

DIFFERENTIATED WRITING INSTRUCTION BASED ON STUDENTS' WRITING PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Sabilla Amelia Putri^{1*}, Wildan Isna Asyhar², Kristanti Yuntoro Putri³

Universitas Islam Kediri

e-mail: sabillaameliap@student.uniska-kediri.ac.id

Diterima: 03/08/2026; Direvisi: 15/08/2026; Diterbitkan: 19/08/2026

ABSTRAK

Kelas EFL dengan kemampuan campuran menghadirkan tantangan instruksional yang terus-menerus, karena tingkat kemahiran menulis yang heterogen di antara siswa jarang dapat ditangani secara efektif melalui pendekatan satu ukuran untuk semua. Studi empiris yang secara khusus meneliti pengaruh Instruksi Diferensiasi (*Differentiated Instruction* / DI) terhadap pencapaian menulis EFL pada berbagai tingkat kemahiran masih terbatas, sehingga menyisakan kesenjangan dalam pedagogi menulis pada konteks sekolah menengah pertama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji pengaruh DI berbasis proses terhadap pencapaian menulis siswa EFL kelas VIII di SMP Islam Sultan Agung. Penelitian menggunakan desain kuasi-eksperimental *nonequivalent control group* yang melibatkan 50 siswa, terdiri atas kelompok eksperimen ($n = 25$) yang memperoleh pembelajaran terdiferensiasi berbasis proses dan kelompok kontrol ($n = 25$) yang memperoleh pembelajaran konvensional. Intervensi dilaksanakan selama tiga sesi pembelajaran menulis teks recount. Kemampuan menulis diukur menggunakan pedoman *ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test* (WPT), sedangkan data dianalisis melalui statistik deskriptif, uji normalitas Shapiro–Wilk, uji homogenitas Levene, dan *independent-samples t-test*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua kelompok memiliki kemampuan awal yang relatif setara sebelum perlakuan diberikan. Setelah intervensi, kelompok eksperimen menunjukkan pencapaian menulis yang lebih tinggi dibandingkan kelompok kontrol. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa DI berbasis proses efektif dalam meningkatkan kemampuan menulis siswa EFL dengan mengakomodasi tingkat kesiapan belajar yang beragam. Meskipun demikian, keterbatasan jumlah sampel dan durasi intervensi yang relatif singkat membatasi generalisasi hasil penelitian. Oleh karena itu, DI direkomendasikan sebagai alternatif strategi pembelajaran untuk kelas EFL yang heterogen, dan penelitian lanjutan diperlukan untuk mengeksplorasi dampaknya dalam jangka panjang pada konteks yang lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: instruksi terdiferensiasi, pencapaian menulis, Pelajar EFL

ABSTRACT

Mixed-ability EFL classrooms present a persistent instructional challenge, as heterogeneous writing proficiency levels among students are rarely addressed effectively through a one-size-fits-all approach. Empirical studies that specifically investigate the effect of *Differentiated Instruction* (DI) on EFL writing achievement across different proficiency levels remain limited, leaving a gap in writing pedagogy within junior high school contexts. This study aimed to examine the effect of process-based DI on the writing achievement of eighth-grade EFL students at SMP Islam Sultan Agung. A quasi-experimental nonequivalent control group design was employed involving 50 students, consisting of an experimental group ($n = 25$) receiving process-differentiated instruction and a control group ($n = 25$) receiving conventional instruction. The intervention was conducted over three sessions focusing on recount text writing. Writing performance was assessed using the ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) guidelines, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, the Shapiro–Wilk normality test, Levene's homogeneity test, and an independent-samples *t*-test. The findings revealed that both groups had comparable initial writing ability before the intervention. Following the treatment, the experimental group demonstrated higher writing achievement than the control group. These results indicate that process-based DI effectively enhances EFL students' writing performance by accommodating diverse levels of learner readiness. However, the relatively small sample size and short



intervention period limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, DI is recommended as an alternative instructional strategy for heterogeneous EFL classrooms, and further research is needed to explore its long-term impact across broader educational contexts.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, writing achievement, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

EFL classes with mixed-ability students represent one of the most tangible challenges in English language learning, as students in a single class differ not only in linguistic ability but also in learning readiness, interests, and learning styles (Fajariyah et al., 2023; Tajik et al., 2024). This diversity has made it difficult for teachers to manage the classroom effectively (Fajariyah et al., 2023; Zakarneh et al., 2020), and these difficulties occur with very high frequency in mixed-ability classes (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Altohami et al., 2022; Yotta, 2023). Nevertheless, many EFL teachers have not accommodated differences in their students' learning styles, and the one-size-fits-all approach still commonly used has proven unable to provide equal learning opportunities for all students (Yotta, 2023). This condition directly affects students' writing abilities: those who are paired with peers of similar ability have been shown to produce better writing compared to those paired with peers of significantly different abilities, indicating that too large an ability gap can hinder collaboration and reduce the quality of students' writing (Susanti et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023).

Writing is one of the most complex skills in learning English, as it goes far beyond merely noting words on paper and instead involves constructing discourse through the simultaneous integration of linguistic, cognitive-metacognitive, and sociocultural dimensions (Asyhar, 2026; Hyland, 2019). The complexity of this skill is empirically reflected in the various writing difficulties identified among EFL learners, which include vocabulary (36.76%), grammar (29.41%), organization (10.29%), spelling (8.67%), punctuation (7.35%), and coherence (7.50%) (Taye & Mengesha, 2024). Furthermore, ACTFL (2024) classifies writing proficiency into five main levels, namely Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished, which reflect the spectrum of writing development from the most basic to the proficient level. This range of levels emphasizes that writing ability is heterogeneous and develops gradually, thereby requiring instructional approaches that respond to learners' diverse needs individually and effectively.

In response to the limitations of a uniform approach, differentiated instruction (DI) has developed as a pedagogical framework that adapts content, process, product, and/or learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Research demonstrates that DI can provide learning opportunities that are appropriately aligned with each student's abilities and preferences, while treating both high- and low-ability students equally and fostering the development of reflective and empowered learners (Titus, 2025). Furthermore, differentiation strategies are the most effective approach for mitigating the negative impacts of mixed-ability classes (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Tajik et al., 2024; Titus, 2025), underscoring the potential of DI as a feasible and equitable instructional response.

Although academic attention to DI in the context of EFL continues to grow, empirical studies specifically examining the implementation of DI in writing instruction across various proficiency levels remain very limited (Sapkota, 2025; Sholah & Cahyono, 2025; Sun & Yusof, 2024). This gap has become increasingly urgent to address given the complexity of writing skills, the vulnerability of low-ability students in heterogeneous classrooms, and the potential of differentiated instruction as an equitable instructional framework. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how differentiated instruction is implemented in teaching writing to EFL students

with varying levels of ability, and to examine how this implementation supports their writing performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a quantitative quasi-experimental design to examine whether students taught with Differentiated Instruction (DI) have better writing skills than those taught with a conventional approach. This design was chosen because the researcher does not have full control over assigning participants to groups, as students have already been grouped into intact classes by the school. The study has one independent variable (teaching strategy) and one dependent variable (students' writing ability), measured as writing test scores after the treatment's implementation. The factorial design used is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Factorial Quasi-Experimental Design

Class	Pretest	Treatment	Posttest
Control	O ₁	X	O ₂
Experiment	O ₃	-	O ₄

Descriptions:

O₁: The pretest results of the control class.

O₂: The posttest results of the control class.

X: treatment using a Differentiated Instruction strategy

O₃: The pretest results of the experimental class.

O₄: The posttest results of the experimental class.

This study was conducted at Sultan Agung Islamic Junior High School in early May 2026 over five days: the first day for the pretest, the next three days for treatment implementation, and the last day for the posttest. The accessible population in this study was all eighth-grade students of SMP Islam Sultan Agung. The sample was selected through interviews with the English teacher to identify two eighth-grade classes (X-1 and X-2) with similar average scores. One class was designated as the experimental group receiving the DI treatment. In contrast, the other class was designated as the control group continuing the conventional approach, with the groups randomly determined (Sugiyono, 2023).

The research instruments include a writing pretest and posttest as well as an assessment rubric. The pretest serves to identify the initial writing ability level and to assess the homogeneity between the control and experimental classes. In contrast, the posttest measures the effectiveness of the treatment provided. Both tests were developed by adapting the ACTFL Writing Proficiency Test (WPT) guidelines, which are an internationally recognized standard widely used in assessing foreign language writing skills, thereby ensuring the instrument's validity is supported by the alignment of content with the construct being measured, the participant response process, and the consistency of the test's internal structure (Creswell, 2017). The assessment rubric was developed based on the proficiency level criteria listed in the WPT guidelines.

Data were collected using a pretest adapted from the ACTFL-WPT guidelines, administered directly to students in the classroom. Students completed the test within the allotted time, while the researchers supervised and collected the responses. After the treatment phase was completed, a posttest was administered to both classes independently, following the same procedure, to maintain reliability. To minimize subjectivity in the assessment, two English lecturers served as independent raters to evaluate students' written outputs using a WPT-level rubric, enabling comparison of score consistency across evaluations and determination of the assessment's reliability.

Data analysis was conducted through a series of stages using SPSS version 25 at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. First, descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data using mean values, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values. Second, the Shapiro-Wilk normality test was applied to assess whether the data distribution was approximately normal. Third, Levene's homogeneity test was conducted to assess the equality of variances between groups, a prerequisite for parametric analysis. Finally, an independent t-test was used to test the hypothesis that there were significant differences in writing ability between the DI and conventional groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Posttest Scores

	Class	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pretest	Control	25	18.04	6.195
	Experiment	25	21.20	4.983
Posttest	Control	25	14.72	4.686
	Experiment	25	36.04	9.825

Table 2 shows that the average pretest scores of the control group ($M = 18.04$) and the experimental group ($M = 21.20$) were close, indicating a relatively comparable initial condition. After the treatment was administered, there was a very significant difference in posttest scores: the experimental group recorded a much higher average ($M = 36.04$) than the control group ($M = 14.72$), a difference of 21.32 points.

Table 3. Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test

		Statistic	Sig.
Pretest	Control	.921	.053
	Experiment	.949	.232
Posttest	Control	.932	.096
	Experiment	.947	.217

Based on Table 3, all significance values exceed the critical threshold of .05, which means that all four data distributions follow a normal distribution. With the normality assumption fulfilled, the parametric statistical procedures can proceed to the next stage.

Table 4. Independent Sample Test on Pretest Scores

Class	Mean	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Control	18.04		
Experiment	21.20	-1.987	.053

Table 4 shows that the difference in the mean pretest scores between the two groups did not reach statistical significance, $t(48) = -1.987$, $p = .053$. This result confirms that the control and experimental groups had equivalent initial writing abilities before the intervention, allowing for a valid comparison at the posttest stage.

Table 5. Levene's Test and Independent Sample t-Test on Posttest Scores

Levene Statistic	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
9.989	.003	-9.793	34.381	.000

Levene's test showed a significant result ($F = 9.989$, $p = .003$), indicating that the assumption of equal variances between the two groups was not met. Therefore, the interpretation of the t-test results refers to the row 'equal variances not assumed' (Welch's t-

test). The test yielded a statistically significant difference between the posttest scores of the two groups, $t(34.381) = -9.793$, $p < .001$, with the experimental group obtaining a higher mean ($M = 36.04$) compared to the control group ($M = 14.72$). Furthermore, the effect size calculation using Cohen's d formula yielded $d = 2.77$, which falls into the very large category according to Cohen's (2013) criteria. The magnitude of this effect size confirms that the differences in writing achievement found are not only statistically significant but also have high practical significance in the context of language learning. Based on these overall results, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted.

Discussion

This study revealed that students who received Differentiated Instruction (DI) achieved better writing outcomes than those who were taught using conventional instruction. The findings indicate that adapting learning activities to students' readiness levels can positively support writing development in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. This result reinforces Tomlinson's (2014) proposition that learning becomes more effective when instruction is adjusted to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In the present study, this principle was implemented through process differentiation, where writing activities were tailored to the capacities of students at different proficiency levels, enabling them to engage with learning tasks more meaningfully.

The improvement in students' writing achievement can also be interpreted through Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the importance of providing instructional support that matches learners' developmental needs. Through differentiated processes, students received learning experiences that were appropriately challenging and supported, allowing them to progress beyond their current level of performance. Consistent with Erlangga et al. (2025), instruction that emphasizes the writing process rather than solely the final product provides greater opportunities for learners to develop writing skills systematically and according to their individual needs.

The findings are also consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the effectiveness of DI in EFL contexts. Titus (2025) reported that differentiated instruction promotes equitable learning opportunities for students with varying ability levels, while Al-Subaiei (2017) and Tajik et al. (2024) identified differentiation as an effective response to the challenges of mixed-ability classrooms. However, the present study contributes more specifically to the literature by focusing on writing achievement rather than overall language performance. This distinction is important because writing requires the integration of multiple linguistic and cognitive skills and is often one of the most challenging language competencies for EFL learners to develop (Hyland, 2019; Taye & Mengesha, 2024).

The positive outcomes observed in this study also reflect the limitations of traditional one-size-fits-all instruction in heterogeneous classrooms. Previous studies have shown that differences in students' readiness and proficiency levels can create unequal learning opportunities when instructional practices fail to accommodate learner diversity (Fajariyah et al., 2023; Yotta, 2023). Furthermore, substantial ability gaps may reduce the effectiveness of classroom interaction and collaborative learning, particularly for lower-achieving students (Susanti et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). By providing learning activities that correspond to students' readiness levels, differentiated instruction offers a more inclusive approach that enables all learners to participate and progress according to their individual capacities.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that process differentiation can serve as a practical strategy for improving writing instruction in junior high school EFL



classrooms. Although implementing DI requires careful planning and preparation, previous studies have indicated that it remains feasible and beneficial in diverse educational settings (Sapkota, 2025; Sun & Yusof, 2024; Zakarneh et al., 2020). Consequently, teacher education and professional development programs should incorporate practical training on differentiated instructional strategies to help teachers effectively address learner diversity and create more responsive writing instruction.

From a methodological perspective, the use of multiple statistical procedures strengthened the credibility of the findings and supported a rigorous evaluation of the intervention. The consistency between the descriptive and inferential results provides convincing evidence that differentiated instruction contributed positively to students' writing achievement. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted cautiously because the study was conducted in a single school and involved a relatively short intervention period. Future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples, extend the duration of implementation, and explore other dimensions of differentiation, such as content and product differentiation, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of DI on EFL language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study found that process-based Differentiated Instruction (DI) effectively improved the writing achievement of eighth-grade EFL students with diverse readiness levels. Students who participated in differentiated learning activities demonstrated better writing performance than those who received conventional instruction. These findings highlight the importance of adapting instructional processes to learners' varying levels of readiness in order to create more equitable, responsive, and effective learning experiences in mixed-ability EFL classrooms. The results also support the application of differentiated instruction as a practical pedagogical approach for addressing learner diversity in writing instruction.

Despite these positive findings, the study has several limitations. The research was conducted in a single school and involved a relatively short intervention period, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples, implement longer intervention periods, and investigate other dimensions of differentiated instruction, such as content and product differentiation, to provide a broader understanding of its impact on EFL language learning and development.

REFERENCES

- Al-Subaiei, M. S. (2017). Challenges in mixed-ability classes and strategies utilized by ELI teachers to cope with them. *English Language Teaching*, 10(6), 182–189. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n6p182>
- Altohami, W. M. A., Hashem, M. E., Omar, A., & Hussein, M. S. M. (2022). Technological affordances and teaching in EFL mixed-ability classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications*, 13(3), 371–380. <https://doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2022.0130346>
- Asyhar, W. I. (2026). *Developing writing skills with constructive teaching*. Diva Pustaka.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Elhadki, İ. (2024). ACTFL proficiency guidelines 2024. *Dil Eğitimi ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.31464/jlere.1494854>



- Erlangga, B. S., Ifadah, M., & Semilla, J. R. B. (2025). Exploring the challenges of teaching writing in EFL classrooms: Perspectives from prospective teachers. *Applied Research on English Education (AREE)*, 3(2), 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.26714/aree.3.2.2025.74-85>
- Fajariyah, L. A., Retnawati, H., & Madya, S. (2023). Exploring students' diversity in a differentiated classroom. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 16(2), 205–219. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/LEARN/article/view/266942>
- Gheith, A. G., & Mehany, A. A. A. (2020). *Using differentiated instruction for developing writing fluency*. Online Submission. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED632209>
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Putri, S. A., Mujiono, M., & Sulisty, T. (2025). The effect of differentiated learning on EFL achievement: A meta-analysis. *Premise: Journal of English Education*, 14(3), 685–702. <https://doi.org/10.24127/pj.v14i3.12703>
- Sapkota, H. P. (2025). Differentiated instruction in EFL classrooms: A systematic review. *Journal of Natural Language and Linguistics*, 3(1), 201–208. <https://doi.org/10.54536/jnll.v3i1.5775>
- Sholah, H. M., & Cahyono, B. Y. (2025). A systematic review on the implementation of differentiated instruction for teaching writing. *International Journal of Current Educational Practices*, 5(3). <https://journal.payungi.org/index.php/ijcep>
- Sugiyono. (2023). *Metode penelitian kuantitatif, kualitatif, dan R&D*. Alfabeta.
- Sun, X., & Yusof, S. M. (2024). Implementation of and challenges in differentiated L2 language instruction: A systematic literature review (2014–2023). *Salud, Ciencia y Tecnología – Serie de Conferencias*, 3(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.56294/sctconf2024.1249>
- Susanti, A., Widiati, U., & Cahyono, B. Y. (2020). The effect of proficiency pairings on EFL students' writing ability in genre-based approach context. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 9(1), 245–251. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v9i1.20439>
- Tajik, O., Noor, S., & Golzar, J. (2024). Investigating differentiated instruction and the contributing factors to cater EFL students' needs at the collegial level. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-024-00299-5>
- Taye, T., & Mengesha, M. (2024). Identifying and analyzing common English writing challenges among regular undergraduate students. *Heliyon*, 10(17), e36876. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e36876>
- Titus, A. (2025). Effects of differentiated instruction on students' empowered learning skills. *International Journal of Instruction*, 18(3), 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2025.1832a>
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). ASCD.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Yotta, E. G. (2023). Accommodating students' learning styles differences in English language classroom. *Heliyon*, 9(6), e17497. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e17497>
- Zakarnah, B., Al-Ramahi, N., & Mahmoud, M. (2020). Challenges of teaching English language classes of slow and fast learners in the United Arab Emirates universities. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(1), 256–269. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n1p256>
- Zhou, Y., Cai, T., Wang, D., & Li, F. (2023). Classroom compositional effects on low-ability students' achievement in China. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(2), 788–812. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22939>