

An Analysis of Differentiated Learning Strategies in the Implementation of *Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar* in Teaching English Writing Skills

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A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to disclose the state of English writing proficiency among students and analyze how differentiated learning strategies in *Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar* approaches address the needs of different student populations when teaching writing English. This study used descriptive qualitative methods which employed observation, questionnaire and interview to collect the data. The participants of this study were one English subject teacher and 35 grade XK of students of MA. Muallimat NWDI Pancor in the academic year 2023-2024. The study's findings demonstrated that, while students' writing is currently in fairly good condition, it is far from perfect, as shown by the percentage data presented. The occasionally answer had the highest percentage data presentation, totaling 42.86%. There were 24 students who thought that they had difficulty to found an interesting idea to write about. Differentiated learning strategies can meet the needs of divers students in teaching writing English throuhg deviding students based on learning styles, namely visual, auditory and kinesthetic. It supports the quality of students' English writing learning, especially in finding interesting topics to write about because this learning provides suitability of materials, processes and tasks or projects according to the needs, abilities and creativity of students in the learning process.



Introduction

Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar is developed in response to the ever-evolving demands of education. "The concept of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar can then be accepted considering the vision of Indonesia's future education mission for the creation of quality humans who can compete in various fields of life" (Sibagariang et al., 2021). The background is an attempt to give students more freedom to pursue competency excellence, discover their potential, and pursue their interests. The curriculum's implementation will demonstrate the appropriate educational system because "the curriculum is the core of education" which determines the course of education (Munandar, 2017). Furthermore, Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar seeks to lessen undue academic pressure and encourage learning that is more applicable to daily life. According to UU No.20 (2003), "The curriculum is a collection of lesson plans that address the goals, subject matter, instructional strategies, and resources utilized to provide direction for structuring learning activities in order to meet a national education

goal." Therefore, the goal of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar is to equip students to become more self-reliant, imaginative, and creative people. Furthermore, the introduction of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar in Indonesia gives schools greater latitude in selecting teaching methods and strategies that meet the needs of their students. One of them is the English language subject, where the Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar presents a chance to enhance learning.

Learning the English language is crucial for today's students. English proficiency is not trivial but plays an important role in the development of students' abilities in this modern era. The ability to communicate in English provides a broad avenue of information, knowledge, and experience in this era of globalization. Learning English also helps students develop critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills, which are very important when facing the future. Therefore, learning English is not only an important component of the educational curriculum but also a meaningful investment for students in this global era. The four components of English language proficiency are speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

One of the most crucial skills that students need to develop is writing because it allows them to think critically and deeply about what they are writing. English writing proficiency is crucial for students' academic growth. Along with assisting students in effectively communicating in a foreign language, this skill also makes it easier for them to organize and clearly express their ideas. Rahmawati and Latifah (2019) state, "Finding and organizing ideas, putting them on paper, and then shaping and revising them are all steps in the writing process." Students who write in English gain proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and structure, which enhances their speaking and language comprehension. Furthermore, writing abilities are required in many facets of life, including both professional and academic settings. Students who have strong writing abilities can produce written works of high quality and speed up the learning process. Therefore, there are new opportunities and challenges in helping students improve their writing skills when implementing Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. One tactic that can be applied to optimize learning in the Merdeka Belajar implementation is differentiated learning.

Differentiated learning is defined as a way to recognize and teach according to students' different talents and learning styles (Morgan 2014). Differentiated learning aims to address each student's distinct needs in the classroom. This entails adapting instructional strategies, resources, and evaluation tools to the aptitudes, interests, learning preferences and learning pace of each student. The goal is to establish a welcoming environment for learning where every student can reach their full potential.

The grouping of student learning outcomes according to the child's growth phase characterizes this learning strategy which clearly illustrates the position of differentiation. One of them is the English subject, where Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar provides an opportunity to improve learning through appropriate strategies. Learning that is flexible and meets each student's needs to help them reach their full potential based on their skills is known as differentiated learning. The majority of students expressed satisfaction with their experiences and discovered that they could get past their learning challenges when the teachers used differentiated instruction techniques in their classes. (Astuti, et al., 2023). This is the same as Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar which prioritizes student learning. Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar and differentiated learning are closely related concepts because their goals and directions are the same. The results of identifying the various student profiles and needs inform the teacher's

preparation for selecting the best learning strategy, allowing students to participate fully in the learning process while feeling happy and free according to their learning style.

According to Haar (2002), each person's processing, submission, and perceptions of information vary based on their inclination toward a particular learning style, which they frequently employ during the learning process. Each student has a distinct way of learning, but the three most common types are kinesthetic, auditory, and visual. Visual learners typically absorb information best through images, graphs, or diagrams, and find it easier to process information when concepts are visualized. Conversely, auditory learners prefer to learn by hearing, and they do a good job of retaining information through spoken explanations, group discussions, or voice recordings. Kinesthetic learners, on the other hand, favor experiential learning and hands-on learning activities. Experiments, simulations, or hands-on activities like role-playing or physical skill practice help them understand concepts better. By considering the various learning styles of students, teachers can create more engaging and productive lessons that maximize every student's learning potential.

The majority of prior research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of differentiated learning strategies on students in various learning environments. Therefore, in this study, researcher aim to disclose the state of English writing proficiency among students and analyze how differentiated learning strategies in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar approaches address the needs of different student populations when teaching writing English.

Research Method

This research used descriptive qualitative method. In this case, the participants of this study were one English subject teacher and 35 grade XK of students of MA. Muallimat NWDI Pancor in the academic year 2023-2024. The researcher toke a class of students as research participants. This school was chosen because the teacher used differentiated learning strategy in implementing Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. For the data collection techniques, researcher used observation techniques, questionnaire, interview and recording device. The information gathered from the observation was utilized to carry out the study. This observation was carried out during the English language learning process in class to know the teaching learning processs and the division of student learning groups.

In addition, a questionnaire was utilized to know the current writing conditions of the students. This was followed by interviews with teachers and students regarding their experiences with differentiated instruction in the Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar.

Three steps are taken in the analysis of the gathered data, namely data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing/verification (Miles and uberman 1992: 16). Data reduction is the process of summarizing, highlighting, and focusing on relevant information for a study topic. Data presentation involves organizing and presenting qualitative data logically and understandably by using graphs. Conclusions to explain the results of the treatment based on the data that has been presented

Result and Discussion

The researcher observed the class on May 12, 2024, and observed the teacher's teaching methods and student group division. The learning process was smooth, with the teacher encouraging students to continue learning English, particularly writing. The classroom used a differentiated learning approach, matching students to their learning

styles. Differentiation was organized into content, process, and product, with students choosing topics based on their learning styles.

To collect field data about students learning condition, the researcher gave questionnaires to students to fill out on May 13, 2024. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items that became questions. The questionnaire results are presented in the following table.

Table 1
The percentage of each item of students’ current learning condition

No	Questionnaire list	Yes	Some-times	No
1	Do you enjoy writing?	24	11	0
2	In general, do you trust yourself as a person who can find good words, ideas, and perceptions?	4	25	6
3	Are you confident expressing your ideas in writing?	6	16	13
4	Do you think difficult to find out an interesting topic to write?	24	8	3
5	Can you come up with ideas or insights you’d not thought of before?	11	12	12
6	Can you find problems in your reasoning or logic and straighten them out?	10	16	9
7	Can you adjust something you’ve written to fit the needs of particular readers?	8	14	13
8	Can you get rid of most mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and so on, so readers would not be put off?	5	25	5
9	Can you get rid of virtually all such mistakes?	7	19	9
10	Do you feel your writing skills have improved in the recent years?	25	4	6
TOTAL		124	150	76
PRESENTAGE		35.43%	42.86%	21.71%

Based on the number of presentations received from the questionnaire, which consisted of 35 participants, the highest score was given to point 2, which is sometimes, with a total presentation of 42.86%. This shows that the current condition of students' writing is quite good based on the questions that have been answered.

The highest presentation with a total of 42.86% in the sometimes answer. The data shows that the current condition of students' writing is quite good but not perfect as evidenced by the percentage data between the answers yes and sometimes which has a slight difference of only 9.1%, which means students are not fully capable. Most of the

students also like writing lessons in English, the data also shows that 25 out of 35 students thought that their writing skills have improved in recent years. Although many students thought that their writing skills have improved, there were 24 students who thought that they have difficulty in finding interesting ideas to write about. Therefore, the researcher thought that this differentiated learning was very suitable for students, considering the current writing condition according to the result of the interview.

Researcher conducted interviews with teacher and students to understand their perceptions of writing skills and differentiated learning in the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. The study found that students' writing interest has slightly decreased due to the advent of AI technology, but the role of technology in differentiated learning is crucial for teachers' success and time savings. Differentiated learning strategies in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar include content, process, and product differentiation, dividing students based on their learning abilities and interests. Teachers face challenges such as students' lack of enthusiasm, inadequate facilities, and limited time, funds, facilities, and educators' readiness. However, students generally like differentiated learning, as it allows them to express their ideas and perceptions in writing, and it is more interactive and adaptable to their learning style. Students recommend giving feedback directly to teachers more often to improve their writing skills.

To address these issues, the teacher implemented Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar, which places an emphasis on the needs of each individual student, using differentiated learning strategies. Teachers separated students' learning based on their learning styles in an attempt to meet each student's learning needs. In this study, the teacher divided 35 class X K students into 3 learning groups, namely visual, auditory and kinesthetic groups using cognitive assessments. It can be concluded through the following diagram percentage.

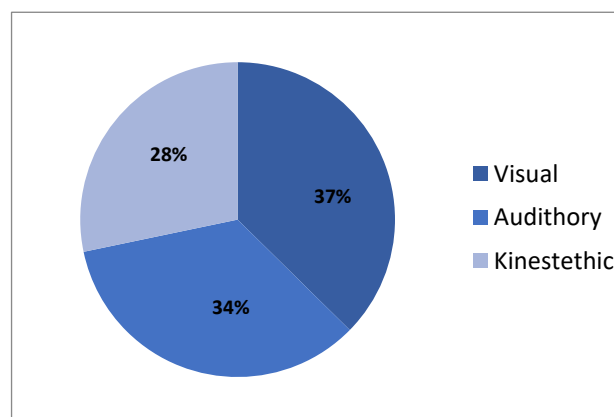


Figure 1. Diagram of the Results of Mapping Student Groups Based on Learning Styles

Students with visual learning styles amounted to 13 people with 37% presentations, auditory amounted to 12 people with 34% presentations and kinesthetic amounted to 10 people with 28% presentations, with a total of 35 students in one class.

In learning process, teacher organize efficient time to carry out differentiated learning strategies. Teachers give students according to three kinds of differentiation, namely content, process and product. Where during the content differentiation process, students can choose the topic of discussion that they will learn, in this content differentiation students with visual learning styles choose the topic of animals to describe, students with auditory learning styles also have animal topics, while students

with kinesthetic learning styles choose to describe their friends. Then, in process differentiation, students with visual learning style was given learning media in the form of pictures with animal topics, students with auditory learning style was given media through animated videos, while for students who have kinesthetic learning style was given practice to describe their fellow groups. Finally, in product differentiation, students with visual learning style was given a project to make mind mapping with animal topics and then presented, students with auditory learning style was given a project to make video creations with animal topics, while students with kinesthetic learning style was given a project to describe their school through video and then presented in front of the class. In this case, it appears very interactive between the teacher and students and students with one another. The students were very enthusiastic in answering, practicing and presenting the results of the projects they made.

Differentiated learning in the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar is seen as appropriate in the learning process of writing in English. In the teaching and learning process, it can be seen that this differentiated learning strategy was very attractive to students because it creates a lively atmosphere and was able to provide active interaction between teachers and students, as well as between one student and another. In line with previous research which said, “Regarding the application of differentiated instruction in the classroom, the majority of students and all teachers had positive opinions. Their positive feedback on their preparation and execution suggested that differentiated instruction turned into a successful and interesting teaching strategy in the classroom (Astuti, Syaifei, Suryani 2023).” The researcher discovered that during the process of teaching and learning, this differentiated learning provided space for students to express and bring up new ideas in writing through content, process and product differentiation. This was further reinforced by classifying students into groups according to the division of their visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles, which reflected their individual learning needs. Creativity can only be achieved by students if given the space and opportunity to do sodevelop independence and potential that exists within oneself, which can be done by providing opportunities for students to study individually/in groups; give opportunities for students to learn through experience; provide motivation; include students in every aspect of activities that constitute children's basic needs; and make students aware that life is dynamic (Jalaluddin, 2012). So that students are interested and enthusiastic in learning to write. This differentiated learning also involves all students because of the different learning methods in each group that has been divided.

Differentiated learning in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar undoubtedly places a strong emphasis on appreciating the unique personal characteristics of each student. The analysis also revealed that Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar strongly supports this differentiated learning strategy. Where teachers are not only transfer of knowledgebut also as a facilitator for receiving and giving, and facilitating development student potential (Mutmainnah, 2020). The curriculum approach that emphasizes freedom, creativity and student empowerment is able to provide feedback for teachers in getting a more relevant and interesting teaching experience so that in the future teachers will always be able to adjust students' learning needs. To the fullest extent possible, Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar can thus offer additional room for differentiated learning strategies to be used, enabling students to learn in accordance with their preferred learning style.

The researcher can conclude that differentiated learning strategies can support the quality of students' English writing learning, especially in finding interesting topics to

write about because this learning provides suitability of materials, processes and tasks or projects according to the needs, abilities and creativity of students in the learning process.

Conclusion

A questionnaire was used in the study to ask 35 students about their writing conditions. The results showed that 42.86% of students felt their writing skills improved in recent years. However, 24 students found it difficult to find interesting ideas. The study suggests that differentiated learning, implemented in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar was suitable for students' current writing condition. This strategy fosters an interactive living environment, The Merdeka Belajar curriculum uses differentiated learning strategies, such as content, process, and product differentiation, to group students according to their learning preferences and aptitudes. Teachers deal with issues like unenthusiastic students, inadequate resources, time constraints, space constraints, and teacher preparedness. Differentiated learning is generally well-liked by students, though, because it gives them the opportunity to write about their thoughts and perceptions and is more interactive and customizable to fit each student's learning preferences. Encourages active interaction between teachers and students, and allows students to express and bring up new topic and ideas through content, process, and product differentiation. It also groups students based on their learning styles, fostering interest and enthusiasm in writing, so that differentiated learning in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar can meet students' learning needs. Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar supports this differentiated learning strategy, emphasizing freedom, creativity, and student empowerment. For further research, it is hoped that we will explore more about differentiated learning in the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar to find out the extent to which differentiated learning can influence students' writing learning needs through grouping based on students' learning abilities or learning interests.

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