

The Strategy of Arabic Language Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

This research aims to deeply examine the strategies used by Arabic language teachers in implementing differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at Jatirenggo State Elementary School Glagah Lamongan. The background of this study is based on the importance of applying a learning approach that is responsive to the individual learning needs of students in order to create inclusive, adaptive, and student-centered learning. The Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with the flexibility to design learning that suits the characteristics of students, thus requiring teachers to have specific strategies to manage differentiated learning, especially in the Arabic language subject, which has its own complexities. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of Arabic language teachers at the institution.

The research results show that Arabic language teachers implement three main forms of differentiation strategies, namely content differentiation, process differentiation, and product differentiation. Content differentiation is carried out through the presentation of materials that are varied visually and audibly, as well as the use of digital learning media. Process differentiation is implemented through grouping students based on their initial abilities and providing tiered assignments. Meanwhile, product differentiation focuses on giving students the freedom to choose the final form of their assignments, such as creating dialogues, posters, or recordings of conversations. Teachers also adapt their teaching styles based on students' learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).

Keywords: *Strategy of Arabic Language, Differentiated Learning, Merdeka Curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

Basic education plays a strategic role in shaping the foundations of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities of students. In the context of the transformation of Indonesia's education system, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is a progressive step aimed at providing a broader space for learning freedom for students and teachers. This curriculum emphasizes the development of competencies, differentiated learning, and the character of Pancasila students. This demands teachers to change their learning paradigm from merely delivering material to being adaptive and innovative learning facilitators.

Theoretically, the differentiated learning approach refers to the views of Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001), who states that differentiated learning is a process of designing curriculum and teaching strategies that take into account students' readiness to learn, interests, and learning profiles in an effort to optimize their potential. Differentiation can be applied through content (material), process (ways of learning), and products (learning outcomes). This principle guides teachers to be flexible and responsive designers of learning experiences.

The Merdeka Curriculum as the foundation of new education policy in Indonesia is based on the principle of differentiation. This curriculum provides autonomy for educational units and teachers to adapt learning according to the conditions and needs of students. Explicitly, the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes the importance of student-centered learning, strengthening the Pancasila student profile project (P5), and flexibility in the use of teaching modules and formative assessments. This aligns with the principles of student agency and learning by doing, which are key elements in 21st-century education.

In addition, differentiated learning is closely related to constructivist and humanistic learning theories. The constructivist theory, as proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky, emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed by students through interaction with their environment and social experiences. In this context, the teacher acts as a facilitator who creates a learning environment rich in interaction, problem-solving, and critical reflection. Meanwhile, humanistic learning theory (Rogers & Maslow)

emphasizes the importance of fulfilling students' psychological needs, such as a sense of security, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Rogers stated that learning will be more effective if students feel personally attended to and have autonomy in their learning. Therefore, a differentiated learning approach is very suitable to be implemented within the framework of humanistic theory because it places students as unique individuals and encourages the optimal emotional and cognitive development of their potential (Nugroho & Darmawan, 2024).

Differentiated learning has become one of the main strategies in the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes the importance of understanding students' needs, learning styles, and readiness to learn. This concept aligns with the views of constructivism and humanistic learning theory that emphasize the meaningfulness of learning based on experiences and individual characteristics. At the elementary school level, differentiated learning is crucial because students are at an early stage of development that is very diverse and unique, both intellectually, emotionally, and socially. The biggest challenge in implementing differentiated learning is the readiness of teachers to design and implement strategies that meet those needs.

The Arabic language subject in elementary schools, especially in madrasahs or schools with religious content, has its own complexities. Arabic is not only a means of communication but also a primary medium for understanding the sources of Islamic teachings. Therefore, Arabic language teaching must be designed comprehensively and engagingly, so that students can master language aspects gradually and contextually. Differentiated learning strategies can be an appropriate approach to meet these challenges, especially in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum that opens up opportunities for learning innovation.

According to Hasanah et al. (2024), teachers' understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction is still limited, especially in identifying individual student needs and designing appropriate learning media. This impacts the low effectiveness of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the field. Similar constraints were also found by Lukman et al. (2023), who stated that many teachers are still unable to optimally

develop differentiated teaching modules due to a weak understanding of initial assessments and differentiation techniques in the learning process.

Teachers, as the main actors in the transformation of learning, have a strategic role in designing and implementing differentiated learning. The role of teachers becomes increasingly complex when they must accommodate the diversity of students in a single class while also delivering dense teaching materials such as Arabic. Research conducted by Sumantri et al. (2024) shows that improving teachers' competence in understanding the Merdeka Curriculum concept significantly impacts their readiness to design effective differentiated learning. In the perspective of modern pedagogy, a teacher is not only a transmitter of knowledge, but also a facilitator, motivator, designer of learning experiences, and classroom manager. This multifunctional role requires teachers to possess integrated pedagogical, psychological, social, and professional competencies.

Especially in the context of Arabic language learning in elementary schools, teachers' ability to design learning based on students' needs is crucial. Arabic has unique linguistic challenges, such as its morphological system, phonetics, and grammatical structure, which differ from the students' native language. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer relevant. Teachers are required to implement diverse, adaptive, and inclusive strategies that can reach students with varying abilities in absorbing and processing information. Furthermore, differentiated learning is also very much in line with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), developed by CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology). UDL emphasizes the importance of providing various ways to present information (multiple means of representation), student engagement (multiple means of engagement), and students' expression of understanding (multiple means of expression). This approach encourages teachers to design flexible learning that is responsive to students' needs with diverse backgrounds and learning styles.

The Merdeka Curriculum, as a broad framework in the transformation of national education, provides space for teachers to develop differentiated learning strategies more freely. Focusing on essential learning, diagnostic assessments, and student data-based planning makes the role of teachers increasingly central as designers of a learning environment that favors students. This is supported by the findings of Lukman et al.

(2023), which state that teachers trained with differentiation approaches are better prepared to design learning that meets the real needs of students.

In this approach, teachers do not merely deliver the curriculum, but design authentic, enjoyable, and challenging learning experiences that are also suitable for the individual conditions of students. Research by Hasanah et al. (2024) shows that teachers' understanding of differentiation of content, process, and product remains a challenge, thus appropriate strategies are greatly needed to optimize learning outcomes. Furthermore, according to Nugroho & Darmawan (2024), the differentiated learning approach from a humanistic theory perspective has proven effective in enhancing student creativity and learning outcomes. This indicates that differentiated learning is not only technical but also requires a philosophical and psychological understanding of the student learning process. Teachers who deeply understand children's learning characteristics will be more capable of creating authentic and meaningful learning experiences.

In this case, the integration of theory and practice becomes very important. Teachers need to combine theoretical understanding with pedagogical sensitivity to classroom dynamics. Reflective and data-based processes are the main foundations in differentiated learning. Apart from the aspects of knowledge and pedagogical skills, differentiated learning strategies are also greatly influenced by the availability of resources, such as learning media, planning time, and student-to-class ratios. In many public elementary schools, including SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan, these limitations present a unique challenge in adopting differentiated learning approaches. Therefore, it is important to explore concrete strategies applied by Arabic language teachers in real-field contexts, so that they can serve as a reference for other teachers facing similar challenges.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at describing the strategies of Arabic teachers in implementing differentiated learning in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Sugiono, 2015). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the behaviors, views, and practices of teachers in real environments without statistically manipulating variables. The subject of this study is

Arabic language teachers at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan, while the object is differentiated learning strategies that include content, process, and product aspects as proposed by Carol Ann Tomlinson in the theory of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, C. A, 2001). This theory explains that teachers need to tailor learning to students' readiness to learn, interests, and profiles in order to achieve more optimal learning outcomes.

Data was collected through three main techniques: direct observation of the learning process, in-depth interviews with teachers, and documentation in the form of lesson plans, teaching modules, and student assignment results. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which involves data reduction, data presentation, and continuous conclusion drawing until the data reaches saturation. To maintain validity, the researcher used triangulation of techniques and sources, as well as member checks to confirm the accuracy of the data with informants. This strategy aims to enhance the credibility of the results and avoid interpretative bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to uncover the strategies used by Arabic teachers in implementing differentiated learning in the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan. The findings show that differentiated learning is implemented gradually with adjustments to the elementary school context and the diverse abilities of students. The main strategies implemented by Arabic language teachers in the differentiated learning process include three main aspects: content differentiation, process, and product. The strategies identified can be grouped into several key aspects:

1. Content Differentiation

In the context of learning Arabic at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan, the implementation of content differentiation refers to the teacher's efforts to adjust the material and information presented to students based on their learning readiness (initial understanding level), interests, and learning profiles (learning styles). The teacher does not present the material in a 'one size fits all' manner, but rather offers various pathways for students to access and understand the content of the lesson.

1) Providing Tiered Materials (Structured Scaffolding)

Teachers systematically provide teaching materials designed with varying levels of difficulty, allowing students to progress at their own pace and understanding. This is a form of deliberate scaffolding:

For Students with Low Readiness: The teacher prepares large illustrated cards with very clear and engaging illustrations. For example, when introducing the theme of 'family members' ('a'daul usrah'), the teacher provides illustrated cards of the father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, complete with Arabic vocabulary labels ('abun', 'ummun', 'jaddun', 'jaddatun') printed in a large and easy-to-read font, accompanied by transliteration (Latin letters) and a brief translation in Indonesian. Emphasis on introducing basic vocabulary through strong visual and auditory stimuli. The teacher will repeatedly pronounce while pointing at images, and students are asked to imitate. This is very helpful for students who have minimal Arabic language background or students with visual-auditory learning styles.

For Students with Moderate Readiness: For students who have mastered basic vocabulary, the teacher presents simple sentences using that vocabulary. For example, from family vocabulary, students are invited to fill in the blanks in sentences like 'hadza ...' (this ...) or 'tilka ...' (that ...), or to match short sentences ('Abun fil baiti' - Father is at home) with relevant pictures. Building an understanding of simple sentence structures and the use of vocabulary in a broader context. The teacher also provides double-sided flashcards (one side with images, the other side with Arabic text without transliteration) for independent or paired practice, encouraging visual word recognition.

For High-Ability Students: Students with deeper understanding are given short descriptive paragraphs (2-3 sentences) or short dialogues that involve more complex vocabulary and sentence structures. They are challenged to read for comprehension, answer inferential questions (not just literal ones), or even create new narratives or dialogues based on the same theme with their own creativity. Developing reading comprehension skills, expressive writing, and higher-level speaking, as well as encouraging critical and creative thinking.

2) Utilization of Various Multimodal Learning Resources

Teachers do not solely rely on standard textbooks. They actively seek out and utilize various resources to enrich and diversify the ways students access content. Teachers use short animated videos in Arabic (for example, from YouTube or educational platforms) that are interesting and relevant to the lesson theme (for example, videos about the daily life of children in Egypt). Teachers often play audio recordings of vocabulary and phrases pronounced by native speakers (either recordings made independently by the teacher using applications, or downloads from Arabic education sites).

3) Topic and Quantity Choices in Assignments

In independent assignments, especially those involving writing or speaking activities, students are given topic options with varying levels of complexity. For example, on the theme of 'colors,' students can choose to describe the color of two simple objects around them (such as a table and a chair) or to describe the color of five types of fruits (which requires more specific vocabulary). Sometimes, differentiation in content is also reflected in the expected quantity of output. Students with lower readiness may only be asked to write 3 words, while students with higher readiness may be asked to write 5-7 words or even sentences.

2. Process Differentiation

The differentiation of processes in this research is at the heart of the efforts of Arabic language teachers to accommodate various learning styles and readiness of students at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan. Teachers do not impose a single way of learning, but rather provide various pathways and activities for students to process and understand the material. In brief, the differentiated process strategies applied include:

- 1) Flexible Grouping: Teachers often form dynamic, rather than static, study groups. These groups can be based on readiness levels (students needing extra help, independent students, students needing challenges), interests (drama-loving group, writing-loving group), or learning styles (visual, auditory,

kinesthetic). The rotation of groups is adjusted according to the lesson objectives.

- 2) Personal Support: The teacher actively moves among the students, providing one-on-one guidance (scaffolding) for those who are struggling, or enrichment tasks for those who quickly master the material. This ensures that every student receives the appropriate support or challenge.
 - 3) Activity Variation: In a single session, the teacher uses a variety of methods and activities. For example, starting with singing, followed by group discussions, vocabulary card games, and ending with presentations. This keeps engagement high and accommodates all types of learners.
 - 4) Flexible Time Allocation: Teachers provide students with leeway in time to complete assignments, especially for those who need more time to understand or finish their work, emphasizing understanding over speed.
3. Product Differentiation

Product differentiation in this research is the efforts of Arabic language teachers to provide various options for students to present or demonstrate their understanding and mastery of the material they have learned. This is an important step in the Independent Curriculum that emphasizes holistic and student-centered assessment, allowing them to express their learning in ways that best align with their strengths, learning styles, and interests. Teachers realize that not all students excel in traditional written exam formats, thus offering more varied and authentic alternatives.

4. Readiness of the Learning Environment and Teacher Professional Commitment

Two crucial factors that significantly support the implementation of differentiated learning in this study are the readiness of the learning environment and the high professional commitment of teachers. Both create a strong foundation for the successful adaptation of the Independent Curriculum.

- 1) Classroom Environment that is Stimulating and Interactive: The physical environment of the Arabic language classroom is designed as an immersive and stimulating learning space, not just a place for sitting. The classroom walls are

decorated with colorful Arabic vocabulary posters relevant to the lesson themes (for example, pictures of fruits or classroom objects with their Arabic names). There are also simple grammar charts (for example, how to conjugate basic verbs or form noun sentences) that are easily accessible to students. Students' works labeled in Arabic are also displayed, creating a sense of ownership and pride. Furthermore, there is a mini reading corner with a collection of age-appropriate picture books in Arabic and picture dictionaries. This environment visually and audibly supports learning, sparks curiosity, and enriches students' exposure to Arabic beyond formal lesson times.

- 2) High Commitment and Professionalism of Teachers: The Arabic language teacher at SDN Jatirenggo shows extraordinary dedication and high initiative in adapting to the Merdeka Curriculum. They do not passively wait for instructions, but actively seek information and deepen their understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum and differentiated learning. This is evident from their participation in online webinars, exploration of the Merdeka Mengajar platform, and active involvement in Arabic teacher forums to share best practices. They frequently discuss with peers to find solutions to challenges faced in the classroom. Their willingness to bravely try new methods and strategies (for example, creating their own tiered teaching materials or designing new assessment rubrics), despite the limitations of resources, demonstrates a lifelong learning ethos and a strong desire to improve the quality of learning.

The explanation about the strategies of Arabic teachers in implementing differentiated learning is explained in the table below.

Table 1. Arabic Language Teachers' Differentiated Instruction Strategies in SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan

No.	Aspect of Differentiation	Strategies Implemented by Arabic Language Teachers
1	Content Differentiation	A. Tiered Material Provision (Structured Scaffolding) B. Utilization of Diverse Learning Resources (Multimodal) C. Choices in Topic and Quantity for Assignments (Early Product Differentiation)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 2 | Process Differentiation | A. Flexible and Dynamic Student Grouping
B. Individual and Small Group Coaching
C. Variety of Learning Activities within a Single Session
D. Flexible Time Allocation |
| 3 | Product Differentiation | A. Choice of Assignment/Final Project Format
B. Tiered and Transparent Rubrics |
| 4 | Learning Environment
Readiness & Teacher
Commitment | A. Stimulus-Rich Classroom Environment
B. Teacher Commitment and Professionalism |

CONCLUSION

This research reveals various strategies implemented by Arabic teachers in applying differentiated learning in accordance with the demands of the Merdeka Curriculum at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan. Teachers use a variety of approaches to tailor the learning process to the individual characteristics and learning needs of students. These strategies include grouping students based on ability levels, interests, and different learning styles, as well as selecting varied teaching methods such as discussions, language games, and project-based learning. In addition, teachers also adapt relevant media and learning resources to strengthen students' understanding, as well as apply formative and summative evaluation techniques while considering the differences in students' abilities. The implementation of this differentiated learning strategy not only enhances students' motivation and active participation in Arabic language learning but also helps them achieve competencies according to curriculum standards more optimally.

This research also shows that the success of this strategy highly depends on the readiness and competency of teachers in understanding the concepts of differentiated learning and their willingness to innovate in classroom management. Support from the Merdeka Curriculum policy, which provides flexibility in learning design, is also a key supporting factor in the implementation of this strategy. Thus, the application of differentiated learning strategies by Arabic teachers at SDN Jatirenggo Glagah Lamongan is able to create an inclusive and adaptive learning environment, which ultimately enhances the quality of learning and the students' learning outcomes. This research recommends that teachers continue to develop their competencies in differentiated learning and be supported by adequate training

and facilities to optimize the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools.

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