

A Systematic Literature Review on Differentiated Instruction Practices in English Classrooms (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT

In the multifaceted reality of today's English language teaching (ELT) classrooms, a single curriculum is insufficient to meet the needs of all learners, making a flexible and responsive approach essential. Teachers face the challenge of addressing variations in students' proficiency levels, learning preferences, and motivational backgrounds. Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a key pedagogical framework to support inclusion and learner engagement. However, research on DI in ELT remains fragmented, with limited synthesis of its implementation patterns, pedagogical outcomes, and contextual challenges. Accordingly, this review aims to consolidate recent research to identify trends, thematic patterns, and pedagogical implications of DI in ELT. Sixteen peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 and indexed in Scopus and Web of Science were analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach guided by the PRISMA framework, and relevance-based selection ensured analytical consistency. Findings confirm DI's potential to enhance learner engagement, motivation, and autonomy. From the analysis, five major thematic clusters were identified, encompassing teachers' beliefs, pedagogical implementation, effectiveness, professional readiness, and research trends. Despite its benefits, DI implementation remains inconsistent due to limited teacher preparation, time constraints, and contextual barriers. The review concludes that sustained institutional support, targeted professional development, and context-sensitive frameworks are essential to translating DI from theory into consistent classroom practice.

Keywords-Differentiated Instruction (DI); English Language Teaching (ELT); Inclusive Education; Systematic Literature Review; Pedagogical Implementation; Learner Engagement

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the English language classroom is increasingly characterized by diversity, marked by significant variations in learner proficiency, cognitive styles, and motivational drives. While diversity enriches learning environments, these differences pose a dilemma for teachers on how to design instruction that is equally accessible, effective, and capable of ensuring learning outcomes are met. Conventional one-size-fits-all teaching approaches often fail to accommodate such variations, leading to inequitable learning opportunities and disengagement among students (Tomlinson, 2017; Hall, 2021). These challenges are pronounced in ELT, given that language acquisition is fundamentally dependent on tailored interaction, scaffolding, and comprehensible input.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is an approach that recognises the diversity of learners and empowers teachers to modify content, methods, and assessments to address individual learning needs. Teachers need to have flexible approaches in their instruction to create meaningful learning experiences for all students, regardless of their starting point. This involves adapting the curriculum and instruction to meet the learners' diverse needs, rather than expecting them to adjust themselves for the curriculum (Hall, 2002). In doing so, the teacher takes on the role of a responsive facilitator, continuously assessing and modifying instructions to optimise learning.

Such pedagogical orientation allows teachers to boost students' progress and achievement by aligning instructions according to individual needs and providing targeted support throughout the learning process.

In the context of ELT, DI is particularly relevant because language classrooms are typically composed of learners from heterogeneous backgrounds. The variety of background differences are characterized by a diversity in linguistic, proficiency levels, and cultural experiences. Customizing teaching methods to these differences will lead to successful second language acquisition by supporting the language input, scaffolding, and interaction. This method leads to greater learner autonomy, engagement, and motivation (Valiandes, 2020; Pham, 2023). Consequently, it will cultivate inclusive practices, ensuring that diverse student needs and learning styles are actively valued and met.

Despite the increasing volume of research on differentiated instruction over recent years, the literature remains fragmented, with limited high-quality empirical studies and inconsistent operationalisation of DI practices (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). This gap is particularly pressing, since effective language acquisition requires teaching that continuously adapts to learners' varying proficiencies and needs. As a result, there is an increasing demand for a comprehensive conceptual framework that contextualizes DI within language learning classrooms.

This review addresses the gap by systematically examining peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025. It aims to consolidate recent research to identify trends, thematic patterns, and pedagogical implications of DI in ELT. The findings can serve as foundation efforts in making English language classrooms more equitable, effective, and responsive to learners' diverse needs. This review also establishes a foundation for future research by focusing efforts on differentiated instruction that is both sustainable and responsive to specific contexts.

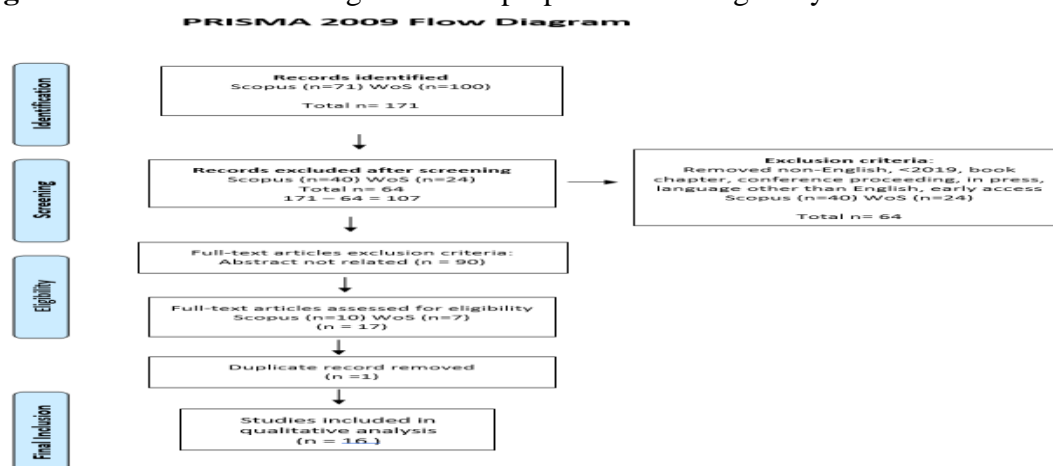
Hence, the main objectives of the review are:

1. to identify relevant literature on studies that examine trends, thematic patterns, and pedagogical implications of DI in ELT; and
2. to synthesis findings from the reviewed literature by highlighting their strengths and limitations.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

The systematic review was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, which comprises four phases, including identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and final inclusion Moher et. al., (2009). This guideline ensures a transparent, rigorous, and reproducible methodology. The process comprised five key phases: identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, data extraction, and synthesis of findings. Each stage was critical for selecting relevant studies that met the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, thereby guaranteeing the review's reliability and comprehensiveness. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA flow diagram of the proposed searching study for this systematic literature review.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow diagram of the proposed searching study



Identification

The first phase of the PRISMA systematic review involves the identification of keywords and the searching for related terms using resources such as thesaurus, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and prior research. Once the appropriate keywords were determined, search queries were generated on the Scopus and WoS databases (see Table 1). During the initial phase of the systematic review procedure, a total number 171 articles were initially identified from two major databases, namely Scopus (71) and Web of Science (100).

Table 1: The Search Strings

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("differentiated instruction" AND English LANGUAGE teaching) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (OA , "all")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))
WOS	https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/summary/3df658a3-fcda-4939-a921-a53a7fb84b94-017e0198b6/b32aa15d-b1f1-4a4f-ae72-d72bca007f05-017e0194cf/relevance/1 "Differentiated Instruction" in English classroom * (Topic) and 2025 or 2023 or 2022 or 2020 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages)*

Screening

The second phase of PRISMA is the screening process (the initial exclusion criteria). The objective of this phase is to evaluate the identified studies against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the review is comprehensive, relevant, and high-quality. The selection criteria (See Table 2) were applied to determine the relevance of each study.

Table 2: The Selection Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	2020 – 2025	< 2019
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject Area	Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities	Other than Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities

As mentioned in Table 2, the review only considered English articles to ensure uniformity and accessibility. Articles published between 2020 and 2025 were included to ensure that the review covered recent studies. Only journal articles were selected since they typically undergo rigorous peer review, ensuring higher quality. To ensure completeness, the articles must also be in their final publication stage, excluding those that were in press. Finally, the review concentrated on educational studies that explored differentiated instruction within language learning environments to maintain pedagogical relevance. As a result of this step, a total number of 107 articles were excluded (40 from Scopus and 24 articles for Web of Science were, leaving 107 articles for further review (31 from Scopus and 76 from WoS).

No formal quality appraisal tool was used in this review. Instead, the selection of studies was guided by relevance-based criteria as mentioned above, which aligns with the study objectives. This decision was made because the main objective of this review was to map the scope of available literature than to focus on the methodological evaluations. Employing relevance-focused screening would ensure efficiency and consistency

in the selection process. The emphasis on relevance safeguarded the systematic review against the inclusion of studies that were crucial to the main research questions.

Eligibility

The third part of the PRISMA process is eligibility evaluation, which illustrates how articles were screened for final inclusion. For this step, a total 107 were reviewed and 90 articles were excluded because their abstracts did not relate to the study's objectives were deemed insignificant. From this number, 10 articles were from Scopus and 7 were from WoS. Apart from that, 1 redundant article was also eliminated from the dataset.

Final Inclusion

Following these rigorous screening, 16 articles were identified for the final inclusion. The study first extracts the data in which essential information was gathered from each selected article. This includes the authors, the title of the article, the year of publication, and the journal in which it was published. Any comparisons made between different approaches or notable findings from each study were documented. This information was crucial in synthesising evidence and determining the trends, thematic patterns, and pedagogical implications of DI in ELT. Lastly, the synthesis of findings was conducted, and it involved analysing the data extracted from the previously selected articles.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The synthesis of findings involved analysing the data extracted from the previously selected articles.

This synthesis sought to provide clear insights and best practices for educators and researchers, emphasising on the trends, thematic patterns, pedagogical implications, and gaps for future research in the field of DI in ELT. Based on 16 major studies published between 2020 and 2025, differentiated instruction has proven to provide wide-ranging impacts in English language teaching. These studies show that while teachers generally see DI as a helpful way to address student diversity, putting it into practice is often challenging due to high workloads, insufficient institutional support, and limited training (Al-Breiki et al., 2025; Mansoor et al., 2025). Research by Magableh & Abdullah (2020) and Sapan & Mede (2022) consistently point to improvements in learner motivation, engagement, and achievement when DI is used. However, results vary widely between settings, highlighting ongoing inconsistencies and a fragmented evidence base for DI in ELT (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the critical influence of teacher readiness and professional development on the successful enactment of DI. Studies from Asia and Africa (Hidayat et al., 2024; Osaë & Papadopoulos, 2024) emphasize that contextualized support, curriculum flexibility, and collaborative learning communities are prerequisites for effective differentiation. However, most DI research still focuses on small-scale, descriptive studies, indicating a need for more robust, longitudinal, and intervention-based investigations. Overall, the evidence indicates that while DI holds strong potential for inclusive language teaching, its consistent and scalable practice depends on systemic support, empirical depth, and continuous professional capacity-building.

From an organizational perspective, the viability of differentiated instruction depends more on the institutional and systemic conditions than by individual teacher effort (Sofiana et al., 2024; Osaë & Papadopoulos, 2024). Factors like sufficient time allocation, curriculum flexibility, administrative support, and sustained professional mentoring would enable teachers to translate DI frameworks to authentic classroom practices (Liang & Zou, 2025; Hidayat, et.al., 2024; Whitley, et. al., 2021). Nevertheless, even within these systemic constraints, teachers proactively develop strategies like flexible grouping, learner profiling, and formative assessment, to foster equitable and engaging learning (Tomlinson, 2017; Umar & Abdul Aziz, 2024). In summary, while systemic reforms are essential for consistency, teacher-driven innovation remains central to meaningful differentiation in diverse English language classrooms.

Despite its promise, there are studies point to persistent barriers in actual DI implementation, such as inconsistent teacher training, resource limitations, and gaps between teacher beliefs and classroom practices (Sapkota, 2025; Nejad, 2024). Besides, some research highlights the challenges of managing diverse classrooms, complex lesson planning, and the lack of support from institutions (Oktoma, 2025; Mansoor et al., 2025; Sofiana, et. al., 2024). Some weaknesses are evident in the methodologies, such as small or localized samples, reliance on self-reported data, which limits the generalizability of the research. These findings underscore a significant shift toward more differentiated and inclusive teaching methods in English language education, while also emphasizing the urgent need for focused professional development and strengthened educational infrastructure to effectively translate DI theory into effective English classroom practice (Bhandari, 2025; Oktoma, 2025).

Table 3: Synthesis by Thematic Clusters

Theme Cluster	Representative Papers	Common Ground	Clashes / Divergent Views
1. Teachers' Beliefs & Perceptions	Al-Breiki et al., (2025); Mansoor et al. (2025); Al Siyabi & Al Shekaili (2021); Zólyomi (2022); Nejad (2024)	DI is recognized to be pedagogically valuable and improves student engagement. Teachers across regions acknowledge DI requires advanced teaching skills, continuous effort, and reflective practice.	Differences in readiness: Western teachers (e.g., Nejad) show stronger relational and metalinguistic awareness, while Asian and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) teachers highlight resource and workload barriers. Some studies (e.g., Zólyomi) note low confidence, others (Nejad) report confident relational practices.
2. Pedagogical Implementation & Creativity	Hidayat et al. (2024); Tajik et al. (2024); Sarzhanova et al. (2023); Osae & Papadopoulos (2024); Al-Breiki et al. (2025); Liang & Zou (2025)	Agreement that creativity and collaboration are core to successful DI, and that professional development fosters innovation.	Divergence in creativity expression: Hidayat et al. stress internal (teacher-driven) creativity, while Liang & Zou argue collaborative/structural factors are more decisive. Some contexts (Kazakhstan, Oman) emphasize competencies over creativity.
3. DI Effectiveness & Learning Outcomes	Magableh & Abdullah (2020); Sapan & Mede (2022); Elyas et al. (2020)	All show positive student outcomes (achievement, motivation, autonomy) when DI applied systematically.	Effect size inconsistency; Magableh & Abdullah show advantages mainly for higher achievers, while Sapan & Mede found benefits across all proficiency levels. Elyas et al. caution that cognitive diversity complicates DI outcomes.
4. Professional Development & Readiness	Sofiana et al. (2024); Osae & Papadopoulos (2024); Liang & Zou (2025)	All highlight the same structural needs of time, resources, clear guidelines, and mentoring.	Contextual contrasts: Rwanda and China emphasize institutional PD models; Indonesia stresses national curriculum alignment (Merdeka curriculum). Varying degrees of readiness and systemic support.

5. Research Trends / Meta-Perspective	Asriadi et al. (2023)	Confirms global interest and emerging diversity of DI topics (inclusion, online learning, motivation).	Emphasizes a research imbalance, with Western contexts dominating descriptive investigations, while applied and experimental studies from Asian and African regions remain comparatively scarce.
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Table 3 shows the synthesis across five thematic clusters which uncovers significant global patterns and differences on DI within ELT between 2020 and 2025. The findings shows that teachers perceive DI as a valuable pedagogical approach that enhances engagement and accommodates learner diversity (Al-Breiki et al., 2025; Mansoor et al., 2025; Nejad, 2024). However, varying levels of readiness persist. While educators in Western contexts tend to show higher relational and metalinguistic awareness, those working in Asian and MENA regions cite persistent obstacles like limited resources, heavy workloads, and institutional constraints (Zólyomi, 2022). These differences reaffirm earlier observations that while teacher beliefs toward DI are positive, systemic conditions play a decisive role (Whitley et al., 2021).

The analysis also shows that maintaining effective DI over time depends on structural and institutional factors, including adequate time, mentoring, and curriculum alignment (Sofiana et al., 2024; Osae & Papadopoulos, 2024). National approaches differ, with Rwanda and China emphasizing institutional PD systems, while Indonesia advances DI through national policy initiative under the Merdeka Curriculum. The bibliometric review by Asriadi et al. (2023) further highlights a global expansion of DI studies, though a persistent imbalance exists, with dominance of Western descriptive studies and a shortage of applied or experimental work from Asia and Africa. These findings highlight the need for continuous, locally relevant teacher learning and a rigorous, evidence-based approach, ensuring DI to be reliably implemented and assessed as an inclusive framework in English language education.

Regional disparities in the effectiveness of differentiated instruction are influenced by the structural characteristics of educational systems. In Western contexts, flexible institutional policies foster teacher autonomy and individualized pedagogy, allowing educators to adapt instruction to meet diverse student needs (Yılmaz & Çolak, 2023; Keddie et al., 2023; Narayanan, et. al., 2024). Conversely, many Asian and African systems maintain standardized curricula that restrict pedagogical choices and limit opportunities for instructional differentiation (Bi, et.al., 2023; Strogilos, et. al., 2021; Ledwaba, 2024;). The viability of Differentiated Instruction in the multilingual, multi-proficiency ELT classroom is fundamentally shaped by systemic support. Without institutional provisions like adequate planning time, scaffolded materials, and flexible assessment, teachers' efforts to meet diverse English language learner needs are often constrained (Gibbs, 2023; Suprayogi, et. al., 2024; Tajik, et.al., 2024b).

Research on DI implementation highlights creativity and collaboration as key determinants of effective differentiation, though their interpretations vary across contexts. Teacher-driven innovation and flexibility are highlighted in some studies (Hidayat et al., 2024; Tajik et al., 2024a), while others underscore institutional collaboration and structured support as the foundation of sustainable practice (Liang & Zou, 2025; Osae & Papadopoulos, 2024). Regardless of context, professional development is deemed essential for fostering pedagogical creative and adaptive teaching of English in the classroom. In terms of learning outcomes, DI consistently enhances student achievement, motivation, and autonomy when systematically applied (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020); Sapan & Mede, 2022). However, the magnitude of the impact of this varies. Some studies report stronger effects for high achievers, while others identify benefits across proficiency levels, suggesting DI's success is closely linked to classroom context and learner variation (Elyas et al., 2020; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

Research shows that the successful implementation of differentiated instruction in English language teaching also depends largely on the broader institutional environment. Key factors such as sufficient time for lesson planning, equitable access to teaching resources, and flexible assessment systems play a critical role in enabling or constraining differentiated practices, rather than teachers' individual efforts alone (Gibbs, 2023; Suprayogi, et.al., 2024; Tajik, et. al., 2024b). Therefore, sustainable differentiation in ELT is not merely a

pedagogical skill to be mastered by teachers, but a systemic capacity to be built by all parties, especially the institutions.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the results and discussions, this systematic literature review highlights key implications for enhancing differentiated instruction in English language teaching. These implications address practical, institutional, and research aspects needed to strengthen DI implementation. Figure 2 presents the main implications of the study.

Figure 2: Implications of the study

For Teachers	For Professional Development Courses	For Institutions and Policy makers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt lessons to suit students' different levels and learning styles. • Use flexible grouping and varied tasks to boost engagement. • Reflect and adjust teaching regularly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include DI principles and practice in teacher education programs. • Provide hands-on training on DI. • Build professional learning communities for sharing DI strategies. • Focus on closing the gap between DI theory and classroom practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer time, resources, and flexibility for teachers to implement DI. • Integrate DI into curriculum standards and school policies. • Support mentoring and peer collaboration among teachers. • Promote DI as part of inclusive education goals.

The findings of this review highlight the significance of differentiated instruction (DI) as a powerful strategy to meet the varied needs of learners English language classrooms. Teachers should adopt flexible strategies that cater to learners' diverse proficiency levels, learning preferences, and interests. By tailoring content, process, and assessment methods, teachers can create more inclusive learning environments that foster engagement and equity among learners. Such practices help create an equitable learning environment where every learner can have equal chance to thrive.

For teacher education and professional development, the results highlight the need to embed DI principles within training programs and workshops. Trainings should focus on work of integrating DI concepts into the curriculum content and provide practical opportunities for implementation. Collaboration, mentoring, and reflective teaching can enhance teachers' confidence and competence in applying DI. Continuous professional learning and mentoring can help bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and classroom implementation of DI.

At the institutional and policy level, continuous support is vital to embed differentiated instruction as an integral part of English language teaching. This includes providing and offering adequate time, sufficient resources, and flexibility to enable teachers to implement DI effectively. Inclusive policies that promote and recognize learner diversity can further strengthen DI's roles within language education. In addition, future research should be encouraged to examine how institutional support and contextual factors influence the long-term effectiveness of DI across diverse educational settings.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This review provides a thorough overview of differentiated instruction practices in English language teaching but is subject to several limitations. Firstly, analysis was confined to peer-reviewed, English-language articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science from 2020 to 2025, which excluded non-English and grey literature that may reflect alternative or region-specific perspectives. Secondly, while the PRISMA approach supported procedural transparency, the absence of a formal quality appraisal tool such as CASP or MMAT limited the methodological rigor of the review. Thirdly, majority of included studies were small-scale and descriptive, restricting the generalizability of the conclusions and offering limited evidence on the causal effects of DI on learner outcomes. To advance research in this area, future studies should adopt broader methodological approaches, enhance contextual representation, and deepen empirical analysis. Table 4 summarizes major avenues for future research and practice.

Table 4: Recommended Directions for Future Research on Differentiated Instruction in ELT

Focus Area	Research Needs	Suggested Approach / Rationale
Broader Data Sources	Include non-English and regional studies beyond Scopus and WoS	Look into diverse pedagogical and cultural perspectives currently underrepresented in DI research
Quality Appraisal	Employ systematic evaluation tools such as CASP or MMAT	To enhance methodological rigor and transparency in study selection
Empirical Rigor	Move beyond perception-based or descriptive designs	Utilize longitudinal, experimental, or quasi-experimental studies to assess measurable outcomes
Comparative Contexts	Investigate DI implementation across different educational systems and policy frameworks	To reveal how institutional structures and national policies shape scalability and sustainability
Technology Integration	Examine DI within digital, blended, and hybrid learning settings	To reflect the growing influence of technology on adaptive instruction post-pandemic
Teacher Development Models	Explore links between teacher training, mentoring systems, and DI enactment	To identify professional learning pathways that sustain long-term differentiation practices
Learner-Centered Outcomes	Assess DI's impact on motivation, engagement, and learner autonomy using mixed methods	To strengthen evidence for DI's contribution to inclusive and equitable learning outcomes

CONCLUSION

This review summarizes recent research on differentiated instruction in English language teaching between 2020 and 2025, revealing its significance as a core element of inclusive and responsive pedagogy. With sufficient institutional resources, adaptable curriculum policies, and ongoing professional development, differentiated instruction increases student engagement, motivation, and independence. This approach supports learners in becoming more actively involved, self-driven, and autonomous in their educational experiences. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of its implementation remains uneven across contexts, largely due to disparities in teacher training and preparation, resources, and support from the educational system.

The effectiveness of differentiated instruction depends more on institutional commitment than on individual teacher effort. Such commitment is in term of continuous professional learning, review of adaptable curriculum design, structured mentoring, and supportive policy frameworks. Strengthening these structural supports is essential if DI is to evolve from an aspirational model into a consistent feature of English language education.

To strengthen the theoretical and practical foundations of this field, future research should examine ways to combine differentiated instruction with educational technologies and learner analytics, enabling more precise and data informed support for students. By combining differentiated pedagogy with innovation and reflective practice, English language teaching can continue to evolve toward greater inclusivity, relevance, and learner empowerment in the 21st century.

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