

Implementation of Differentiated Instruction and Challenges Faced by Malay Language Teachers in Primary Schools in Keningau, Sabah

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ABSTRACT

Differentiation instruction is a reaction to learner differences, which adjust the instruction to the readiness, needs, interests and learning strengths of pupils. This paper has discussed the application of differentiated instruction in the Malay Language lessons and the difficulties faced by primary school teachers in Keningau, Sabah. They employed an exploratory qualitative design where two purposely sampled Malay Language teachers with direct experience of differentiated instruction were employed. Data were produced via semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of lesson plans and teaching materials in classrooms. The data gathered during the interview was analysed using a deductive approach based on the Zone of Proximal Development and Multiple Intelligences theory by Vygotsky and Gardner respectively and triangulation was carried out with the aid of observation and document evidence. The results developed four inter-related implementation practices. The initial method used by teachers to determine the readiness of pupils was diagnostic reading combined with oral and writing exercises with constant observation. The next step they undertook was differentiation by ability-based grouping, different teaching materials, differentiation of tasks and enrichment. Individual and graduated scaffolding, peer support, encouragement and, in some cases, parental support were used to provide instructional support. There was also a variety of learning activities in linguistic, auditory, visual-spatial, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical and naturalistic strengths by teachers. The problems were basically the lack of instructional and preparation time, the necessity to prepare multi-level materials, the classroom-management needs, the high number of pupils in need of assistance, inconsistent levels of motivation, and the perception of unequal task challenge and distribution of teacher attention among groups of pupils. The research finds that inclusive and responsive Malay Language instruction with diagnostic assessment, structured planning and scaffolding that is paired with long-term professional and school-wide support can be supported through differentiated instruction.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, Malay Language teachers, primary schools, scaffolding, teacher challenges

INTRODUCTION

Primary classrooms are non-homogenous. Students in the same grade might not be language proficient, have prior knowledge, motivation, speed of learning, interests and their favorite learning activities. A standardized method of teaching might thus be one that does not fit well with the learning environment of certain students. Different instruction provides an alternative in that it asks teachers to respond intentionally to the variation in the learners instead of presuming that activities, content and the level of support are equally suitable to all. Differentiation conceptualised by Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) is a response to readiness, interest and learning profile based on adjustments to content, process, product and the learning environment. Practically, differentiation does not mean that each pupil should have a different curriculum; it is the intentional difference in common learning objectives to ensure that each pupil has fair access to learning and growth.

The problem is especially pertinent to the teaching of Malay Language in primary school. Language acquisition is a set of related skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing and students can exhibit

significantly varying degrees of mastery in each of the areas. This diversity can be further complicated in rural and interior settings by variations in exposure to home language, access to learning materials and past school experiences. In an investigation of the Malay Language teachers in rural primary schools in Sabah, Abdul Muttalip (2020) found high acceptance of the strategy of differentiated instruction but revealed a gap in the knowledge of the method among teachers. More current Malaysian research has also indicated that educators are starting to realise the importance of differentiation with existing practical obstacles to systematic application (Michael & Mahamod, 2023; Radi & Amran, 2023; Umar & Abdul Aziz, 2024).

The differentiated instruction research has shifted more toward the question of whether diversity in learners is important or not, to the question of how differentiation can be made practical by teachers. Evidence in the elementary school setting demonstrates that diagnostic assessment, learning materials that are flexible, differentiated products and family collaboration are important (Faigawati et al., 2023). Meanwhile, implementation may require additional preparation time, various resources, more robust classroom routines and enduring pedagogical judgement. In Malaysia, prior studies have explored the perception of teachers, reported practices and challenges in the implementation in various school settings, but less studies have been done to capture how Malay language teachers in Keningau integrated assessment, planning, scaffolding and diverse activity design in the actual classroom practice. Such a contextual disjuncture is significant in the sense that implementation is not only influenced by the pedagogical knowledge but also by neighborhood class composition, resources at hand and the practical imperatives imposed on teachers.

Based on this, the research was dealing with two objectives; (1) to find out how Malay Language teachers in primary schools in Keningau, Sabah practiced differentiated instruction, and (2) what challenges they encountered in the implementation. The research was defined as a qualitative study, which is in depth inquiry and not an estimation of prevalence and statistical generalisation. What it contributes is a description of a logical progression of practices in the classroom and demonstrating that the same practices that render differentiation responsive to pupils can also elevate the planning, resource and attention demands of teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of differentiated instruction is based on the idea that the decisions regarding the instruction should be responsive to the differences that can be observed in the learners. Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) find differentiation in four areas: what the pupils learn, how they interact with learning, how they show learning and in what conditions learning takes place. This orientation changes the teacher into not delivering a fixed lesson in a single instance and instead compiles evidence of the needs of pupils and modifies teaching. Similarly, Mustafa et al. (2021) define differentiated pedagogy as variation of content, process, product and learning environment based on readiness, interest and learning profile. In the case of language teaching, this implies that a similar topic can be maintained but the complexity of texts, prompts, supports or anticipated output can be differentiated to suit the current competence of pupils.

The focal point is the readiness assessment since differentiation needs a justifiable ground of variation. Diagnostic tasks may demonstrate the ability of pupils to decode text, build sentences, answer or write on their own, and teacher observation may demonstrate the ability of pupils to interpret instructions, maintain attention, and engage in activities. In their study, Faigawati et al. (2023) discovered that diagnostic assessment and diverse learning materials were two salient characteristics of differentiated learning in elementary schools. Similar findings were made by Radi and Amran (2023), who found that readiness and content were significant factors in the differentiation decisions of primary teachers. These analyses show that differentiation starts even before the actual task that a teacher wants to differentiate: the teacher has to determine what pupils can and cannot do and where they need more challenge or help.

The current research was also based on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Vygotsky (1978). The ZPD identifies what a learner can do without special help and what can be done with appropriate help. This concept underpins the application of scaffolding that is adjusted to the existing level of competence in differentiated classrooms and is slowly decreased as the student progresses in terms of independence. Scaffolding may involve teacher modeling, prompts, guided practice, teacher-to-peer support and gradual introduction of less challenging tasks to more challenging ones. Recent research into the early reading field shows that ZPD-based language scaffolding remains relevant and underscores the importance of providing the

same level of support to learners based on their developmental needs (Wu & Abu Bakar, 2025). In this light, differentiation is not task variation per se; it is the intentional control of challenge and support.

The second interpretative lens was the Multiple Intelligences theory offered by Gardner (1983). The theory suggests that human capability is manifested in various forms, not in a single undifferentiated intelligence and thus offered a point of investigation on whether teachers differentiated activities based on the various pupil strengths. Linguistic tasks in language classrooms can be interrelated with visual, auditory and movement-based, social, reflective, logical and environmental activities. The worth of this variation is the development of more than a single pathway of approach to a shared learning goal by the pupils. Other sources of evidence have also attributed the difference in learning preferences and classroom settings to the necessity of responsive teaching (Mohd Zamri et al., 2022).

The rural Sabah situation is another reason to take a closer look at the implementation. Differentiation is commonly referred to as a broad pedagogical concept, yet the teachers implement it in the context of the locally available materials, specific classroom configurations and the language experiences that the pupils bring to the school. Abdul Muttalip (2020) demonstrated that rural Malay Language teachers in Sabah were open to differentiated instruction despite the imbalanced knowledge of the methodology. This makes evidence at the classroom particularly useful: it may demonstrate how teachers can put the general principles into practice and make practical decisions under the usual conditions of school. A contextual based explanation does not also presuppose that the practices reported in urban schools, or in other subject areas, automatically apply to Malay Language classrooms in Keningau.

Although it has a pedagogical potential, differentiated instruction imposes significant implementation requirements. Educators must plan the resources on various levels, organize multiple activities, follow students with varying speeds and ensure the sense of equity. Radi & Amran (2023) found out that time, class size, broad attainment differences and inadequate teaching resources were significant issues among primary school teachers. Michael and Mahamod (2023) discovered that even when Malay Language teachers claimed they used differentiated practices, there were issues with efficient and consistent use of the practices. The significance of teacher preparedness and practice was also emphasized by Mohamed Zohomi and Mahamod (2023). Such results imply that the success of differentiation is not only reliant on task design but also on institutional support, teacher capacity and classroom-management conditions. Liang et al. (2025) also show that continuous professional growth can empower teachers to implement differentiated instruction, and therefore, professional learning is a key aspect of implementation.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative design was exploratory, which provided an in-depth narrative on the concept of differentiated instruction as perceived and implemented by teachers within a particular school setting. The qualitative inquiry was suitable since the research aimed at the practices, judgements and implementation problems of teachers and was not concerned with testing causal impacts or making population estimates (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The selection of participants was done using purposive sampling in order to have first hand experience of the phenomenon. The inclusion criteria was that the participants had to be currently teaching at a primary-school in Keningau, Sabah, they needed at least two years of teaching experience, they were required to have taught differentiated instruction in the classroom and were willing to participate. These criteria were met by two female teachers. Participant 1 (P1) had 30 years of primary-school teaching experience, and used differentiated instruction in lower and upper primary classes, and Participant 2 (P2) had four years of experience and implemented the approach in upper primary. The small sample size was chosen intentionally to focus on the richness of information and depth of context over statistical generalisation. The use of two participants was thus not meant to represent as a representative picture of all Malay Language teachers in Keningau. Instead, the study was viewed as a small, bounded, qualitative study with two information-rich cases that were chosen for both of the teachers' experience with differentiated instruction and significant differences in year levels in which they used differentiated instruction. This bounded design allowed for an examination of the relationship between instructional decisions and classroom practices and implementation pressures within participating settings. The worth of the sample is in its richness of detail and context and diagnostic analysis; transferability is not based on statistical generalisation, but on the reader's judgement of the similarity of the described situation to other school contexts.

Three complementary data sources were used: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The interview protocol, observation checklist and document-analysis checklist were formulated based on the objectives of the study and conceptual lenses of ZPD and Multiple Intelligences. The three experts in education and Malay studies reviewed the instruments; two suggested some amendments, and the rest considered the instruments to be appropriate without amendments. Drafts were tightened, scaffolding and multiple intelligences items, teacher-pupil and peer interaction were observed. Semi structured interviewing allowed the researcher to include typical domains and pursue accounts of participants with probing questions, which is in line with the flexibility but systematic application of interview guides that Kallio et al. (2016) explain. All the participants took part in one primary online interview via Google Meet that took about 40-60 minutes. Consent was obtained to make audio recordings, and field notes were made to capture contextual features and first line analytic observations.

One of the lessons offered by each teacher was observed in the classroom, with a duration of about 60 minutes to two hours as per the planned lesson. Before entering the classroom, permission was obtained with the school. The instructional adaptation, scaffolding, teaching materials and teacher-pupil interaction were observed using the checklists without purposely disrupting the normal teaching. The analysis of documents concentrated on the daily lesson plan and teaching aids in the lessons observed. Evidence of task adaptation, scaffolding and diverse learning modes were looked at in the documents. The methodological triangulation of interviews as the key source with the observed practice and planned material as the comparative sources minimized the reliance on self-report only (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The thematic analysis was applied to analyse data in line with the iterative familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, definition and reporting of Braun and Clarke (2022). Manual coding was performed using Microsoft word. This analysis was more deductive: the objectives, ZPD and Multiple Intelligences offered an initial analytic framework, and codes that expressed more directly the experiences of participants, in particular, issues in their implementation, were kept where they were pertinent to the research questions. The comparison of the interview themes and observation and document evidence was made to determine convergence and divergence. The triangulation process was not based on the assumption that all the sources would generate the same evidence. Rather observations and documents were used to verify observable classroom practices and interview accounts were held to events like preparation pressure or perceived resource limitation that may not be evident in one lesson. Peer debriefing, member checking, thick description and maintenance of an audit trail reinforced rigour, which is aligned with qualitative trustworthiness recommendations (Birt et al., 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). The anonymisation of the participants was through the name and school as P1 and P2. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was given prior to the interview, confidentiality and right to withdraw was clarified and school permission was taken prior to classroom observation. This analytic procedure was clearly stated in the six stages. Meaningful segments were manually labeled in MS Word after multiple readings of the transcriptions from the interviews and multiple reviews of the observations notes and documents. Initial codes were developed based on the objectives, ZPD and Multiple Intelligences, and relevant codes were retained if it was found that they were related to the research questions that were experience based. Codes were clustered into candidate themes, compared to coded extracts and the entire data set, and finalized to provide definitions and names for the themes. Relationships between codes, subthemes and final themes were documented in a theme table. Trustworthiness procedures were also instituted. Member checking involved summarizing interviews at the end of the interview and checking the emerging interpretations with the participants; peer de-briefing involved discussion of sections of transcripts and analysis with a peer or supervisor; and the audit trail included the retention of field notes, coding versions, and theme tables to enable key analytic decisions to be tracked.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Subject	Teaching experience	Differentiated instruction experience
P1	Female	Malay Language	30 years	Lower and upper primary
P2	Female	Malay Language	4 years	Upper primary

RESULTS

The discussion resulted in the creation of five general themes. Four themes explained the implementation of differentiated instruction which is determining the readiness of pupils, planning differentiated instruction, scaffolding based on ZPD, and incorporating the use of differing types of intelligence into the learning process.

The fifth theme was the issues that complicated implementation. Interview, observation and teaching documentation evidence tended to be convergent, but there were limitations, such as perceived time pressure, limited resources and perceptions of task fairness by pupils, which were better articulated in interviews than apparent in one observed lesson. Interviews were viewed as the key source of participant experiences, and classroom observations and analysis of lesson plans or teaching materials revealed the observability of reported practices or their planning. When the sources mentioned the same practice convergence was reported, where source-specific evidence was presented, a challenge to that (e.g. preparation pressure, perceived unfairness) could not reasonably be substantiated based on observations of a single lesson. Below are the verbatim quotes of selected verbatim quotations to illustrate how interpretations were based on participants accounts.

Identifying pupil readiness. Both teachers considered the knowledge of the current competence of pupils as a precondition of differentiation. They identified a great deal of within-class variance with some pupils being fluent and independent, some pupils at the intermediate level, and some pupils continuing to struggle with the basics of literacy. This can be seen by P1's and P2's description:

"In a class of 29 students, I face the challenge of teaching three distinct learning levels: low, moderate, and advanced. Because of these wide gaps in proficiency, a one-size-fits-all teaching method does not work, and lessons must be tailored to fit each group's ability." (P1)

"Some pupils can read, some pupils cannot read. We can see the difference in level." (P2)

Preparedness was evaluated by use of short reading texts, oral questions, sentence making, dictation or writing and continuous observation. The reading activities enabled teachers to differentiate between fluent and pupils who still had to decode syllables or had problems with syllable patterns. Complementary language production evidence was in the oral and writing activities. This can be seen through P1's and P2's excerpts below:

"I tested them orally to see their different levels. The better ones could make simple sentences or tell stories." (P1)

"I prepared reading texts for them. From there, I could see their different reading levels." (P2)

Teachers also observed the rate at which pupils comprehend instructions, their level of engagement and ability to carry on without the need to be prompted again during lessons. It was observed and documented that the assessment information was utilized to influence the future activities and not an isolated test. This idea of level-matching work to the pupil's current competence is demonstrated in P1's and P2's description:

"Some pupils are active, some are passive... some understand instructions quickly." (P1)

"Some pupils learn fast when given attention, but slower pupils need a different teaching approach." (P2)

The quotation demonstrates that lower level work was used as a suitable starting point and then progressed, and not as a permanent label. This interpretation was supported by observation of and evidence in documents related to the gathering of diagnostic information and connections to task selection and subsequent instructional adjustments.

Planning differentiated instruction. Pupil readiness was identified when both teachers designed their lessons

around different pupil's abilities. Pupils were also clustered based on the generally similar level, which meant that guidance could be focused.

"They need to be in this group so I can guide them. The guidance for Group A, Group B, and Group C is all different." (P1)

"Usually, the slower learners will sit together in one group. The ones with better abilities will also gather in their own group." (P2)

The teaching materials were diversified within the same topic of the lesson: the worksheets of various level of difficulty, syllable or flash cards, picture cards, word cards, and multimedia materials were used.

"I need to prepare simple worksheets, flashcards, and syllable cards for the lower-level pupils, but all within the same topic." (P1)

"I give them different worksheets. For the higher group, it is slightly harder. For the lower group, I modify the worksheets so they can understand easily." (P2)

The tasks were varied and a common learning focus was kept. Less ready pupils could match or construct syllable words, middle ability pupils could create sentences and higher ability pupils could respond to comprehension questions, retell or perform more challenging language tasks.

"The low level will match syllables to make words. The moderate level will construct sentences, and the high level will answer comprehension questions or tell stories." (P1)

"The learning topic is the exact same, but the tasks are slightly different based on the pupil's levels." (P2)

Pupils who finished the core task early were prepared to work on enrichment activities, such as extra questions or short creative tasks or puzzles. The teachers thus separated the level of complexity and support without disintegrating the classroom into irrelevant curriculums.

"As an enrichment activity, they tell short stories about the topic or solve crossword puzzles." (P1)

"Higher-level pupils get more questions than lower-level pupils. That's my enrichment." (P2)

ZPD-based scaffolding. Graduated support was based on pupil need. Scaffolding by teachers involved one-on-one instructions and gradual support and more direct support to students who struggled to grasp or work through a task. The more masterful pupils were provided with increased independence.

"...We always want to keep an eye on those at the lower level. We want to provide guided support so that they gain a better understanding." (P1)

"...I focus more on pupils who struggle to understand, while for the high-achieving pupils, I try to give them the opportunity to think for themselves." (P2)

Peer support furthered this process: more competent pupils occasionally became peer tutors or helped group members in order to avoid being overly reliant on teacher help.

"I call the advanced pupils who finish early and turn them into 'little teachers' to guide their peers." (P1)

"The advanced language pupils stay at their stations to teach other visiting pupils." (P2)

They were also reinforced and encouraged through positive reinforcement to ensure that pupils who did not have confidence or persistence continued with their efforts. In the description of one of the participants, the support was provided even outside of the classroom by communicating with parents to allow pupils who needed more support to practice at home. In all these practices, scaffolding served as a transitional tool between the performances of the pupils at the present and the more autonomous accomplishment of language tasks. The evidence of support differentiation can also be seen in the interview evidence.

“I give them praises to motivate them to learn faster and progress to the higher learning group.” (P1)

“Besides classroom guidance, I ask parents to support and guide their children at home too.” (P1)

These accounts were similar to observations of teachers switching the roles of helping pupils, and of pupils who needed less help doing more independent work in the planned activities. So, evidence of the interviews, observations and documents supported the ZPD interpretation.

Integration of multiple intelligences.

The two participants made the classroom activity more diversified in terms of various means of engagement. The linguistic interaction was manifested in storytelling, discussion, oral questioning, production of poetry and sentences or texts. Auditory or musical involvement comprised of songs, rhythm and audio content based on video. The visual-spatial back-up was in terms of pictures, cards, written displays and other visual reminders, whereas kinaesthetic activity involved the pupils moving, touching materials or engaging in a physical activity. Group and peer-explanation were used in interpersonal learning and individual work and self-directed completion were used in intrapersonal opportunities. Logical-mathematical interaction was observed in sequencing, matching, categorising and structured problem-solving activities. The naturalistic interaction was designed through connection of language activities with the environment of pupils, which can be objects of the school environment, or environmental themes. Combined, these modes depicted the intentional attempt of the teachers to diversify the instruction based on the various strengths and preferences of the pupils keeping the Malay Language learning focus. Caution was used in interpreting these activity modes. An intelligence assessment was not administered within the study and therefore it was not possible to determine if any pupil had fixed or objectively identified 'intelligences'. Multiple Intelligences was used instead as an interpretative framework to categorise range of instructional modes observed. Kinaesthetic engagement could be seen in the movement related activities and visual-spatial engagement could be seen through pictures, cards and multimedia. It is, therefore, a finding that the teachers diversified the ways in which their students participated and represented, and not that tasks were matched with the students' diagnosed intelligence profile.

“We do group discussions or storytelling.” (P2)

“They prefer when we teach using rhythmic singing.” (P1)

“I show a video... they can see and learn.” (P2)

“Each group performs a role-play for the class to guess.” (P2)

“I encourage group activities or discussions.” (P2)

“I give pupils the opportunity to think for themselves.” (P2)

“I use classification or problem-solving activities.” (P2)

“Look outside the window... palm trees, pond, field.” (P1)

Implementation challenges.

Differentiation created new needs in six areas that are closely related. To begin with, there was limited time

during lessons and prior to lessons. Teachers were forced to allocate scarce teaching time among groups as well as spending more time preparing materials and tasks. Second, the process of preparation of teaching aids on multiple levels added workload, and a lack of appropriate resources might limit the planned activities. Third, it was more complicated to manage the classroom when the groups were not working at the same rate. Students who completed their tasks prematurely might get distracted during the time when the teacher was assisting other classes, and active monitoring and enrichment were necessary. Fourth, the issues of pupils involved quite high amounts of pupils who required intensive instructions and changes in motivation or interest levels. Fifth, some pupils might perceive differentiated task difficulty as unfair when they would compare their work with those of their peers who did not comprehend the purpose of the instruction. Lastly, educators struggled to allocate attention. Students who required a lot of scaffolding were inherently more time consuming, but higher-achieving students also demanded attention, feedback, and appropriate challenge. It was not just the difference in pupils, but also organizing several valid learning requirements within a given lesson time. Triangulation also helped to understand the character of these limitations. The lessons which were observed were accomplished on time and, therefore, time pressure was not directly observed as the lesson failure, yet the lesson plans and numerous teaching materials demonstrated how much work had to be done to make such a smooth delivery workable. Equally, issues on scarcity and fairness were mostly experiential results which had been reported in interviews but not conditions which could be solely checked through documents. The difficulties reported are further illustrated by direct evidence from the interviews.

“...There is the issue of time—specifically, the time needed to focus on a particular group... That is where time constraints come in.” (P1)

“The main challenge is, of course, time... I might lack the time to prepare teaching materials..” (P2)

“Preparing different teaching materials is a challenge.” (P2)

“Classroom management is very challenging.” (P1)

“They have no mood to learn... they become lazy to work.” (P1)

“Some pupils feel the task given is unfair by saying theirs is easy, ours is difficult.” (P1)

The balanced attention difficulty was also clearly stated:

“It is indeed difficult for me to give equal attention to everything.” (P1)

These accounts were partially supported by observations of teachers as they made their way between groups and the presence of differentiated tasks in lesson plans. Time and resources were not measurable, however, within one lesson and were mainly reported by the participants.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate differentiated instruction as a dynamic cycle and not a set of isolated strategies. The cycle started with information regarding pupil readiness, proceeded to planning and task adjustment, and proceeded with a real-time scaffolding and monitoring. This trend is in line with the argument by Tomlinson and Strickland (2005) that differentiation must be in response to readiness, interest and learning profile. It also captures evidence of Malaysian primary-school that diagnostic assessment and readiness are the focus of instructional adaptation (Faigawati et al., 2023; Radi & Amran, 2023). Notably, the participants did not merely decrease work among low-readiness students and increase work among higher-readiness students. They kept similar topics but changed the level of difficulty in the tasks, materials, anticipated product and level of assistance. This maintained a common curricular focus but established alternative points of entry to the learning goal.

The results also exhibit the ZPD applicability to the differentiated language instruction. Teachers were more

direct where pupils had not yet attained the ability to work independently and discharged responsibility when they had gained competence. Peer tutoring made available additional scaffolding and made possible the opportunity to have strong pupils refreeze learning via explanation. This is in line with the personalized learning theory of Vygotsky (1978) that learning may be promoted by the help of more competent individuals and with the recent findings that scaffolding of language facilitates early reading abilities (Wu & Abu Bakar,

2025). The parental support that was noted in the study also extends the concept of scaffolding to the outside of the immediate interaction between the teacher and the pupil, meaning that the continuity between school and home may be beneficial when the pupils require practice again.

Differentiation was introduced by a second dimension brought by the combination of various activity modes. Whereas the degree of challenge and support was determined by readiness, the diverse linguistic, auditory, visual, movement-based, social, reflective, logical and environment-linked activities diversified the way the pupils could be involved. It is consistent with Gardner (1983) focus on various types of human capability as well as evidence that differences in learner preferences and conditions of engagement are important in Malay Language learning (Mohd Zamri et al., 2022). The usefulness of this discovery is pedagogical diversity: the teachers alternated the modes of activities in the context of shared language goals and correlated those decisions with the noticeable variations in pupil readiness, strengths and involvement.

The implementation paradox is critical in the challenges. Differentiation is resource-intensive because of the responsiveness that renders it educationally valuable. The planning and creation of multiple task versions, creation of appropriate teaching materials, tracking groups and modifying support takes time and long-term professional judgment. This finding is quite consistent with that made by Radi and Amran (2023), who have found time, class size, attainment gaps and teaching materials as significant challenges, and Michael and Mahamod (2023), who stated that they have found the difficulty in efficient and consistent differentiated practice among primary Malay Language teachers. The issue of classroom management was not an isolated issue, as compared to differentiation that was an issue that emerged as a result of pupils being lawfully engaged in various activities and finishing them at various times. Effective differentiation thus involves transition routines, meaningful extension work and systems that enable the pupils to work with a certain degree of independence and yet the teacher assists others.

As pupils were not the participants, the issue of task fairness must be understood through teacher perceived pupil response. Some pupils P1 remembered when they were being asked to compare the difficulty of the tasks saying,

“Oh, for them it’s easy, Teacher. But for us, it’s such a struggle—it’s like this and like that..” (P1)

This suggests that the teacher's perception of the task difficulty level may at times be seen as unequal treatment. Pupils were not observed challenging task allocation and lesson papers did not show pupils' perceptions. Therefore, this finding should not be interpreted as a shared pupil view and only represents the experiences of one teacher. However, it implies that teachers should tell students that differentiated tasks are not preferential treatments but give them the right level of challenges (Konyuo and Wan Mohammad, 2023).

This research also explains why sustainable differentiation revolves around professional and organisational support. The personal dedication of the teacher may come up with innovative solutions, but the problem of preparation load, lack of material or the need to take care of multiple groups simultaneously cannot be completely addressed. Liang et al. (2025) demonstrate that teacher empowerment in differentiated instruction does not result after a single exposure but a continuous process based on the professional learning. Collaborative planning, access to the right technology and professional learning communities, sharing of teaching materials and access to the right technology and professional learning communities may help remove duplicated preparation and enhance the capacity of teachers to plan the right task progressions in the Keningau setting. The feasibility of the pedagogy is thus the school-level decisions of resources, planning time and instructional support, rather than the background conditions of administration.

The interpretation of the findings is also influenced by the bounded qualitative design. The two participants

presented differing degrees of teaching experience, and that made the account rich, but the study was intended to be in-depth as opposed to being representative. It adds more value in the form of analytic contribution, therefore, it determines a plausible structure of implementation and records the interaction of responsiveness of instruction and practical workload within a rural district setting. Interviews, observation and documents helped to strengthen the account by demonstrating where reported practice was observable in lessons and plans, coupled with challenging issues that could not be directly observed during a planned lesson. The transferability of these patterns to other teachers, school environments and pupil groups can be tested further through additional studies. The one-lesson observation for each teacher also restricts the ability to make claims about that reoccurring patterns of classroom management and/or problems with implementation over longer periods of time. Observed lessons may demonstrate the presence of certain practices, rather than their frequency or regularity during weeks, topics or pupil groups. The study thus makes a difference between the observable practice in the classroom, the planned practice documented in papers and the experiential challenges expressed by teachers. Additional observations and participants would have to be needed to study recurrence and larger transferability.

Another contribution is how the findings relate assessment, differentiation and classroom participation. Diagnostic assessment was not considered a goal in itself; it guided grouping, choice of materials, complexity of tasks and the level of scaffolding that ensued. This connection is important since differentiation may be superficial where the teachers change activities without any clear indication as to why a given pupil or group requires the given variation. The logic of implementation in the present study was relatively clear: teachers identified the actual performance, chose the necessary level of challenge, offered help when it was necessary and kept the interest high by a variety of forms of activity and enrichment. This sequence offers a pragmatic foundation to school-based coaching since it shifts an abstract promise to attend to various needs into tangible instructional choices, which are capable of being planned, negotiated and sharpened together.

Implications

The findings have several practical implications. To begin with, Malay Language teachers ought to incorporate short form diagnostic testing and ongoing observation into regular lessons so that the distinction will be made on the basis of existing facts, rather than presumptions about the ability of the pupils. The grouping must be flexible and changed as the pupils advance. Second, reusable tiered worksheets, shared teaching-aid banks and common lesson templates can make differentiated planning easier since the same topic can be presented at various levels of difficulty. Third, educators must have clear classroom-management routines, such as group work, early finishers and peer tutoring, such that focusing on one group does not cause other groups to become disengaged.

Professional growth must not stop at an overall awareness of differentiated instruction, but rather shift to designing it: interpreting evidence of readiness, building graduated tasks, planning scaffolds, employing peer assistance and clarifying differentiation to students. Implementing it can be supported by district and school leaders who can create collaboration planning time, access to teaching materials and technology to help, and facilitate structured sharing of effective lessons. These types of support align with evidence that enduring professional learning enhances teacher capacity and differentiation empowerment (Liang et al., 2025).

The administration of the school is of particular interest since some of the mentioned obstacles cannot be addressed with the help of the individual lesson planning only. Teachers require time to prepare, exposure to different teaching materials and time to plan or share materials with other teachers. The repetitive preparation can be minimized by providing common resources and proper technology, and by making the multi-level activities easy to maintain. Consistency in the classroom can also be enhanced through a school culture that promotes teachers to talk about effective differentiated lessons. These practical organisational support mechanisms are a direct response to the time, material and workload strains that are surfaced in the study and are used to change differentiation, a primarily an individual teacher effort into a more sustainable school practice.

As in this research, two teachers of one district were involved, the results are to be transferred analytically, but not statistically. Future studies must incorporate larger more diverse samples in urban, rural and interior schools, pupil and administrator views, they should incorporate mixed-method designs that relate

implementation processes to larger trends in teacher practice and pupil achievement.

CONCLUSION

The research determined that differentiated instruction in Malay Language primary classrooms in Keningau was carried out by a related cluster of practices, namely that of determining the readiness of the pupils, planning various levels of tasks and materials, graduated scaffolding and diversifying modes of participation. It was more than the use of various worksheets because it relied on the constant teacher judgement of what pupils could do, what assistance they required and how they could still be significantly involved in shared learning objectives. Simultaneously, the implementation imposed great time and material preparation demands, classroom control and allocation of teacher attention. The process was also affected by pupil motivation and perceptions of task fairness. Differentiation instruction may offer more inclusive, flexible and pupil-centred Malay Language teaching when it is orchestrated at a systemic and extra-curricular level. Implementing in a sustainable manner needs teacher competence, common resources, joint professional learning and school-wide conditions that render responsive teaching viable in practice.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Both teachers were informed about the study in advance and informed consent was sought and confidentiality and the right to withdraw explained, the identities of the participants and schools were anonymised and the schools were asked to approve classroom observations.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The underlying interview, observation and document-analysis materials are not publicly deposited in this article in order to preserve the confidentiality of participants and schools in the bounded study context.

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