

## Encouraging Learning Autonomy through Differentiated Instruction in Writing Activities

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### A B S T R A C T

This classroom action research seeks to demonstrate how differentiated instruction might promote students' learning autonomy in a writing class setting. This study included 50 English department students from a private institution in Malang. According to the findings of the preliminary study, students were unmotivated to participate in writing activities because they thought they were boring and uninteresting. They were detected paying little attention to the assigned writing assignments and, as a result, demonstrating poor writing performance. To promote student learning autonomy, the researchers implemented with differentiated instructions in several writing exercises. Using two cycles of classroom action research, the researchers seek to solve the instructional challenge using potential learning strategies. After adopting differentiated instruction, the researchers assessed the students' writing scores and compared them to success criteria. The first cycle resulted in 70% of students meeting the success criterion since they were still unfamiliar with the differentiated instructions. In the second round, the pupils successfully met 85% of the criteria. The findings showed that creating differentiated instructions provided pupils with a favorable challenge. It was evident from the behavioral changes of pupils who exhibited greater enthusiasm for following the directions. Furthermore, the students demonstrated the established learning autonomy, which resulted in improved writing performance. These research findings add to the enrichment of the educational component, since future teachers or researchers may focus on a more comprehensive covering of this teaching technique.

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## Introduction

As a productive skill in learning English as a foreign language, writing is a rather difficult skill to acquire. Some previous researchers have confirmed this statement (Alisha et al., 2019; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Agdia & Syafei, 2020; Budjalemba & Listyani, 2020). This is in line with the findings of Galbraith & Baaijen (2018) who argue that the whole process of writing involves deploying the not-pre-stored content of our writing. Further, they promote that writing includes constituting the content in a not straightforward way but it deals with how we try to understand as it unfolds within the text. Even though the result of writing performance can be analyzed from the product, the process itself is rather unseen. It is because writing process ensures the employment of cognitive structures that can support the learning process in both implicit and explicit ways (Graham et al., 2020). In addition, the process of writing allows students to develop critical thinking skills (Sinaga & Feranie, 2017; Kayaalp et al., 2020) which include multiple stages of thinking and pour the acquired skill and knowledge in a writing product. Those reasonings wrap up the idea of how writing is a challenging skill to master by students who learn English as a foreign language.

The researchers conducted a preliminary study in a descriptive writing class at a private university in Malang with 50 students as the participants. The result reflected that the students had difficulties in following the conventional instructions in writing activities. It was shown by the students' writing performance which was categorized as poor. One of the students' writing works showed that 80% of the students got low scores based on the established writing criteria. Not only the scores were low, the students' writing products did not match the instruction. Curious by the preliminary results, the researchers tried to find out what reasons underlying the phenomenon. From the interview with some of the participants, the researchers discovered that the students had initial perception that writing is a difficult activity to proceed and it contributed to how they approach writing attempt poorly. Another thing was that students felt unmotivated by the conventional instructions given by the course instructor as they felt that they only followed particular rules. Therefore, the researchers think of encouraging students' learning autonomy through differentiated instruction in conducting writing activities.

The psychological aspect contributes to how students are involved in a writing process. Shang (2012) found that students got nervous when they were required to write an English composition as they were afraid of making mistakes in language forms. Naturally, writing is a complex activity even to native speakers because there are many factors affecting the process including psychological, linguistic, and cognitive aspects (Alfaki, 2015). To this, the researchers attempt to provide safe space for students to be involved in writing activities by promoting their learning autonomy. One of the alternatives to encourage students to have learning autonomy is to arrange the right instruction. Chou (2011) states that other causes that may lead to the difficulties faced by students in writing are first language interference, inadequacy of ideas, and unclear instructions of the task. In this study, the researchers focus on the use of powerful instruction to facilitate students' learning experience.

Creating a safe learning environment is promoted to be one way to facilitate students' needs in achieving meaningful process of learning and excellent learning objectives. Jihan (2023) suggest that learning environment can be built using the appropriate tools and strategies. This research tries to employ dynamic teaching where the analysis of changes in students' performance during instruction and probes of learners' responses are included to approach successful instructional steps (Shea, 2015). Differentiated instruction is proposed in this study to encourage the shaping of learning autonomy in hope the students find convenient space or environment to acquire writing skill as each of their uniqueness is appreciated. Endless previous studies show the positive traits of using differentiated instruction to support students' learning in different education levels and scopes (Endal et al., 2013; Halim et al., 2022; Ismail, 2019; Jawiah et al., 2023; Pudjiati et al., 2023). However, there is still limited access on the linking between differentiated instruction in encouraging students' learning autonomy in teaching writing skill. Therefore, this research findings will become a powerful contribution to pedagogical field in term of theoretical and practical significances of the employment of writing differentiated instruction to provide learning autonomy for the students as there is still few reference which becomes the foundation of similar research.

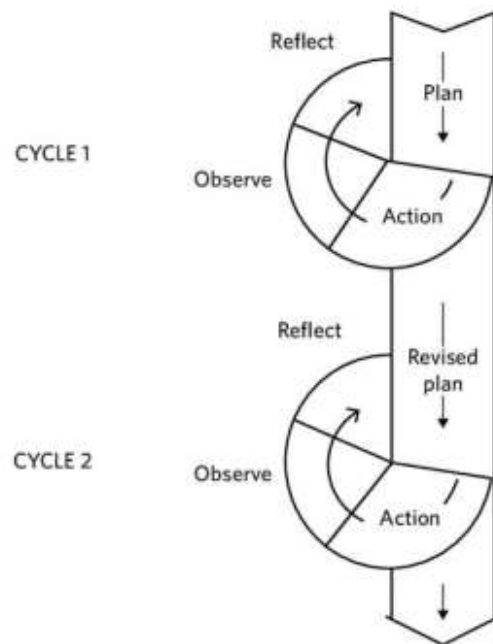
## Research Method

This research employs a classroom action research design. It is based on the instructional problems found in the preliminary study. The participants in this study were 50 students in English Department of Universitas Insan Budi Utomo Malang who attended Descriptive English Writing class. As the preliminary writing performance of

the students were categorized as poor, the researcher attempted to propose differentiated instruction to facilitate the students in learning writing skill. The procedure includes planning where course outline, material, and media were arranged, acting where the researchers implemented the differentiated instruction in writing activities, observing where the researchers took note on how the instruction was implemented, and reflecting where they discovered what needs to be revised and adjusted in the implementation of differentiated instruction. The researchers set the criteria of success as 85% of the students can achieve the minimum standard of assessment. If the criteria of success can be achieved in the first cycle of the classroom action research, the researchers can stop and make a conclusion. The researchers are required to continue to second cycle if the criteria of success cannot be achieved after making some revisions and adjustments based on the reflection in the first cycle.

### Result and Discussion

The classroom action research conducted by the researchers followed the design proposed by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014). The illustration of the procedure is displayed in the following chart.



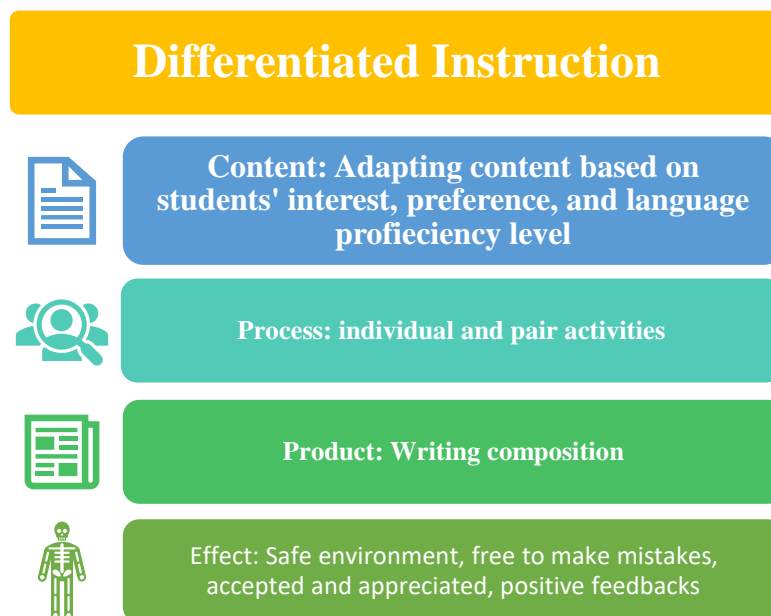
**Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Model by Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon**

In the first cycle, the researchers focused on providing safe learning environment for the students in writing report using differentiated instruction. The students were given the opportunity to select one out of the topic options. The students were excited in either the selection or the writing process. Surprisingly, there was improvement on the students' motivation and the quality of the writing composition. If the preliminary result showed that only 10 students (20%) got good score on their writing performance, cycle 1 dramatically changed the result as there were 60% of the students improved their writing. The students got all excited to experience the new differentiated instruction and produced writing composition based on the established instruction. This was a huge impact as students found it difficult to write writing compositions according to the conventional instruction in the preliminary study. However, the researchers continued to cycle 2 since

the criteria of success was not achieved yet. The researchers adjusted the selection of report topics to the more relatable areas so that the students would produce the more authentic writing compositions.

The result of the second cycle became the vivid evidence that using differentiated instruction was effective to encourage students' learning autonomy. The results were reflected to the significant upgrade on the students' motivation and score in writing a report. 45 students (90%) out of this research participants achieved the learning objectives which reflected that the criteria of success have been reached. Moreover, the students witnessed that this differentiated instruction was a good alternative to provide the convenient environment to learn. They felt that their choice and ideas were very much appreciated and welcomed. It led to students' confidence in following the instruction correctly and appropriately. As the result, the students' writing performance also greatly improved. Those results have become a scientific proof that students' learning autonomy was shaped favorably.

The whole process of the implementation of differentiated instruction in this research was done by adapting the learning materials to students' interests, preferences, and language proficiency level. The researchers reflected on the results of the first cycle and adjusted the selections topics because they were considered as a little too difficult and unfamiliar for the students. The process included pairing activity where the students were required to find a partner who got similar preference on the topic and gave feedbacks to each other and individual activity where they needed to write a report composition on their own. The product of the differentiated instruction in this research was writing composition specifically report. Finally, the effects of this instruction were safe environment to learn, students were allowed to make mistakes, students felt accepted and appreciated, and the students got positive feedbacks from their peers and teachers. These findings were illustrated in the Figure below.



**Figure 2.** Illustration of implementation of differentiated instruction to encourage learning autonomy in writing activities

This research findings confirmed that the use of differentiated instruction was effective to encourage students' learning autonomy in writing activities. This contributes

to the enrichment of the results of the previous studies focusing on using differentiated instruction in pedagogical context. The shaped learning autonomy was reflected from the students' writing performance and motivation. A study conducted by Rumkoda & Alinda (2022) showed identical result of using differentiated instruction in improving speaking skill. The conducted two cycles displayed equally positive result on the implementation. In addition, the research done by Pudjiati et al. (2023) also promotes the effectiveness of using differentiated instruction in enhancing students' skill in writing poetry in elementary level. Another study by Sari et al. (2023) is evidence that implementing differentiated instruction has a positive impact on writing skill of the students. Further, the learning autonomy shaping using differentiated instruction was because the students' self-regulation was trained. This is in line with the result of Kayaalp's study (2022) which showed that the academic achievement and self-regulation skill of the students were higher compared to those who were taught using conventional method.

This research findings indicated that when the differentiated instruction was first implemented to the students, there was adjustment to make as the students found it unfamiliar. This finding is in line with the result of a study conducted by Unal et al. (2022) who employed differentiated instruction on K-5 teachers in Georgia. They highlighted that despite the success of differentiation as a learning instruction, they face several barriers in the implementation including a lack of knowledge and practice on differentiated instruction. Besides, Ismail (2019) also found that the implementation of this instruction faced challenges as it took time, careful consideration to plan, and never-ending reflection. This is also faced by the researchers as they were required to make some adjustment to how they implemented the instruction to match students' interest, preference, and language proficiency level. This supports the statement by Madhatillah & Suharyadi (2023) that this instruction encourages teachers to pay more attention to students' needs, interests, competencies, language proficiency levels, and preferred learning strategies.

As the implementation of differentiated instruction in this research required individual and paired activities, it was successful in enhancing students' interaction among the classroom members. This finding matches to the result of Halim et al.'s study (2022) who concluded that differentiated instruction can improve students' engagement during the lesson. Last but not least, students' motivation in this research was significantly increased as they enjoy the experience of using differentiated instruction in writing activities. The finding supports the research conducted by Endal, et al. (2013) that there is significant difference in writing competency and motivation in comparison of using differentiated instruction and conventional method.

## Conclusion

Referring to the research findings, the students had meaningful learning using differentiated instruction in the context of acquiring writing skill. The evidence is shown in the significant improvement of the students' writing performance where 90% of the students achieved the minimum standard of assessment, beyond the set criteria of success. The notes from the observation step indicate that the students gain confidence in following the writing activities through differentiated instruction. They were seen selecting the provided topics of writing excitedly and continuing the whole process wholeheartedly. It is shown from the bright faces of the students when they were offered many selections of topic to write according to their interests. Another thing is that the writing composition that the students make shows excellent compliance to the instruction, quite different from when they were asked to follow writing instruction conventionally.



The more pleasant confirmation from the students was that they felt like they had bigger and more convenient space to learn through differentiated instruction. They said from the interview that they felt appreciated as they have options to choose in following the writing instruction. As the result, students were more motivated to proceed the instruction and concretely showed improvement in the writing performance. This is vivid evidence that learning autonomy has been successfully shaped for the students.

This research findings give meaningful contribution to both theoretical and practical aspects in the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching writing. The linking of the instruction implementation and the learning autonomy enhances the novelty of this research as there is still limited storage of the research scope. Future researchers are encouraged to develop this research to bigger coverage and scale.

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