom conditions disrupted concentration, while instructional pacing rarely corresponded to students' individual processing speeds. Environmental factors compounded cognitive difficulties, further diminishing productive engagement with English content.

Impact of Differentiated Learning Implementation

Following differentiated instruction implementation, significant positive impacts were observed across four major themes, documented through teacher interviews, student self-reports, homeroom teacher observations, and classroom observation data. These outcomes are consistent with recent empirical evidence on differentiated instruction effectiveness in Indonesian EFL settings (Laksono et al., 2024; Subandiyah et al., 2024). Table 2 summarizes these themes and their key manifestations.

Table 2. Themes in the Impact of Differentiated Learning on Slow Learner Inclusion Students

Theme	Key Findings
Improved Comprehension and Language Skills	Measurable improvements were documented across all four language skills. Comprehension in writing simple commands increased from approximately 20% to 75%. Students demonstrated enhanced vocabulary, grammar, and contextual language use, attributed to individualized adjustments in content complexity and instructional pacing.
Increased Participation and Classroom Activeness	Student participation rates rose from approximately 75% to 85%. Flexible task design calibrated to individual ability levels, dynamic grouping arrangements, and sustained teacher support created psychological safety, enabling participation without performance pressure or fear of judgment.
Enhanced Motivation and Self-Confidence	Both intrinsic motivation and academic self-confidence increased substantially. Students reported heightened enjoyment and enthusiasm toward English learning. Graduated success experiences within a supportive environment enabled students to reconstruct positive academic self-efficacy beliefs.
Development of Independent Learning Habits	Students developed greater learning autonomy, including self-initiated vocabulary expansion, improved independent reading, and increased confidence in seeking clarification. This shift from academic helplessness to learner agency represents the most significant long-term outcome of differentiated instruction implementation.

Teacher-Identified Challenges and Strategies Implementation Challenges

English teachers identified five principal challenges in implementing differentiated instruction within the inclusive classroom context. These challenges operated at teacher, institutional, and systemic levels, reflecting broader structural issues in



Indonesian inclusive education (Sari et al., 2022; Kartini & Aprilia, 2022). Table 3 presents these challenges and their key manifestations.

Table 3. Teacher-Identified Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Theme	Key Findings
Diverse Individual Student Needs	The wide variation in individual learning profiles within a single inclusive classroom made it difficult to design instruction that simultaneously addressed all students' readiness levels, learning preferences, and processing capacities.
Time Constraints	Designing adequately differentiated instruction required substantially more planning time than conventional teaching. Balancing differentiation with curriculum coverage expectations created persistent tension in lesson preparation and delivery.
Insufficient Teacher Training	Limited professional preparation in inclusive differentiated instruction strategies reduced teachers' confidence and competence in systematically designing varied content, process, and product adjustments for diverse learners.
Minimal Facilities and Instructional Resources	Limited teaching aids, learning materials, and technological resources constrained the range of differentiated activities available, particularly for sensory and interactive modalities that most benefit slow learners.
Absence of Special Assistant Teachers	The complete absence of Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPK) meant classroom teachers bore sole responsibility for all inclusive education needs without specialist collaboration, substantially limiting the quality and sustainability of differentiated support.

Implementation Strategies

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated considerable pedagogical creativity in developing effective adaptive strategies. Eight strategies emerged from the data, reflecting responsive and resourceful practice within constrained institutional circumstances (Musyarrofah et al., 2024). Table 4 presents these strategies and their key characteristics.

Table 4. Strategies Employed for Effective Differentiated Instruction Implementation

Theme	Key Findings
Parent Collaboration	Engaging parents as active partners in home-based learning support, providing guidance on reinforcing classroom vocabulary through familiar daily contexts and culturally meaningful activities.
Simple Audio-Visual Media	Using accessible audio-visual materials such as illustrated vocabulary cards, pictures, and short videos to deliver multi-modal input that reduces cognitive load and supports comprehension for students with limited reading proficiency.
Content Differentiation	Adjusting text complexity, new vocabulary volume, and grammatical structures per lesson to match students' current proficiency levels and processing capacities, ensuring appropriate challenge without cognitive overwhelm.
Discovery Learning	Implementing inquiry-based activities enabling students to explore language through structured discovery, reducing performance anxiety while building vocabulary and comprehension through active, low-stakes engagement.
Storytelling	Using narrative-based activities to contextualize vocabulary and language structures within emotionally engaging frameworks that support long-term retention through cultural connection and narrative meaning.



Individual Learning Plans	Developing personalized learning plans based on initial readiness assessment, ensuring differentiation is systematic and evidence-based rather than improvised, with each student's specific needs explicitly addressed.
Positive Classroom Management	Constructing explicitly supportive, non-judgmental environments with anti-ridicule norms, mutual encouragement, and consistent affirmation of effort and incremental progress as meaningful academic achievement.
Regular Reflection and Professional Development	Engaging in continuous professional reflection on differentiated instruction practices and participating in available professional development opportunities to progressively build inclusive pedagogical competence.

Homeroom Teacher Observations

Homeroom teachers provided independent triangulation confirming both pre-implementation conditions and post-implementation improvements across subjects. Prior to differentiated instruction, slow learner students' English ability was characterized as low, with difficulty understanding basic vocabulary, inability to compose simple sentences, persistent lack of confidence, and predominantly passive classroom participation. Following implementation, students were observed to be more actively engaged, more willing to attempt responses, demonstrating improved vocabulary comprehension, and showing increasing capacity for independent sentence composition. These cross-contextual observations confirm that positive impacts extended beyond the English classroom to students' broader academic engagement and self-concept (Laksono et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

The Multidimensional Landscape of Learning Challenges

The eight challenge themes identified reveal that slow learners experience difficulties that are not merely cognitive but also affective, social, and environmental, constituting a complex web of mutually reinforcing barriers to language acquisition. The cognitive challenges align with current understanding of slow learners as requiring extended time, increased repetition, and explicit instruction to achieve learning outcomes comparable to peers (Langelaan et al., 2024). The specific comprehension failures and extended processing requirements reflect the particular demands that EFL contexts place on learners with limited processing capacity, who must simultaneously manage linguistic form and communicative meaning (Laksono et al., 2024). The critical implication is that standardized curriculum pacing constitutes a structural barrier for slow learners, one that no individual student effort can overcome without systemic instructional accommodation (Musyarrofah et al., 2024).

The prevalence of affective barriers, including fear, anxiety, shame, and persistent lack of confidence, strongly aligns with Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Learners who repeatedly experience failure develop diminished self-efficacy, reducing effort, persistence, and willingness to engage with challenging tasks (Zhou et al., 2023). This finding resonates with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) foundational conceptualization of foreign language anxiety and with recent research demonstrating anxiety's impairment of the cognitive and affective processing required for language acquisition (Yu, 2024). For slow learners who already experience cognitive constraints, this compounding affective burden creates a dual disadvantage that single-dimensional instructional approaches cannot adequately address. Effective intervention must therefore target both cognitive and affective dimensions simultaneously, a principle central to contemporary differentiated instruction frameworks (Musyarrofah et al., 2024).

Differentiated Instruction as Transformative Pedagogical Intervention

The significant positive impacts documented following differentiated instruction implementation provide empirical support for the proposition that slow learners' difficulties, while genuine, are substantially context-dependent and responsive to instructional quality and environmental conditions. The improvement from 20% to 75% comprehension in writing simple commands, and the increase in participation from 75% to 85%, substantiate the claim that inclusive differentiated instruction can generate meaningful learning gains even within resource-constrained Indonesian school contexts (Subandiyah et al., 2024; Langelaan et al., 2024).

The enhancement of intrinsic motivation and self-confidence is theoretically grounded in Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. When students experience achievement through appropriately challenging tasks, their psychological need for competence is satisfied. When they exercise agency through task choice, their need for autonomy is supported. When they feel valued by teachers



and peers, their need for relatedness is fulfilled (Davis, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Students' reports of enhanced enjoyment and enthusiasm reflect the progressive satisfaction of these basic psychological needs through differentiated instruction, consistent with recent Self-Determination Theory applications in EFL contexts (Printer, 2023). The development of independent learning habits represents arguably the most consequential long-term outcome: students who had previously avoided English began autonomously initiating vocabulary learning and seeking instructional support, a transformation from learned academic helplessness toward self-directed engagement (Laksono et al., 2024).

Implementation Challenges and Systemic Dimensions

The challenges teachers identified, including diverse needs, time constraints, limited training, minimal resources, and the complete absence of GPK, reflect structural issues in Indonesian inclusive education that extend beyond individual teacher capacity. Research consistently demonstrates that inclusive pedagogy requires not only teacher competence but also institutional support, including resources, professional development, and collaborative specialist structures (Sari et al., 2022). The absence of GPK is particularly critical: collaboration between classroom teachers and special education professionals is recognized as essential for sustainable inclusive support in Indonesian school contexts (Kartini & Aprilia, 2022). These findings confirm at the classroom level what systematic policy analyses have documented at the national level: implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia remains structurally uneven due to resource constraints and inadequate professional preparation (Musyarrofah et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2022). The strategies teachers employed demonstrate considerable pedagogical creativity within severely constrained circumstances. However, sustainable inclusive education requires not only individual teacher creativity but systemic institutional investment. The evidence from this study supports clear policy implications: investment in teacher professional development, GPK recruitment, and flexible curriculum structures is a prerequisite for educational equity in inclusive settings rather than an optional enhancement (Langelaan et al., 2024; Musyarrofah et al., 2024).

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

Theoretically, these findings extend the understanding of differentiated instruction by documenting its operation within the specific context of slow learner inclusion in Indonesian ELT, confirming that theoretical predictions from Self-Determination Theory, self-efficacy theory, and Vygotskian scaffolding are empirically supported in this underrepresented context (Davis, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023; Subandiyah et al., 2024). Practically, for English teachers, differentiated instruction must be understood as a foundational pedagogical orientation, not an optional supplement, requiring systematic readiness assessment, varied activity design, positive classroom climate construction, and affirming feedback practices. For school administrators, investment in professional development, collaborative planning time, and GPK recruitment are essential systemic requirements. For teacher education programs, explicit preparation in differentiated instruction for inclusive classrooms must be incorporated as core curriculum content. For policymakers, funding for GPK positions, ongoing professional development, and curriculum flexibility represents an investment in equitable educational outcomes that Indonesia's inclusive education commitments require (Sari et al., 2022; Kartini & Aprilia, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the challenges experienced by slow learner inclusion students in English classes and the impacts of differentiated learning implementation on their outcomes at SMPN 1 Rembon, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The findings document eight interconnected challenge themes spanning cognitive, affective, social, and environmental dimensions, including negative emotional responses, perceived English difficulty, comprehension failures, cumulative learning gaps, extended processing time requirements, vocabulary deficits, profound affective barriers, and environmental disruptions. These challenges interact in self-reinforcing patterns that progressively widen the gap between slow learners and peers across each instructional cycle that fails to differentiate.

Following differentiated instruction implementation, four significant positive impacts were documented: improved comprehension and language skills, increased classroom participation, enhanced intrinsic motivation and self-confidence, and the development of independent learning habits. The quantified improvements, with comprehension rising from 20% to 75% and participation from 75% to 85%, substantiate the proposition that slow learners' difficulties, while genuine, are substantially responsive to appropriate instructional design. These gains were independently corroborated by homeroom teachers observing students across subjects, establishing cross-contextual validity for the findings (Langelaan et al., 2024; Musyarrofah et al., 2024).



Nonetheless, sustainable differentiated instruction in inclusive Indonesian EFL classrooms requires addressing structural challenges: systematic teacher professional preparation, resource provision, flexible curriculum pacing, and the urgent recruitment of GPK. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to assess impact sustainability, test specific differentiated instruction interventions through controlled experimental designs, and examine how different differentiation strategies interact with varied slow learner profiles across diverse Indonesian educational contexts. By centering the experiences of slow learner inclusion students, this study contributes evidence-based direction for developing more equitable, inclusive, and effective English language education, affirming that all students, regardless of learning pace, possess both the right and the capacity to achieve meaningful educational outcomes (Sari et al., 2022; Printer, 2023).

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