

## Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition through Differentiated Instruction in Senior High School Classrooms

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| ARTICLE INFO                                                                                                                          | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| Received:<br>29 August 2026                                                                                                           | This study investigates the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in English vocabulary learning and its contribution to student engagement among senior high school EFL students in Indonesia. The study addresses learner diversity in readiness, interests, learning preferences, and prior vocabulary knowledge. A quantitative quasi-experimental design was employed at SMAN 7 Soppeng, South Sulawesi, involving 11th-grade students assigned to an experimental group receiving DI and a control group receiving conventional instruction. Vocabulary mastery was measured using pre-tests and post-tests, while student engagement was assessed through a questionnaire adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement and examined across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The experimental treatment incorporated varied content, activities, grouping, and experiences, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities, to accommodate students' different learning needs. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and an independent-samples t-test for vocabulary outcomes, while engagement responses were analyzed descriptively. The findings indicate that DI produced positive changes in students' engagement. Behavioral engagement increased through more active participation, attentiveness, and classroom contributions. Emotional engagement improved through greater interest, confidence, and motivation, accompanied by lower reported anxiety. Cognitive engagement showed the most notable development, reflected in the use of vocabulary grouping, journaling, peer teaching, games, storytelling, and deeper processing strategies. Overall, the findings suggest that DI provides a responsive and inclusive approach to vocabulary instruction by creating varied learning pathways that support active participation, positive learning experiences, and meaningful cognitive engagement among Indonesian senior high school EFL students. |
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| <b>Keywords:</b><br><br>Differentiated Instruction, English Vocabulary Learning, Student Engagement, EFL Students, Senior High School |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

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## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become an essential language for international communication, academic exchange, knowledge dissemination, and access to global information. Its importance extends beyond communication because English proficiency enables learners to participate in educational, professional, technological, and intercultural environments. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, therefore, effective language instruction requires pedagogical approaches that not only develop learners' linguistic knowledge but also respond to differences in their abilities, learning experiences, interests, and learning needs. Brown and Lee (2015) emphasize that effective language pedagogy should consider learners as active participants whose individual differences influence the way they engage with and develop language knowledge. Within this context, vocabulary occupies a particularly important position because knowledge of words is fundamental to understanding and producing language across listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2017).

Vocabulary knowledge is not limited to knowing the meaning of individual words. It includes knowledge of word form, meaning, use, collocation, grammatical behavior, and the ability to recognize and produce vocabulary appropriately in different contexts (Nation, 2022). A sufficient vocabulary repertoire enables learners to comprehend texts, express ideas more precisely, participate in conversations, and construct written messages effectively. Webb and Nation (2017) further explain that vocabulary development requires repeated encounters with words, meaningful use, and opportunities for both receptive and productive learning. Recent empirical research supports this position by demonstrating that vocabulary development can be enhanced through repeated reading, contextualized learning, digital reading, and technology-assisted learning. For example, Soleimani et al. (2022) found that assisted repeated reading produced greater vocabulary gains among EFL learners, while Zhu et al. (2024) reported positive evidence for digital reading as a means of supporting second- and foreign-language vocabulary learning. Similarly, Li and Hafner (2022) found that mobile-assisted vocabulary learning could improve both receptive and productive dimensions of vocabulary knowledge.

Despite its importance, vocabulary acquisition remains a considerable challenge for many EFL learners. Students differ substantially in their prior vocabulary knowledge, language proficiency, learning pace, motivation, interests, and opportunities for exposure to English. Consequently, the same vocabulary activity may not produce the same learning outcomes for all students. Recent research has demonstrated that technology-supported vocabulary learning, digital flashcards, mobile applications, and different task types can contribute positively to vocabulary development, but their effectiveness may vary according to learning conditions and learner characteristics (Eskandari et al., 2024; Yu & Trainin, 2022; Zakian et al., 2022). These findings indicate that vocabulary instruction needs to move beyond a uniform instructional model and provide learners with appropriate opportunities to encounter, process, practice, and use new vocabulary according to their learning needs. In this respect, differentiated instruction provides a potentially relevant pedagogical framework for addressing learner diversity.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a learner-responsive approach in which teachers proactively modify aspects of instruction to accommodate differences among learners. Tomlinson (2014, 2017) explains that differentiation can involve adjustments to content, learning processes, learning products, and the learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Rather than providing exactly the same instructional experience to every learner, DI seeks to create multiple pathways through which students can access learning objectives and demonstrate their understanding. Importantly, differentiation does not mean creating an entirely different curriculum for every student. Instead, it involves purposeful variation in instructional materials, activities, grouping,

scaffolding, task complexity, and forms of assessment while maintaining common learning goals (Tomlinson, 2017). This approach is particularly relevant to EFL classrooms, where students may enter the classroom with substantially different levels of English proficiency.

Recent international research provides empirical support for the potential of DI to create more responsive and inclusive learning environments. Pozas et al. (2021), for example, found that differentiated instruction was positively associated with secondary students' well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept. Shareefa (2023) also demonstrated that teachers' qualifications were related to their implementation of differentiated instruction, highlighting the importance of teachers' professional knowledge and preparation. More specifically within language education, Sun (2023) examined differentiated instruction in two extensive reading programmes for secondary EFL learners and found that differentiation could be implemented through variations in content, learning processes, and forms of learning products. However, the study also identified challenges related to learner autonomy, interaction, and the learning environment. These findings suggest that DI has considerable potential in language classrooms, but its implementation needs to be carefully designed according to the particular learning objectives and characteristics of learners.

The relevance of DI becomes even more apparent when considered alongside recent developments in vocabulary pedagogy. Current vocabulary research has increasingly explored contextualized, task-based, digital, and mobile-assisted approaches rather than relying exclusively on decontextualized memorization. Soleimani et al. (2022) demonstrated the value of repeated and assisted exposure to vocabulary, while Zakian et al. (2022) found that mobile-assisted digital flashcards could contribute to vocabulary development and longer-term retention. Yu and Trainin (2022), through a meta-analysis, likewise reported positive effects of technology-assisted L2 vocabulary learning, although the magnitude of the effects varied according to instructional and methodological conditions. Eskandari et al. (2024) further showed that the type and cognitive demands of vocabulary learning tasks influence vocabulary acquisition. These studies collectively indicate that effective vocabulary instruction should provide varied opportunities for exposure, processing, retrieval, interaction, and meaningful use. Such principles are compatible with the broader philosophy of DI, which emphasizes flexible instructional pathways rather than a single uniform method.

Nevertheless, an important research gap remains. Much of the recent literature has examined differentiated instruction in relation to general learning outcomes, inclusion, reading, student engagement, or broader language development, while contemporary vocabulary studies have frequently concentrated on digital technologies, mobile-assisted learning, repeated reading, or task-based vocabulary acquisition (Pozas et al., 2021; Sun, 2023; Yu & Trainin, 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Consequently, relatively limited attention has been given to the direct implementation of differentiated instruction as a pedagogical approach specifically for English vocabulary learning among senior high school EFL students, particularly within the Indonesian educational context. This gap is important because Indonesian secondary classrooms commonly contain learners with heterogeneous levels of English proficiency, prior vocabulary knowledge, motivation, and learning experiences. A vocabulary teaching approach that does not adequately account for these differences may not provide equal opportunities for students to develop lexical knowledge.

Therefore, this study investigates the implementation of differentiated instruction in teaching English vocabulary to senior high school students in Indonesia. The study focuses on how differentiated instruction can be applied to accommodate differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles while providing varied learning experiences and opportunities for vocabulary practice. It also examines whether the implementation of DI contributes to improvements in students' vocabulary mastery and engagement in the learning process. By connecting the principles of differentiated instruction with contemporary research on vocabulary acquisition, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence regarding the

applicability of a learner-responsive approach to vocabulary instruction in an Indonesian EFL secondary-school context. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive and adaptive English teaching practices and to strengthen the empirical basis for differentiated vocabulary instruction in secondary education.

## 2. Method

This study employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design involving two groups: an experimental group that received differentiated instruction and a control group that was taught using conventional methods. The research was conducted at SMAN 7 Soppeng, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, with 11th-grade students selected through simple random sampling. The use of a quasi-experimental design with experimental and control groups is appropriate for examining the effectiveness of instructional interventions in educational settings where fully randomized assignment may be difficult (Quiroz et al., 2021; Duong et al., 2021; Labordo, 2024). Previous studies have also applied quasi-experimental designs to investigate differentiated instruction and language-learning outcomes, demonstrating their relevance for comparing instructional treatments (Sun, 2023; Jufrianto et al., 2025). In the present study, the vocabulary test was administered as a pre-test and post-test to measure changes in students' English vocabulary mastery, while a student engagement questionnaire adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was distributed to the experimental group to assess behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The use of pre-test and post-test vocabulary measures is consistent with recent EFL vocabulary research employing quantitative intervention designs (Barenberg et al., 2021; Soleimani et al., 2022).

The treatment in the experimental group involved tailoring instruction according to students' learning needs and preferred ways of engaging with vocabulary learning, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities. Learning materials and tasks were adapted accordingly, such as using images and videos for visual-oriented activities, discussions and recordings for auditory-oriented activities, and interactive, hands-on activities for kinesthetic-oriented activities. These variations were implemented within the differentiated instruction framework, which emphasizes adapting instructional content, processes, learning activities, and learning experiences to learner differences rather than providing a single instructional pathway for all students (Gheyssens et al., 2022; Sun, 2023). The control group followed conventional teaching methods without systematic differentiation. This treatment design is supported by previous EFL research showing that differentiated instruction can be implemented through varied learning activities and instructional processes, while vocabulary research has demonstrated that different instructional tasks and learning modalities can influence vocabulary development (Duong et al., 2021; Zakian et al., 2022). Furthermore, empirical studies using quasi-experimental designs have demonstrated that differentiated or alternative instructional approaches can produce measurable differences in language learning outcomes compared with conventional instruction (Labordo, 2024; Jufrianto et al., 2025).

Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize students' vocabulary scores and engagement responses, while an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare vocabulary test results between the experimental and control groups. The use of statistical comparison between experimental and control groups is consistent with recent quasi-experimental vocabulary studies in EFL contexts, including research using pre-test and post-test scores to examine instructional effects (Quiroz et al., 2021; Barenberg et al., 2021; Soleimani et al., 2022). In addition, descriptive analysis of engagement data was used to identify patterns in students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement following the differentiated instruction treatment. Recent research on EFL learning has similarly examined engagement through quantitative measures and intervention-based designs, supporting the use of student engagement as an important complementary outcome alongside language achievement (Lian & Jia, 2021). Together, these

procedures were intended to determine whether differentiated instruction produced differences in students' vocabulary mastery and to describe students' engagement during the instructional intervention.

### **3. Results**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) had a positive effect on students' engagement in learning English vocabulary. Student engagement was assessed using a structured questionnaire based on the framework proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), which encompasses three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The descriptive analysis revealed a notable improvement in engagement among students in the experimental group following the implementation of differentiated instruction. The improvement was reflected in students' classroom participation, emotional responses toward vocabulary learning, and the extent to which they employed learning strategies and engaged in deeper cognitive processing.

#### ***3.1 Behavioral Engagement***

The implementation of differentiated instruction resulted in more active behavioral engagement during vocabulary learning activities. Students who received differentiated instruction demonstrated greater attentiveness, participated more frequently in classroom discussions, volunteered to respond to questions, and completed learning assignments more consistently. The use of activities adapted to students' learning preferences, such as videos for students who benefited from visual input and role-playing activities for those who responded positively to kinesthetic learning experiences, contributed to more dynamic classroom interaction. These findings are consistent with Patall et al. (2020), who found that providing students with choices in learning tasks can positively predict engagement, learning, and affect. Thus, the increased behavioral engagement observed in this study suggests that providing students with varied and appropriate learning opportunities can encourage more active participation in vocabulary instruction.

#### ***3.2 Emotional Engagement***

In addition to behavioral changes, differentiated instruction was associated with improvements in students' emotional engagement with vocabulary learning. Students in the experimental group reported greater interest and motivation and experienced lower levels of anxiety during English lessons. This improvement appeared to be related to the inclusive and student-centered learning environment established through differentiated instruction. By recognizing individual differences and providing opportunities for students to engage with learning materials in ways that were appropriate to their needs, DI appeared to foster a stronger sense of support and acceptance in the classroom. This finding is consistent with Pozas et al. (2021), who found that students' perceptions of differentiated instruction were positively associated with school well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept. Students in the present study perceived the variety of learning activities as more enjoyable and less stressful than their previous experiences with predominantly teacher-centered instruction. These responses indicate that differentiated learning experiences may contribute not only to increased motivation but also to a more positive emotional orientation toward vocabulary learning.

#### ***3.3 Cognitive Engagement***

The most notable improvement was observed in students' cognitive engagement. Following the implementation of differentiated instruction, students reported employing a wider range of learning strategies, including grouping vocabulary according to thematic categories, maintaining personal vocabulary journals, and engaging in peer teaching through games and

storytelling. These activities indicate a shift from surface-level memorization toward more active and meaningful processing of vocabulary knowledge. The availability of multiple ways to access and practice vocabulary appeared to enable students to select learning approaches that were appropriate to their individual needs and preferences. This finding supports Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2010) view that differentiated instruction provides learners with multiple entry points to content, thereby encouraging deeper understanding and sustained engagement with learning tasks. It is also consistent with Gheysens et al. (2022), who emphasize that differentiated instruction involves adapting teaching practices to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, thereby creating opportunities for learners to engage with content through approaches that are appropriate to their individual needs. Furthermore, flexible grouping and individualized feedback appeared to strengthen students' sense of ownership of their learning. Students indicated that they were more motivated to complete vocabulary-related tasks when they perceived the activities as relevant to their needs and appropriately challenging. This finding is in line with Hattie and Zierer (2019), who identify relevance and appropriate challenge as important factors supporting cognitive engagement and long-term academic development.

### 3.4 Summary of Engagement Outcomes

The overall changes in students' engagement following the implementation of differentiated instruction are summarized in Table 1. The comparison between the pre-instruction and post-differentiated instruction observations indicates positive changes across all three dimensions of engagement, namely behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

**Table 1.** Summary of Student Engagement Outcomes Before and After Differentiated Instruction

| Engagement Dimension | Pre-Instruction Observation                 | Post-Differentiated Instruction Observation      |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Behavioral           | Passive participation, minimal volunteering | Active involvement, more frequent contributions  |
| Emotional            | Low enthusiasm, anxiety                     | High interest, increased confidence              |
| Cognitive            | Surface-level memorization                  | Use of learning strategies and deeper processing |

As presented in Table 1, behavioral engagement increased from relatively passive participation and limited volunteering to more active involvement and frequent contributions during classroom activities. Emotional engagement also improved, as students demonstrated greater interest, confidence, and motivation while experiencing less anxiety during vocabulary learning. Meanwhile, cognitive engagement showed a shift from surface-level memorization toward the use of varied learning strategies and deeper processing of vocabulary materials. These findings suggest that differentiated instruction contributed to improvements across multiple dimensions of student engagement rather than merely increasing classroom participation. By providing varied learning activities, flexible learning opportunities, and appropriately challenging tasks, differentiated instruction created a more responsive and inclusive learning environment in which students could participate behaviorally, connect emotionally, and engage cognitively with vocabulary learning. These findings are consistent with the broader literature that positions differentiated instruction as an approach that responds to students' diverse interests, readiness, and learning profiles (Gheysens et al., 2022) and supports students' well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept (Pozas et al., 2021).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that differentiated instruction (DI) effectively enhances student engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions in English vocabulary learning. These results corroborate existing research emphasizing the value of tailoring instruction to meet individual learner needs, thus fostering more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

Behaviorally, the increased participation and attentiveness among students exposed to DI suggest that personalized learning activities encourage active involvement. This supports Nugroho et al. (2021) and Guay et al. (2020), who highlight the role of learning preferences and autonomy in promoting student engagement. By adapting tasks to diverse learning styles, teachers can create a more dynamic and interactive classroom, which is crucial for vocabulary acquisition, a process that benefits from repeated and meaningful practice.

Emotionally, students' reported increase in motivation and reduction in anxiety indicate that DI contributes to a supportive learning atmosphere. This aligns with Kaya and Demir (2022), who emphasize the importance of emotional engagement for language learning success. The student-centered nature of DI likely helps learners feel more valued and understood, reducing affective barriers such as fear of making mistakes, which often impede language learning progress.

Cognitive engagement showed the most significant improvement, as evidenced by students employing deeper learning strategies such as thematic grouping, journaling, and peer teaching. This finding supports Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2019) view that DI offers multiple entry points to content, facilitating critical thinking and sustained effort. Furthermore, the metacognitive benefits observed echo Abidin and Kamarudin's (2023) findings on DI's role in enhancing vocabulary retention and effective usage. The provision of flexible grouping and individualized feedback appears to empower students, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance in their learning, which Hattie and Zierer (2019) identify as key drivers for cognitive engagement.

Overall, this study reinforces the idea that differentiated instruction is not merely a strategy for content delivery but a holistic approach that nurtures the whole learner—behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. For Indonesian senior high school students, whose linguistic and academic backgrounds can vary widely, DI offers an equitable pathway to language proficiency by addressing diverse needs within the same classroom.

These results have important implications for English language teaching in Indonesia, suggesting that teacher training and curriculum design should prioritize differentiation as a standard practice. However, successful implementation requires adequate resources, professional development, and ongoing assessment to ensure that instructional adaptations remain effective and meaningful.

Future research could explore the long-term effects of DI on vocabulary retention and other language skills, as well as investigate the specific challenges teachers face when implementing differentiated instruction in diverse educational contexts. Additionally, examining student perceptions and experiences in greater depth could provide further insights into optimizing engagement strategies.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) positively influenced students' engagement in learning English vocabulary at the senior high school level. The findings indicate improvements across three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Students became more actively involved in classroom activities, demonstrated greater interest and confidence, and applied deeper learning strategies such as vocabulary grouping, journaling, peer teaching, and collaborative activities. These findings suggest that providing varied learning activities and instructional pathways

can create a more responsive, supportive, and meaningful vocabulary-learning environment for EFL students.

Overall, differentiated instruction can be considered a promising approach for addressing learner diversity and strengthening engagement in English vocabulary learning. Its implementation allows teachers to accommodate differences in students' learning needs while maintaining common instructional objectives. However, effective implementation requires appropriate teacher preparation, resources, flexible classroom management, and continuous assessment. Future research is recommended to examine the long-term effects of DI on vocabulary retention and other English language skills, as well as students' and teachers' experiences in implementing differentiated instruction across different Indonesian educational contexts.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Authors' Contributions

**Nurmalayanti Amar:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.  
**La Sunra:** Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.  
**Nur Aeni:** Data curation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

### Statement of the Use of AI

AI was used only for language editing. It was not used for data analysis, interpretation, or research conclusions.

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