

# Assessing Adaptive Capability of English Teachers in Implementing Differentiated Instruction Models in Selected Junior High Schools in Mataram

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**Abstract** : The study addresses the recurrent difficulties teachers experience in response to curriculum reforms that require flexibility, creativity and technology use to respond to heterogeneous student populations. With a qualitative multi case study as its design, the research involved fifteen English teachers of five junior high schools who had applied the Merdeka Curriculum for at least one year. Methods Data were obtained through in-depth interviews and classroom observations as well as documents analysis to ensure validity and reliability. Results indicate a wide discrepancy in teachers' adaptive capacities, depending on the access to professional formation, technological preparedness and institutional support. More flexible teachers were found to design creative approaches in adapting content, process and product for meeting the learning profiles of students. Others had limited facilities, no motivation and minimal parental participation. However, despite these barriers, most of the teachers demonstrated a positive attitude and ongoing efforts toward self-improvement through self-study and peer support. Adaptive teaching is identified in the study as also crucially for achieving the aims of Merdeka Curriculum and therefore there should be ongoing (contextual) teacher training that supports reflective practice and differentiated pedagogy.

**Keywords** : Adaptive Capacity, Differentiated Teaching And Learning, Merdeka Curriculum

**Abstrak**: Penelitian ini membahas berbagai kesulitan yang dialami guru dalam merespons reformasi kurikulum yang menuntut fleksibilitas, kreativitas, dan pemanfaatan teknologi untuk menghadapi keberagaman karakteristik siswa. Dengan menggunakan desain studi multi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini melibatkan lima belas guru bahasa Inggris dari lima sekolah menengah pertama yang telah menerapkan Kurikulum Merdeka selama minimal satu tahun. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen untuk menjamin validitas dan reliabilitas penelitian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya perbedaan yang cukup besar dalam kapasitas adaptif guru, yang dipengaruhi oleh akses terhadap pengembangan profesional, kesiapan teknologi, dan dukungan institusi. Guru yang lebih adaptif mampu merancang pendekatan kreatif dalam menyesuaikan konten, proses, dan produk pembelajaran sesuai dengan profil belajar siswa. Sementara itu, sebagian guru masih menghadapi keterbatasan fasilitas, rendahnya motivasi, dan minimnya partisipasi orang tua. Meskipun demikian, sebagian besar guru menunjukkan

*sikap positif dan upaya berkelanjutan untuk meningkatkan kompetensi melalui belajar mandiri dan dukungan rekan sejawat. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa pengajaran adaptif memiliki peran penting dalam mencapai tujuan Kurikulum Merdeka, sehingga diperlukan pelatihan guru yang berkelanjutan, kontekstual, serta mendukung praktik reflektif dan pedagogi berdiferensiasi.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Kapasitas Adaptif, Pembelajaran dan Pengajaran Berdiferensiasi, Kurikulum Merdeka.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the reform of education in Indonesia has been very dynamic as it strives to address the challenges of the twenty-first century in terms of teaching and learning challenges. The presence of *Merdeka* Curriculum is one of the boldest steps for making a flexible and student-centric educational system at where every needed element stands by. The curriculum is created for teachers and students to become free as learners in much less dependent way but in a creative creativity manner. It values autonomy in learning, supports wide variations of instruction, and embraces the use of technology as a part of instructional practice. But the effectiveness of this new curriculum rests in large part on teachers being prepared to make such a change. Teachers are assumed to know subject matter, but beyond that they become facilitators, who assist students in a learning process that allows for individual variation. In such situation, the adaptive capacity of teachers is an important factor which influences the success of curriculum implementation.

Many Indonesian schools, however, despite all that the *Merdeka* Curriculum offers, have difficulties in implementation. One of the biggest challenges they face is low levels of preparedness among teachers to implement differential learning approaches. Some researchers found that most classroom teachers in their studies utilized traditional teaching modes such as lecturing and textbook-based, non-active lessons, which were likely to reduce students actively engaging in the learning process and creativity (Susanti *et al.*, 2024). Such strategies are often repetitive, demotivating, and disengaging learners. As indicated by the *Merdeka* Curriculum, such methods are not suited to the differentiated teaching model which recognizes that all learners are different in interests, readiness, and learning patterns. The findings of this research indicate that *Merdeka* Curriculum would be partly successful if the quality in teacher training, availability of supporting infrastructures and commitments towards school-level policies were better addressed (Kurniati *et al.*, 2022). Without support, teachers may struggle to 'operationalize' curriculum principles in their classroom practice (Pak *et al.*, 2020).

A second central problem is the disjunction between policy and practice. Guidelines from the Ministry of Education on differentiated instruction are comprehensive, but the reality is that not every teacher has access to adequate training and resources, especially in rural or less-resourced schools. Even in the urban area of Mataram City, we still can study how the schools vary on technological readiness and pedagogical innovation toward digital age. Studies within the local context conducted by Iriyani *et al.*, (2023) that some teachers in Mataram do not fully understand the philosophy and objectives of *Merdeka* Curriculum due to the shortage of information about the new curriculum. Similarly, In other parts of Indonesia, Sulfiani *et al.* (2024) identify that teachers have problems in implementing the new curriculum because of inadequate technical and pedagogical support. These realities underscore the need for adaptive teaching expertise that enables teachers to modulate their practice and thinking in response to situational demands.

The adaptive capacity of teachers is referred to as their capacity to to adjust to potential opportunities to employ new things such as teaching strategies, materials and classroom management policies. This capacity is needed to address diverse students' needs and challenges (Tian & Tang, 2022). Over the last five years the researchers have learned that adaptive teachers are flexible, thoughtful, and resourceful. They can adjust learning objectives, activities, and assessments to accommodate students' varying learning preferences. This power may be most significant when

teachers are engaged in differentiated instruction, or designing instruction that meets the readiness, interest and learning profiles of students (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). In this context, adaptive teachers act as both facilitators of learning and as change agents who mediate between national educational policy goals and local classroom practice (Schipper *et al.*, 2023).

But it's easier said than done to develop such elasticity. That so many teachers have limited experience in reflection, or learning for the professional life-course. Sabon (2018) notes that in Indonesia, teachers' professional development programs often overlook practical classroom-based preparation in preference for theoretical knowledge. Consequently, educators know what differentiation is, but they are still having a hard time with it. In addition, limited facilities and infrastructure including technology and learning resources inhibition to address innovative method (Scherer *et al.*, 2021). In schools with unreliable internet or few digital devices, teachers have to be creative and employ low-tech methods to differentiate their instruction. This requires not just the technical expertise but also emotional stamina and pedagogical adaptability.

Adaptive teaching can be theoretically grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (Kong, 2021). The theory stresses that learning takes place through a concrete experience, reflection on and observation of that experience, forming new ideas from abstract concepts and experimenting with these ideas. In this way, adaptive teachers are constantly learning from their classroom experiences; reflecting on what works and doesn't work for students; developing new teaching approaches or strategies that make sense to them; and trying these out in the next class. On the other hand, SRL theory emphasizes teachers' capability to monitor, control and regulate their teaching actions. Reflective practitioners are better able to evaluate the students' needs, react and adjust instruction quickly, and determine their effectiveness in teaching. In other words, these theories emphasize that adaptability is a dynamic trait, a process sustained through reflection and practice, rather than a fixed one and has roots in pre-existing models.

Merdeka Curriculum adopts differentiated instruction as it is in line with Tomlinson & Imbeau's, (2023) framework, i.e. adapting content, process and product to suit student' profiles. Curriculum/Content differentiation Content differentiation requires that the subject matter be modified according to student readiness. Process differentiation Process differentiation is where there are differences in learning activities, or strategies used to facilitate children's learning Product differentiation Product differentiation is the provision of alternative outcomes through which students can demonstrate their understanding. Therefore, adaptive teachers must be educated about the principles of teacher decision-making and how these principles are put into action within the real limitations of a classroom (e.g., time, how many students are in class, and resources available). For instance, a teacher could form student groups based on reading ability, offer a range of instructional materials and afford flexible paper-and-pencil activities based on students' personal interests.

Previous research on teacher adaptability has also revealed that reflective and adaptive teachers tend to be more effective in their instruction(s) and students are likely to become more engaged with their learning (Parsons *et al.*, 2011, Kolajo, 2025, Brown & Friesen, 2025) They can more effectively react to unanticipated classroom food culture or changes in policy or technology. On the other hand, teachers with low adaptability tend to feel anxious and opposed when they encounter education reforms (Baumgartner, 2019). This condition also occurs in Indonesia when teachers have to adapt rapidly to changes from face-to-face learning with the emergency online systems brought about by COVID-19 or digital platforms with Merdeka Curriculum (Herawati *et al.*, 2022). Adaptive educators successfully managed those changes through trial and error with new online tools, the changing of lesson plans, and ongoing communication with students, parents and more. These are the experiences that suggest flexibility is an essential skill for teacher professionalism in the 21st century.

The point though, is that this flexibility among teachers is uneven in many schools. Some teachers readily accept innovation and some take more time to warm up. A study conducted by Zulaiha *et al.* (2022) reported that the readiness of teachers to change was closely connected with capacity and opportunity for professional learning communities, leadership support, and school culture. Teachers become more seasoned in schools that foster collaboration and peer mentoring. On the other hand, if school is a place with strong hierarchy and little space for discussion, teachers

do not give away ideas or try new approaches. It is therefore not just a matter of personal effort to cultivate adaptability, the institutional setting can provide a supportive context in which professional development may be nurtured, for example through mentoring and reflective dialogue as well as accessible learning experiences.

This study aimed to contribute in the literature by investigating the adaptive features of English teachers that work on applying differentiated instruction under Merdeka Curriculum. Though many studies have examined teachers' general preparedness for curriculum reform (e.g., Sulfiani *et al.*, 2024) few have investigated the adaptive practices of English teachers in junior high schools. English teachers have the difficulty of being required to be trained in both inducing language use through instruction and teaching skills, with a need also to combine communicative competence, creativity and critical thinking. Furthermore, teaching English under Merdeka Curriculum compels teachers to integrate global communicative competence with local culture, complicating the process of adaptation. Through this inquiry into the lived experiences of English teachers in Mataram City, the study sought to reveal how they understand, perceive and conduct differentiated instruction based on their school settings.

As a result, the Merdeka Curriculum period is a viable time to deepen and enhance teachers' adaptive competencies. This change, however, will never fully develop without clear descriptions of what kinds of differentiation teachers understand and apply in actual classrooms. Thus, in this study, the author tries to find out: (1) to what extent of adapting capacity do the English language teachers in some selected junior high schools in Mataram show up when they conduct differentiated instruction; (2) what problems did such adaption bring about and how it may become a barrier; and (3) in terms of its adaptability ability with regard to employing differentiated instruction what effect does it have on the success or failure of Merdeka Curriculum. By means of a qualitative multiple case study, this study offers deep insights into teachers' adaptation in thought and action indicating challenges and reflections, which may be beneficial for both academic discussion and educational practice.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a multiple-case study design to explore English teachers' adaptive teaching practices in implementing differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum context (Yin *et al.*, 2018). A qualitative framework was selected to understand teachers' experiences, reflections, and classroom adaptations in authentic educational settings rather than to test statistical relationships (Miles *et al.*, 2014; Patton, 2015). The study was conducted in five junior high schools in Mataram City, West Nusa Tenggara, involving fifteen English teachers selected purposively based on their minimum one-year experience in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The participants represented diverse school contexts, teaching experiences, and levels of professional development engagement.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, including lesson plans, syllabi, and reflective teaching notes. Interviews focused on teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction, adaptive teaching strategies, technology integration, and challenges encountered during implementation. The data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles *et al.* (2014), involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding and thematic analysis were conducted to identify patterns related to adaptive strategies, instructional challenges, and student engagement. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation across interviews, observations, and document reviews, supported by participant confirmation and cross-case interpretation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data were thematically analysed to uncover patterns of how English teachers exercised adaptive capacity in practicing differentiated instruction under the Merdeka Curriculum. Three themes were identified through interviews, classroom observations and document analysis, i.e. (1) *Adaptive Teaching Strategies*, (2) *Challenges in Developing Adaptivity* and (3). *Impact of Adaptivity on Curriculum Implementation*. On the first theme, namely Adaptive Teaching Strategies, participants of the research have displayed flexible implementations while teaching English in

response to A few teachers demonstrated knowledge of differentiated instruction but some were learning to understand the basics of what it means. Most of them recognized that the curriculum calls for recognition of students' differences in readiness, interest, and learning profiles. Participant A claimed that MMK contained content, process, and product which were still similar with previous curriculum, but student interest was also given another attention by teacher although she admitted that the maintenance of motivation became an obstacle.

This situation led teachers to develop activities that were more flexible and creative in order to make students remain active and involved in the class. Participant B revealed that the curriculum transformed the roles and responsibilities of teachers, who were previously the source of knowledge to making them facilitators leading students to self-discovery. "*I look at that boy who*" referring to one of them "*was taught more flexible, could be more relax,*" she said, underlining how this represent a change from approving teacher-led strategies to an relaxed approach towards student-centered learning. This transformation demonstrates how a new curriculum fosters a climate of openness, inquiry and reflection with teachers and learners. The shift also highlights the fact that educators are beginning to understand, and incorporate into their own thinking, the elements of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory learning through dynamic repetition of experience-reflect-theorize about-repeat, etc. The idea of attending to learning as a dynamic phenomenon rather than static schooling emerged from this new routine that valued learning by doing. These procedural adaptations are believed to have motivated students to become more responsible for their own learning and facilitated better class interactions. This evolution of her practice demonstrates that flexibility is more than a teacher skill but also, a mindset that supports lifelong learning and reflective thinking.

A few teachers modelled inventive solutions that had emerged from their adaptive thinking in spite of insufficient classroom supplies. Participant C, for example, did not teach entirely yet according to Merdeka Curriculum but she already structured her lessons based on the philosophy of Merdeka Curriculum. You know, "*Children, we have to look at them that way, because we know they're diverse,*" she said, referencing her appreciation for the diversity of what students can learn. To facilitate this principle, she used weekly visual themes; audio recordings and content that made the language development more real, from the local culture by weaving in audio recording and visuals and context-bound language learning. Her classroom practices have shown innovative integration of elementary class-wide techniques to apply the basics to children's lives so lessons could be contextualized for them. Participant D remarked that he utilized a more structured design to administer surveys and conducted informal interviews with parents to determine students' learning habits and learning styles. He even went on house visits to get a better understanding of her students' situations and family supports. What he practiced demonstrated his strong adaptive competence as Tominson and Imbeau (2010) described in the theory of Differentiated Instruction. Most participants claimed that they monitored and evaluated their own instruction and brought their reflection to English teacher conference. These results suggest that adaptive teaching is not only about technical adjustments, but also about empathically tuning into learners' circumstances and concerns.

Observation data corroborated that those teachers who were able to utilise differentiated instruction effectively established fun, interactive and collaborative classrooms. They employed diverse teaching tools, such as posters, quizzes, videos and storytelling to link learning material with daily life situations. For instance, the visual aids used by Participant D prompted discussion and fostered student-led knowledge production whereas online quizzes adopted by Participant E promoted self-assessment as well as a sense of joyful rivalry in classroom. These examples illustrate how adaptive teachers persistently experiment and adjust their teaching practices based on student feedback, at the heart of both Experiential Learning and Self-Regulated Learning theories. As mentioned earlier, adaptive teachers' teaching was more flexible so they can be more open for improvising the flow of instruction when facing an unexpected situation in class. They struck a balance between traditional and digital tools to be able to include students at differing levels of access.

However, not all teachers felt comfortable with these techniques. Others continued to rely on textbooks, teacher-centered lecturing approaches that do not afford as much opportunity for

student-centered learning. This variation suggests that teacher adaptability continues to develop and needs continued support. However, interviews also suggested that not so responsive teachers were open for reflexivity and changing themselves. Such reflections are useful initial tasks in the development of teacher professional development that highlights reflective practice, peer mentoring and classroom experimentation. With structured support, teachers can operationalize such reflective practice as routine adaptive behaviour that will enhance instruction and lead to improved student outcomes.

The second theme deals with *Challenges faced by teachers in Developing Adaptivity*. This impacted their flexibility coming from within and outside. Internal barriers were believed to be lack of self-confidence as a teacher, shallow pedagogical knowledge about differentiation, and stress from administrative duties. Other challenges were from external factors such as lack of infrastructure, bad internet connection some parents' involvement in supporting students learning. Participant J described how she was able to work on overcoming these problems, "*I approached their parents, I explained to them the new curriculum demands them to work alone. So, I asked them to support their kids' learning.*" This statement shows his open attitude to approach parents in order to support their children better. However, some teachers were unable to do so, especially if they had a larger number of students. Participant K provided an example of how she had used text, image, and video for learning to motivate students to follow her instruction, yet she complained "*Some of these students simply can't fit in because of the lack of learning supporting facilities*" Participant B explained that many of her colleagues were forced to deal with challenges due to limited technology access. These findings insinuate that lack of equitable technology access could hinder the successful implementation of Merdeka Curriculum.

The last theme deals with *impact of adaptivity on Curriculum Implementation*. Data analysis showed that the flexibility of the teachers in adapting the curriculum affected how well they implemented Merdeka Curriculum and how successful they created the school learning climate. Teachers who had high levels of adaptation skills also developed inclusive classrooms that fostered active participation, creativity and self-confidence among the students. Participant H recalled how persistent he was when he tried out new thing with his limited knowledge and skill. This signifies his struggle to develop self-learning to compensate for his resource constraints. Her persistence mirrors himself as a learner who sets goals and adjusts his strategies to meet his learners' needs (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Participant E was also aided by online workshops that developed her technology skills as well as ideas for lessons plans. These teachers became models of how professional learning communities strengthen both confidence and creativity. But the technology didn't fit together seamlessly.

Participant D explained that students' pronunciation could be enhanced by "*60 percent*" through the use of audio recordings and Participant B utilized digital quizzes and interactive media to encourage learners. Participant A was more sceptical, noting that "*most of the students are just busy with all these entertainment applications*" This represents the human side of adaptability teachers need to be able to channel students' digital interests into effective learning. In addition, adaptive teachers transformed school culture by being mentors to colleagues and exchanging ideas in MGMP discussions. This result is in agreement with Baumgartner (2019) who claim that supportive and adaptive learning speeds up innovation and adjustments as teachers are continually planning, reflecting, moving to adapt their teaching to individual student experience. Adaptive teachers often encouraged and influenced their fellow colleagues with a pooling of thought, providing mentoring and opening joint projects. In schools with the supportive leadership style and the teaching was to advance and the learning environment was to be encouraging; these practices were multiplied.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of this study demonstrate that teacher adaptability plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of differentiated instruction within the Merdeka Curriculum. Adaptability was identified not merely as a teaching skill, but as a multidimensional construct involving reflective practice, creativity, emotional resilience, and pedagogical flexibility. English teachers in Mataram City continuously adjusted instructional strategies, learning materials, and

classroom practices to respond to students' diverse learning needs and classroom challenges. The study also revealed that teacher adaptability was strongly influenced by intrinsic motivation, access to professional learning, and institutional support. Teachers who actively engaged in professional communities and collaborative reflection showed greater confidence, innovation, and technology integration in their teaching practices. Furthermore, adaptive teaching positively contributed to students' engagement, participation, and learning satisfaction by creating more inclusive, responsive, and meaningful learning environments aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Based on these findings, future research is recommended to explore adaptive teaching practices across different educational levels, subject areas, and regional contexts to provide broader insights into differentiated instruction implementation in Indonesia. For educational practitioners, continuous professional development programs focusing on reflective practice, adaptive pedagogy, and technology integration should be strengthened through mentoring systems and collaborative teacher learning communities. At the policy level, educational authorities and school leaders are encouraged to provide sustainable institutional support, equitable access to digital resources, and contextual training programs that enable teachers to maintain adaptive and student-centred learning practices.

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