

## Differentiated Instruction in the Merdeka Curriculum for Arabic Language Learning: An Ethnographic Study at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon

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### Abstract

*Arabic Language at the senior high school level is one of the elective foreign language subjects that must be studied. However, the varying backgrounds and abilities of students present unique challenges in the learning process, particularly due to highly heterogeneous inputs: from students who have never studied Arabic, to those with moderate proficiency from Islamic-based schools, and students graduating from Islamic boarding schools with strong Arabic skills. The Merdeka Curriculum was introduced with an approach that focuses on the needs of learners, one of which is through the implementation of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach in which teachers identify and teach students according to their individual talents, profiles, learning styles, and needs. This study aims to describe the practice of differentiated instruction in Arabic language learning at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon, to explore the experiences of teachers and students in its implementation, and to identify the strategies used, the challenges encountered, and the meaning of differentiated instruction for students. This research employs a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods. Data collection techniques include participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the implementation of differentiated instruction involves three main stages: mapping student needs, designing differentiation strategies (content, process, and product), and conducting evaluation and reflection. Teachers reported improved understanding of learning concepts and greater satisfaction in teaching. Meanwhile, students showed increased creativity, independence, and positive relationships with teachers. Key challenges in implementation include complex planning, time management, and the development of flexible materials. Overall, students felt valued, more comfortable in the learning process, and demonstrated higher motivation and active participation in Arabic language learning.*

**Keywords:** *Differentiated Instruction, Merdeka Curriculum, Arabic Language, Ethnography, Students.*

## **Introduction**

Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System states that the curriculum at all levels and types of education is developed based on the principle of diversification, in accordance with the characteristics of educational institutions, regional potential, and the needs of learners. The explanation of this article emphasizes that curriculum development must consider the needs of society in general and the needs of learners in particular as the primary subjects of education. Therefore, the formulation of the vision and mission of an educational institution should also align with these needs and be able to accommodate the various forms of diversity that exist, including differences among students. Such diversity and plurality are natural realities that cannot be avoided. Consequently, an educational system is required that is balanced and mutually supportive in order to address these differences effectively

Previous studies indicate that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Arabic language learning across various educational levels has been carried out using diverse approaches and has generally produced positive results. In the study conducted at MTs Al-Jawami Cileunyi Bandung, differentiated learning was implemented through a descriptive qualitative approach by adapting instructional strategies to students' learning styles namely visual, auditory, and kinesthetic so that the learning process became more effective and was able to accommodate diverse learning needs. Meanwhile, research at SDIT Khoiru Ummah Curup revealed that the application of differentiation in terms of content, methods, and assessment was aligned with the guidelines of the Merdeka Curriculum, supported by adequate facilities and school management, although there were still challenges related to time constraints and teachers' understanding. Furthermore, the study at MAN Kota Sorong showed that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Arabic language learning was carried out gradually in accordance with established procedures; however, it still faced several issues, such as limited infrastructure, less optimal differentiated learning practices, and insufficient teacher understanding of the curriculum concept. Overall, these three studies highlight that differentiated instruction within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum holds significant potential for improving the quality of Arabic language learning, although it still requires strengthening in terms of teacher readiness and infrastructural support.

From several previous studies, the researcher found similarities in the research variables,

namely the implementation of differentiated instruction. Some studies focus on the implementation process through project-based learning (PjBL), while others employ Research and Development (R&D) methods and descriptive qualitative approaches. However, the researcher has not found any study that uses an ethnographic approach, in which the researcher conducts direct field analysis and observes the real conditions of how differentiated instruction is implemented in practice.

The curriculum that is currently developed and implemented cannot be separated from previous curricula. This means that past curricula serve as references for the present curriculum, both in terms of learning materials and the learning process, which includes the use of media, methods, approaches, and evaluation, as well as the development of students' competencies. As a product of human civilization and culture, the curriculum is not static but dynamic and flexible, adapting to the evolving needs of society and the rapid advancement of science and technology.<sup>1</sup> The development of the national curriculum has undergone a long journey, and in the implementation of the curriculum in Indonesia, changes and developments have occurred repeatedly as improvements. Therefore, the current curriculum is a form of refinement of the previous curriculum. Curriculum development in Indonesia cannot be separated from the many factors that influence it, such as ways of thinking and value systems including moral, religious, cultural, political, and social values. In addition, the curriculum development process is also shaped by the needs of students, the demands of society, and the overall direction of educational programs.<sup>2</sup>

According to Ahmadi (2016), the 2013 Curriculum is an improvement of the previous curriculum, namely the School-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan-KTSP*), which was introduced as a curriculum policy in 2006. This curriculum is also a continuation of the development process of the Competency-Based Curriculum (*Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi - KBK*) that began in 2001.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum can also be understood as a refinement and further development of the 2013 Curriculum.

The Merdeka Curriculum emerged as a response to the demands of the times. Today, humans live in the era of Society 5.0, an era in which humans are positioned as the center

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<sup>1</sup> Anda Juanda, *Landasan Kurikulum Dan Pembelajaran Berorientasi Kurikulum 2006 Dan Kurikulum 2013* (CV.Confident Anggota IKAPI Jabar, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Rouf et al., 'Pengembangan Kurikulum Sekolah: Konsep, Model Dan Implementasi', *Al-Ibrah: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Keilmuan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2020): 23–40.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmadi, *Evaluasi Kurikulum 2013 Perspektif Balance Scorecard* (STAIN Po PRESS, 2016).

(*human-centered*) while technology serves as the foundation (*technology-based*). In this context, the Society 5.0 era requires students to possess essential competencies such as critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, collaboration, and the ability to solve problems appropriately.

The natural changes that occur inevitably affect various sectors of human life around the world, and education is one of the most crucial sectors that must respond to these emerging challenges. Consequently, changes in the direction of education will automatically have an impact on the learning system as well.

Efforts undertaken by the education sector to respond to the Society 5.0 era can be categorized into four main areas: the optimization and equitable distribution of infrastructure, the improvement of human resource competencies particularly among educators, the alignment of educational competencies with the needs of industry, and the optimization of technology as a tool in the teaching and learning process.<sup>4</sup>

As the direction of education in Indonesia has undergone significant changes, the government has formulated guidelines that are aligned with current educational needs. Consequently, the Merdeka Curriculum was introduced as a response to these evolving educational demands, emerging at a time when the world was also facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Its development represents an effort to address both the opportunities and challenges present in the contemporary educational landscape.<sup>5</sup> The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to create a more dynamic and enjoyable learning environment, where students are not only guided to master academic competencies but are also encouraged to develop critical thinking, creativity, and independence in their learning processes.

The Merdeka Curriculum is designed to improve the quality of learners' ability to think freely and independently. In its implementation, this curriculum organizes learning into three main forms: intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, all of which emphasize the strengthening of Pancasila values. These three learning components complement one another in developing students' character, competencies, and social awareness. The Merdeka Curriculum also has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from previous curricula. One of its key features is the emphasis on student-centered

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<sup>4</sup> Nur Fitri Amalia and Moh. Vito Miftahul Munif, 'Tantangan Dan Upaya Pendidikan Dalam Menghadapi Era Society 5.0', *MAANA: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.52166/mjpiud.v2i1.4741..>

<sup>5</sup> Anda Juanda, *Landasan Kurikulum Dan Pembelajaran Berorientasi Kurikulum 2006 Dan Kurikulum 2013*.

learning. In this approach, students are positioned as the central participants in the learning process rather than merely passive recipients of information. Teachers act as facilitators who guide and support students in developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes through meaningful learning experiences. The implementation of this curriculum is expected to transform learning practices that have been considered less effective, particularly those that rely heavily on teacher-centered instruction. One learning approach considered effective in supporting the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum is differentiated learning.<sup>6</sup>

Differentiated learning is an instructional approach that accommodates the diverse learning needs of students. In this approach, teachers facilitate students according to their individual needs, recognizing that each learner possesses different characteristics, abilities, and learning styles. Therefore, students are not treated in the same way during the learning process. Instead, instruction is adapted to ensure that every student receives appropriate support and opportunities to achieve optimal learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the presence of the Merdeka Curriculum can be seen as a breath of fresh air for educators across various subjects, including Arabic. Arabic is one of the compulsory subjects taught from *madrasah diniyah* to Islamic higher education institutions. At the senior high school (SMA) level, Arabic is categorized as a foreign language subject and has become one of the elective languages that attracts considerable interest. This is because Arabic is considered an important language to learn. From a religious perspective, Arabic is often regarded as the language of Islam, since the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and the emergence of Islam took place in the Arab region. Therefore, learning Arabic is closely related to understanding the Qur'an, Hadith, and other sources of Islamic knowledge such as *fiqh*, *tawhid*, and other classical texts that are generally written in Arabic. Furthermore, when Arabic is positioned as a foreign language, it encompasses language competencies that include listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. These competencies make Arabic an important language to study, particularly as a means of communication in the current era of globalization.

In Indonesia, the presence of the Arabic language has been closely associated with the spread of Islam in the archipelago. Formally, Arabic is now recognized as one of the foreign languages taught at various levels of education in Indonesia. However, in practice,

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<sup>6</sup> Andajani Kudubakti, 'Modul Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi', *Mata Kuliah Inti Seminar Pendidikan Profesi Guru 2* (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Haniza Pitaloka and Melian Arsanti, 'Pembelajaran Diferensiasi Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka', *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Pendidikan Sultan Agung IV* (Semarang), no. 4 (n.d.): 1.

many educational institutions have not yet fully developed a flexible curriculum that accommodates the specific conditions and needs of their students. At the senior high school level, students demonstrate diverse levels of learning readiness, interests, talents, and learning styles, largely due to their varied educational backgrounds. Consequently, they require differentiated instructional approaches so that they can better understand the competencies and learning materials according to their individual characteristics and uniqueness. Such an approach enables students to develop their potential more optimally. Since its establishment as an Islamic educational institution, the Raudhatul Jannah Foundation has positioned Arabic as a compulsory subject to be studied at the elementary (SD), junior high (SMP), and senior high school (SMA) levels. Arabic is considered a distinctive subject whose existence is formally recognized within both the school curriculum and the national education framework. Based on this principle, SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon, as an Islamic educational institution, designates Arabic as a mandatory subject that must be learned by all students. Similar to other subjects, students are considered to have successfully completed the learning process when they meet the Minimum Mastery Criteria (Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal/KKM) that has been determined as the standard of learning achievement.

However, one of the main challenges frequently faced by Arabic language teachers at the senior high school level is the diversity of students' backgrounds. Students who enter high school often come from different educational environments and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on differentiation, needs to be carried out effectively in order to address these differences. A similar situation occurs at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon. At the beginning of each academic year, particularly in grade X, teachers often encounter difficulties in the process of teaching Arabic because the incoming students come from diverse educational backgrounds. Some students have relatively standard competencies because they previously studied in schools with similar Islamic educational orientations, such as SMPIT or MTs, where Arabic is already taught. However, a considerable number of students also come from general junior high schools (SMP), both public and private, where Arabic is not offered as a subject at all. Despite these differences in prior learning experiences, all students are expected to achieve the same basic competencies in Arabic language learning.

SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon is one of the schools that has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since its official introduction in 2022. By 2024, the curriculum has

been fully applied across all educational levels or phases within the school. Consequently, the practice of differentiated learning has been indirectly integrated into the teaching and learning process. In this context, the researcher considers it important to conduct an exploration of how the principles of differentiation are implemented in the context of Arabic language learning at the school. Furthermore, the study also seeks to examine how students respond to the differentiated learning process implemented in Arabic language instruction.

The research interest in this topic is also based on several previous studies published in academic journals, one of which is entitled “The Implementation of Project-Based Differentiated Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum for Arabic Language Learning,” written by Auladatil Ma’wa, Ajmi Abdurrahman, and Dewi Qutrunada. This study focuses on the implementation of differentiated learning in teaching mufrodat (Arabic vocabulary) using the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model. The research subjects were students of MTs NW Mercapada, and the study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. The findings of the research indicate that differentiated learning was successfully implemented through the creation of puzzle projects based on mufrodat, which enabled the application of differentiated learning in the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

In several pieces of literature from previous research, researchers found the same variable in the form of differentiated learning, but most of the previous research generally focused only on proof, development, and application, either in the form of content, process, and product differentiation using different methods. However, researchers have not yet found an ethnographic study, where the researcher directly observes the differentiation process in a school, treating this differentiation as a phenomenon that needs to be studied and examined. Therefore, the researcher considers ethnographic research a relevant gap to present novelty in a study.

## Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach aimed at providing an in-depth description of the practice of differentiated learning in Arabic language instruction within the Independent Curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka). The ethnographic approach is used to understand learning phenomena through

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<sup>8</sup> Auladatil Ma’wa et al., ‘Penerapan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Berbasis Proyek Dalam Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka Pada Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab’, *Al-Kalim : Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 2, no. 2 (2024): 172–88, <https://doi.org/10.60040/jak.v2i2.31>.

direct observation of learning culture, social interactions, and instructional practices that occur within the school environment. The research was conducted at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon as the research site because the school has implemented the Independent Curriculum since 2020; therefore, differentiated learning has become an integral part of classroom instructional practices. The study was carried out from April 5 to May 22, 2025.

The data in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and participatory observation involving the school principal, curriculum developers, Arabic language teachers, and students. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected through document analysis related to the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, including the School Operational Curriculum (KOSP), Learning Outcomes (CP), Learning Objectives (TP), Learning Objective Flow (ATP), and Arabic language teaching modules. The data collection techniques used in this study include interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences, understanding, and strategies in implementing differentiated learning. Participatory observation was carried out to directly observe the implementation of differentiated learning in the classroom, including aspects of content, process, and product differentiation. Documentation was used as supporting data, such as students' diagnostic test results and the instructional materials prepared by the teachers. Data analysis was conducted through three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and categorizing the collected data based on key themes relevant to the research focus. The reduced data were then presented in the form of systematic descriptive narratives, supported by interview excerpts, observation findings, and relevant theoretical frameworks. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by interpreting the analyzed data in order to answer the research questions. This process was continuously verified through data triangulation and validation, ensuring the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **A. Differentiated Learning Practices in Arabic Language Subjects at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah**

The researcher presents the results of an ethnographic study conducted through direct observation of the differentiated instruction process in Arabic language learning at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon. The research data were obtained through in-depth

interviews, observations, and documentation. Before explaining the research findings, the researcher first provides a brief overview of the research location and the condition of the school. The Raudhatul Jannah Islamic Education Foundation, located in the Cilegon Indah Housing Complex, was established in 1995. Since its establishment, this institution has made Arabic a compulsory subject taught at all levels of education, from elementary school (SD), junior high school (SMP), to senior high school (SMA). This is in line with the opinion of Muhamad Thohir (2021), who states that there are two main reasons why Arabic is important to learn: first, as a tool for economic and cross-cultural communication, and second, as a means to understand Islamic teachings. Therefore, Arabic has become a distinctive subject whose presence is recognized both in the school curriculum and the national curriculum.

As an Islamic educational institution, SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon requires all students to study Arabic. Like other subjects, students' learning achievement is measured based on the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM) that have been determined. In addition, the school has implemented the Merdeka Curriculum since its initial introduction and has officially become a "*Sekolah Penggerak*" (driving school) that actively disseminates the implementation of this curriculum. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, contextual and flexible approaches, and integration with the values of Pancasila. This student-centered learning approach is also known as differentiated instruction. Based on the results of observations and interviews with the principal and Arabic language teachers, the researcher obtained information that differentiated instruction has been implemented in various subjects, particularly in Arabic language learning. At the initial stage of the research, the researcher conducted interviews with several teachers and the principal to explore their understanding of the concept of differentiated instruction.

According to Kiki Maullidina, the principal of SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah, differentiated instruction is a learning process in which teachers facilitate the diversity of students by accommodating their needs and learning styles, such as auditory, kinesthetic, and visual.<sup>9</sup> She also emphasized the importance of aligning teachers' understanding of the concept of differentiation, as misunderstandings among teachers sometimes make its implementation appear difficult. This view is consistent with the perspective of Najelaa Shihab and the teacher education community, who state that well-implemented

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<sup>9</sup> Hasil Wawancara Ibu Kiki Maullidina, S.Pd.M.Pd. (Kepala SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah) Cilegon, 15 April 2025.

differentiation can actually ease teachers' tasks because it encourages students to become independent learners who are actively involved in their own learning process.

Meanwhile, Aji Mutaqin, an Arabic language teacher, explains that differentiated instruction is an effort by teachers, as facilitators, to provide learning services that accommodate the diverse needs of students, including differences in learning readiness, background, and learning styles.<sup>10</sup> Based on these two perspectives, the understanding of differentiated instruction at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah aligns with the concepts proposed by educational experts such as Carol A. Tomlinson (2014) in her book "How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms". She explains that differentiated instruction is based on the view that students inherently possess individual differences. Therefore, teachers need to adjust instruction according to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles by modifying content, process, product, and the learning environment.

In practice, differentiated instruction at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah is carried out through two main stages: the identification (diagnostic) stage, referred to as the pre-implementation stage, and the implementation stage. This approach is applied across all grade levels, from grade X to grade XII, according to learning needs. However, the most common challenges occur in grade X due to the diversity of students' backgrounds and their varying levels of Arabic language proficiency.

Therefore, teachers consider the application of differentiated instruction essential in classroom learning by paying attention to students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In its implementation, teachers apply differentiation in several aspects of learning, namely content (material), process, and product. For example, in the lesson "المباني العامة في المدرسة" (public facilities at school), the teacher adjusts the learning content to students' learning styles, groups students flexibly according to their abilities, and assigns different learning products based on students' needs. In general, the implementation of differentiated instruction at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah follows two main steps. First, teachers identify and map students' needs as part of the pre-learning stage. This is in line with the opinion of Jenri Ambarita and Pitri Solida (2023), who state that educators should identify and analyse students' characteristics before starting the learning process. Second, teachers implement differentiated instruction by focusing on

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<sup>10</sup> Hasil Wawancara Bapak Aji Mutaqin S.Pd.I (Guru Mata Pelajaran Bahasa Arab) Cilegon, 06 Mei 2025

three main components: differentiation of content, process, and learning products.

## 1. Mapping of Student Needs

At the initial stage, the researcher conducted a mapping of students' learning needs to diagnose their initial conditions as a basis for implementing differentiated instruction. This step is in line with the view of Jenri Ambarita and Pitri Solida (2023), who state that teachers need to identify and analyze students' characteristics before the learning process begins. Dessy Putri Wahyuningsih et al. (2023) also emphasize that differentiated instruction must consider three main aspects: learning readiness, learning interests, and learning profiles. To identify these aspects, a diagnostic assessment is required before differentiated instruction is implemented. In this mapping process, teachers used three methods: observation, surveys, and interviews.

### 1) Observation

During the observation stage, the teacher observed students through a diagnostic test to determine their learning readiness, learning profiles, and learning interests in Arabic language learning. This test helped the teacher identify students' strengths and difficulties so that appropriate follow-up learning activities could be planned. In Arabic language learning, the diagnostic test was conducted to determine students' initial mastery of the material *al-mabānī al-‘āmmah*, including recognition of Arabic letters, basic *nahwu* rules, types of words (*ism*, *fi‘il*, and *harf*), and the ability to construct simple sentences. The results of this assessment allowed the teacher to classify students according to their level of ability and determine suitable learning strategies, such as remedial instruction, enrichment activities, or differentiated learning groups. This approach is consistent with the theory of Carol Ann Tomlinson, which emphasizes that effective learning must consider students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In addition, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the importance of understanding students' independent learning capacity so that teachers can provide appropriate support. The constructivist theory of Jean Piaget also explains that knowledge is built gradually based on prior learning experiences. Therefore, an initial assessment is essential before introducing new concepts so that the learning process becomes more meaningful and effective. The results of the diagnostic test revealed three categories of students' abilities.

First, students who had never studied Arabic obtained an average score of 45.2, with scores ranging from 42 to 54, indicating very limited basic competence. This finding highlights the importance of differentiated instruction at the initial stage of Arabic learning, particularly focusing on the introduction of *hijaiyah* letters, basic vocabulary,

and simple sentence structures. Second, students with moderate experience in learning Arabic obtained an average score of 80.7, with scores ranging from 66 to 87. This group demonstrates relatively good mastery, requiring more challenging learning activities such as reading practice with Arabic texts, vocabulary enrichment, and strengthening grammatical structures. Third, students from Islamic educational institutions such as *pesantren* or boarding schools obtained an average score of 88.4, with scores ranging from 88 to 90. Their abilities are relatively high and homogeneous due to their regular use of Arabic in daily learning activities. Therefore, they can be provided with more advanced learning tasks such as text analysis, Arabic debates, and writing projects.

## 2) Survey

In addition to observation, teachers also conducted surveys using questionnaires to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' characteristics. The questionnaire explored three main aspects: learning readiness, learning profiles, and learning interests. Learning readiness refers to students' mastery of prerequisite Arabic knowledge in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. The learning profile describes students' preferences in receiving and processing information, including dominant learning styles such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, as well as the learning environment they consider most effective. Meanwhile, learning interest refers to students' level of enthusiasm and motivation in learning Arabic, whether for religious purposes, communication, or career development. The results of the survey were analyzed by the teacher to identify the diverse learning needs of each student. This information became a strong basis for designing differentiated learning strategies so that the learning process could be more effective, personalized, and aligned with students' real classroom conditions. This approach is also supported by the Multiple Intelligences theory proposed by Howard Gardner (1983), which states that each individual possesses different types of intelligence, and learning will be more effective when it corresponds with those tendencies.

## 3) Interview

The third step in mapping students' needs was conducting interviews. Interviews are a qualitative data collection method that enables teachers to gather more in-depth and personal information. In the context of Arabic language learning, teachers conducted direct interviews with students to understand the difficulties they encountered during the learning process, such as problems in understanding vocabulary, pronunciation challenges, or a lack of confidence in speaking Arabic. In addition to interviewing

students, interviews were also conducted with guidance and counseling (BK) teachers. Collaboration between subject teachers and counseling teachers plays an important role in identifying students' psychological, social, and academic conditions. BK teachers generally possess more comprehensive data about students, including their interests, talents, and personality profiles. Through discussions with BK teachers, Arabic teachers can gain additional insights that are useful in designing learning strategies tailored to students' individual needs. Thus, mapping students' needs through observation, surveys, and interviews becomes an important foundation for designing differentiated instruction that is more systematic, adaptive, and responsive to the actual conditions of students in the classroom.

## **2. Organizing Differentiation Activities in Learning**

After mapping students' learning readiness, learning profiles, and learning interests, the next step taken by the teacher is to design the learning activities to be implemented. Based on the information obtained from observations, surveys, and interviews, the teacher determines differentiation strategies that are appropriate to students' learning needs. In practice, three differentiation strategies are implemented, one of which is content differentiation.

### **1) Content Differentiation**

Content differentiation is carried out as a response to students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles obtained from the survey results, particularly related to students' learning styles such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. During the learning process, students receive varied learning content through grouping based on their learning styles.

First, students with a visual learning style rely more on their sense of sight. Therefore, the learning media used include pictures, symbols in PowerPoint presentations, infographics, and posters. Second, students with an auditory learning style understand information more easily through listening. For this group, the teacher uses learning media such as interactive videos, podcasts, and audio recordings. Third, students with a kinesthetic learning style learn more effectively through physical movement and activity. Therefore, the learning process for this group involves activities such as group work, role-playing, and practical exercises.

The following section presents an overview of the implementation of learning in content differentiation.



## Visual Learning Style Content Differentiation

### 2) Process Differentiation

The diversity of students' learning profiles and readiness makes it impossible for teachers to apply the same learning process to all students in the class. Therefore, in the implementation of process differentiation strategies, students interpret and understand the learning material through tiered activities carried out individually or in groups. An important aspect of process differentiation is the implementation of individual learning agendas for each student, with varied activities and learning time. In practice, teachers group students by considering their backgrounds and average abilities. Students who demonstrate stronger Arabic language skills are prepared to act as peer tutors so that they can assist their classmates during the learning process. In this approach, students are grouped based on their level of ability or learning readiness. Process differentiation aims to adjust how students access and understand learning material according to their learning styles, level of concept mastery, and individual needs. Through this grouping, teachers can design learning activities with different levels of complexity while still leading to the same learning objectives. Students with basic abilities are given more structured exercises, while students with higher abilities are provided with more challenging tasks such as independent projects or contextual problem-solving activities.



## Visual Learning Style Process Differentiation

### 3) Product Differentiation

After students experience content differentiation and process differentiation in the learning activities, the next stage is determining the product or learning outcomes expected from those activities. Considering the diversity revealed by the survey results regarding students' learning profiles, interests, and readiness, students are given the freedom to choose the type of product they are most interested in, resulting in a variety of outputs. In product differentiation, students select the form of their learning product according to their individual learning profiles. Based on the results of observation and direct participation in the field, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated instruction in Arabic language learning is carried out through three main aspects: content, process, and product. After the teacher obtains information about students' learning profiles and needs, the teacher then adjusts these three aspects according to students' learning styles. This is consistent with the view of Roping Sigalingging (2020), who states that in differentiated instruction the senses play an important role, as some students learn more effectively through listening (auditory), seeing (visual), or physical movement (kinesthetic).



### Visual Learning Product Differentiation

## 3. Teacher Evaluation and Reflection in Differentiated Learning

Evaluation and reflection are important components in the implementation of differentiated instruction because, in practice, not all learning activities run as expected. The existence of obstacles and challenges requires teachers to continuously make improvements so that learning objectives can be achieved optimally. Through evaluation, teachers assess the effectiveness of the learning strategies used, while reflection helps teachers conduct introspection on the overall learning process. Both activities aim not only to measure the achievement of learning objectives but also to improve the quality of learning so that it becomes more responsive to differences in students' abilities.

One approach taken by teachers is to establish a *learning community* with colleagues as a professional discussion forum to share experiences, discuss learning problems, and evaluate the differentiation methods that have been implemented. In addition, teachers also conduct data-based evaluations through the results of supervision carried out by school management and student reflection sheets. Supervision provides objective feedback on the implementation of the learning process, while students' reflections offer direct insights from learners as the main subjects of the learning process. Teachers also utilize learning journals that contain observational notes during the learning process, such as students' responses, emerging obstacles, and achievements obtained. These notes help teachers conduct a more realistic analysis of their teaching practices so that they can design learning strategies that are more adaptive and aligned with students' needs. After conducting evaluation and reflection, teachers then make improvements for the next learning activities. However, in practice, the implementation of differentiated instruction still faces challenges, particularly because teachers must be able to accommodate the diversity of students' learning styles. Teachers need to provide various learning media such as videos, images, and movement-based activities to meet the needs of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. The process of grouping students based on these learning styles requires additional time, preparation, and effort from the teacher.

## **B. Teachers' and Students' Experiences in Implementing Differentiated Learning in Arabic Language Subjects, Including Strategies Used and Challenges Faced**

Differentiated learning is not a new concept in the world of education. This approach adapts the learning process to the diversity of students' abilities, interests, and learning styles. The presence of the Independent Curriculum strengthens the implementation of this approach by emphasizing the flexibility and inclusivity of learning. The curriculum encourages teachers to accommodate differences in students' learning readiness, interests,

and learning profiles so that learning becomes more equitable, adaptive, and meaningful.<sup>11</sup>

This approach aligns with the nature of education, which places learners as active subjects who have different potentials and learning needs. Therefore, teachers need to design learning strategies that are responsive to such diversity so that the educational process can optimally facilitate the development of each individual. In this context, differentiated learning is not only a pedagogical strategy but also reflects the principles of justice and equality in education.<sup>12</sup>

### **1. Social Conditions of the School Community or Students**

SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon admits new students each year from diverse educational backgrounds, including public elementary schools, madrasahs, and Islamic-based schools. These differences result in varying levels of initial ability in Arabic. Some students have had prior exposure to Arabic from an early age, while others have never studied it before and still struggle to recognize the Arabic (hijaiyah) letters, understand basic vocabulary, or read Arabic texts. In general, students' abilities can be classified into three groups. The first is the advanced group, consisting of students who already possess a strong foundation in Arabic and are able to read and comprehend texts well. The second is the intermediate group, consisting of students who have basic knowledge but still require guidance in grammar and vocabulary. The third is the beginner group, consisting of students who are new to Arabic and require instruction starting from the most basic level.

These differences in ability become a challenge for teachers because there is not yet an effective initial assessment system to map and group students according to their levels of Arabic language proficiency.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, teachers need to implement differentiated learning by designing materials, methods, and evaluations that can reach all types of students. Some of the approaches used include level-based learning, cooperative learning, and assigning individual tasks according to students' abilities.

Based on the experience of Arabic language teachers at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon, the heterogeneity of students' abilities makes differentiated instruction an

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<sup>11</sup> Desy Wahyuningsari et al., 'Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Dalam Rangka Mewujudkan Merdeka Belajar', *Jurnal Jendela Pendidikan* 2, no. 04 (2022): 529–35, <https://doi.org/10.57008/jjp.v2i04.301>.

<sup>12</sup> Redhatul Fauzia and Zaka Hadikusuma Ramadan, 'Implementasi Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka', *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA* 9, no. 3 (2023): 1608–17, <https://doi.org/10.31949/educatio.v9i3.5323>.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmad Teguh Purnawanto, 'Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi', *JURNAL PEDAGOGY* 16, no. 1 (2023): 34–54, <https://doi.org/10.63889/pedagogy.v16i1.152>.

unavoidable necessity. Students who have never studied Arabic generally come from public elementary schools and therefore require reinforcement of basic skills, including the introduction of Arabic letters, pronunciation practice, and habituation to listening to vocabulary through visual and audio media. Meanwhile, students who come from madrasahs or Islamic schools generally possess an intermediate level of ability. They are able to read and understand simple texts but are not yet fluent in speaking or in understanding grammatical structures in depth. Learning strategies for this group are therefore focused on vocabulary enrichment, reading practice with simple texts, and strengthening grammatical knowledge such as *nahwu* and *sharf*. Students who come from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), on the other hand, are usually accustomed to using Arabic actively, both orally and in writing. They are capable of understanding conversations, academic terms, and even classical texts. In differentiated instruction, teachers provide enrichment materials such as text analysis, Arabic debates, or project-based assignments to further develop their abilities.

In practice, teachers conduct an initial ability mapping through diagnostic assessment at the beginning of the semester. The results of this assessment serve as the basis for designing differentiated learning modules in terms of content, process, and product. Teachers also form heterogeneous study groups so that more capable students can assist peers who are still facing difficulties through peer tutoring strategies. Overall, the implementation of differentiated learning makes the classroom atmosphere more conducive and allows students to achieve competencies according to their individual abilities. This approach provides equal opportunities for all students to develop and is in line with the spirit of the Independent Curriculum, which positions students at the center of learning and considers the diversity of their learning needs.

## **2. Teachers' Experiences**

Teachers' understanding of the concept and implementation of differentiated instruction at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah Cilegon is still relatively limited. Based on interviews with the principal, classroom supervision reveals that many teachers still experience difficulties in effectively implementing differentiated learning strategies. This can be seen from the dominance of conventional teaching methods, such as lectures delivered uniformly to all students without considering differences in academic readiness, learning interests, or learning styles. Such uniform approaches make learning less contextual and not entirely relevant for all students, especially for those with different abilities and learning preferences. This condition indicates a gap between the expectations

of the Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes differentiated learning, and the readiness of teachers to implement it in classroom practice. Some teachers still perceive differentiated instruction as a complicated approach that requires extensive preparation and is difficult to apply. This misconception arises because some teachers assume that differentiated instruction requires them to prepare different teaching materials for each student. In fact, this approach mainly emphasizes providing choices and flexibility in how students learn, process information, and demonstrate their understanding. The lack of training, mentoring, and concrete examples of classroom practice has also contributed to the resistance shown by some teachers toward this approach.

However, teachers who have begun to understand and apply differentiated instruction acknowledge noticeable improvements, particularly in student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers also become more familiar with the individual characteristics of their students and become more reflective in designing learning processes. These experiences demonstrate that student diversity is not an obstacle but rather an opportunity to enhance creativity and improve the quality of teaching.

Therefore, schools need to strengthen teachers' capacity through training programs, workshops, coaching, lesson study, and professional learning communities such as KKG or MGMP. Through such support, teachers are expected to become more prepared and confident in consistently implementing differentiated instruction, enabling them to manage heterogeneous classrooms more effectively.

#### 1) Improving Teachers' Conceptual Understanding

In the Kurikulum Merdeka, differentiated instruction is not merely an optional pedagogical approach but a necessary practice for teachers. Teachers are no longer expected to deliver the same material in the same way to all students; instead, they must adjust teaching methods, strategies, and learning media according to students' needs, readiness, interests, and learning styles. The implementation of this approach requires teachers to provide diverse learning resources, such as instructional videos, infographics, interactive exercises, educational games, and project-based assignments. This is essential because students possess different learning styles, including visual, auditory, kinesthetic, reflective, or a combination of these styles. This condition encourages teachers to continuously develop their competencies by seeking references, attending training sessions, collaborating with fellow educators, and reflecting on their teaching practices. The Kurikulum Merdeka also provides flexibility for teachers to design contextual teaching modules that align with the characteristics of their schools and students.

Differentiated instruction also creates a more positive learning atmosphere in the classroom. Students feel more valued because their learning styles are recognized and accommodated, which in turn increases motivation, participation, and learning outcomes. For teachers, this approach becomes an opportunity to enhance creativity and professionalism in designing adaptive and innovative learning experiences.<sup>14</sup>

## 2) Increasing Teachers' Job Satisfaction

The implementation of differentiated instruction not only benefits students but also increases teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers feel more emotionally and intellectually engaged in the learning process because they are no longer confined to routine and monotonous teaching practices. Instead, they are involved in a more dynamic, creative, and meaningful learning environment. This sense of satisfaction arises when teachers can directly observe the progress of their students, both in terms of understanding the material, active participation, and increased learning motivation. Success is not solely measured by high academic scores but also by the growth of students' self-confidence, curiosity, and the development of more harmonious relationships between teachers and students.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, differentiated instruction encourages teachers to continue learning and innovating in their teaching practices. Teachers are motivated to explore various learning media and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies they use. This process strengthens the spirit of lifelong learning and enhances teachers' confidence as educational practitioners. Thus, differentiated instruction not only helps students learn more effectively but also increases teachers' job satisfaction and professionalism. This condition becomes an important foundation for improving the overall quality of education, as motivated and professional teachers are more capable of creating meaningful and transformative learning experiences.

## 3. Students' Experiences

### 1) Improvement in Creativity

Differentiated instruction provides broad opportunities for students to develop their creativity because they are not restricted to a single way of learning or a single form of assignment. Students can express their understanding through various products such as visual presentations, videos, posters, comics, written projects, or practical

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<sup>14</sup> Mochammad Saifullah et al., 'Analisis Permasalahan Dan Solusi Keterkaitan Komponen Kurikulum Sebagai Sistem Dalam Kurikulum Merdeka', *Jurnal Inovasi Dan Manajemen Pendidikan* 4, no. 2 (2025): 142–56, <https://doi.org/10.12928/jimp.v4i2.10490>.

<sup>15</sup> Siska Yuniyati, 'Upaya Meningkatkan Kemampuan Guru Dalam Menerapkan Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi Melalui Strategi Discovisit', *Jurnal Didaktika Pendidikan Dasar* 8, no. 2 (2024): 429–50, <https://doi.org/10.26811/didaktika.v8i2.1328>.

demonstrations. This variety allows students to choose forms that align with their interests, talents, and learning styles, thereby encouraging the emergence of creative and original ideas.<sup>16</sup> When students feel valued in the learning process, they become more motivated to explore their potential. For example, students with a visual tendency may express their understanding through illustrations or infographics, while those who prefer verbal expression can present their ideas through podcasts, short stories, or poetry in Arabic. This freedom fosters a sense of ownership over the learning process and increases students' motivation.

Furthermore, differentiated instruction encourages students to think critically and solve problems creatively, particularly through project-based learning. In Arabic language learning, creativity can be demonstrated through activities such as creating Arabic conversation vlogs, designing simple digital dictionaries, composing modern Arabic poetry, or producing dialogue-based comics. Thus, differentiated instruction not only addresses student diversity but also fosters creativity and independent learning.

## 2) Improvement in Learning Independence

Differentiated instruction also promotes students' learning independence. In this approach, students are given choices regarding learning materials, learning methods, and the form of the final product they will produce. As a result, students become active participants who have control over their own learning process, which helps develop responsibility and initiative in determining the most effective learning strategies for themselves. Learning independence develops because students can select learning methods that match their preferred learning styles, such as visual media, videos, or textual materials.<sup>17</sup> These choices allow students to feel more comfortable and focused, which increases their motivation to learn independently without constantly relying on the teacher's instructions.

In addition, this independence supports the development of lifelong learning skills. Students who are accustomed to managing their own learning process are better able to set learning goals, plan strategies, and evaluate their learning outcomes. In this process, the teacher acts as a facilitator who provides guidance and support while allowing students the space to manage their own learning. This approach helps increase students'

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<sup>16</sup> Ida Rahmayani et al., 'Kreativitas Siswa Dalam Pembelajaran Dengan Model Pembelajaran Berdiferensiasi', *Jurnal WANIAMBAY: Journal of Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 64–79, <https://doi.org/10.53837/waniambey.v5i1.1070>.

<sup>17</sup> Hariyadi Hariyadi et al., *Mewujudkan Kemandirian Belajar: Merdeka Belajar Sebagai Kunci Sukses Mahasiswa Jarak Jauh* (Badan Penerbit STIEPARI Press, 2023).

self-confidence and responsibility in learning.

### 3) Improvement in Teacher Student Relationships

Differentiated instruction also strengthens the relationship between teachers and students. This approach requires teachers to understand the needs, interests, readiness, and learning styles of each student, which leads to more intensive and meaningful interactions. Teachers no longer function solely as providers of information but also as facilitators and mentors who help students reach their full potential. The process of mapping students' characteristics through diagnostic tests, observation, and personal discussions indirectly builds stronger interpersonal relationships. Students feel heard and individually recognized, which fosters trust and openness. As a result, a more positive and harmonious classroom atmosphere is created.

In addition, teachers can provide more personalized feedback that is aligned with each student's abilities and progress. Specific and individualized feedback makes students feel appreciated and more motivated to learn. As the closeness between teachers and students increases, learning becomes not only a process of knowledge transfer but also a means of character development and emotional growth.

Overall, differentiated instruction helps create a more inclusive, comfortable, and effective learning environment. This approach enhances student engagement, understanding, creativity, and positive relationships between teachers and students in the learning process.

## 4. Challenges Faced

Although differentiated instruction offers many advantages in creating inclusive and effective learning, its implementation in the classroom still faces several challenges. Teachers, as the main implementers of the learning process, often encounter both technical and strategic obstacles in designing and applying this approach.

### 1) More Complex Planning

Differentiated instruction requires more complex planning because teachers must consider differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Unlike conventional approaches that use a single strategy for all students, this approach requires teachers to conduct a deeper assessment and mapping of students' abilities. Teachers also need to design variations in learning in terms of content, process, and product so that the instruction aligns with the characteristics of the class. This process often becomes challenging, especially when the number of students in a class is large.

### 2) Effective Time Management

Another challenge is managing time effectively during the learning process. Differences in students' ability levels require teachers to provide varied instructions, facilitate diverse group activities, and offer individual feedback. Within the limited time available for classroom learning, teachers must implement effective classroom and time management strategies so that all students can still achieve the learning objectives optimally.

### 3) Development of Flexible Learning Materials

Teachers are also required to develop flexible learning materials that can accommodate the diverse needs of students. Although these challenges are quite significant, differentiated instruction can still be implemented if it is supported by adequate teacher training, the availability of learning resources, and collaboration among educators. Through these processes, teachers can continue to improve their professionalism and the quality of their teaching.

## **C. The Meaning of Differentiated Learning for Students, Especially in Relation to Motivation, Engagement, and Active Participation in the Arabic Language Learning Process**

After conducting interviews with the principal and teachers regarding the concept of differentiated instruction, the researcher carried out participatory observations and subsequently conducted interviews with students. Based on the results of the in-depth interviews, it was found that, conceptually or in terms of definition, the students were not familiar with the concept of differentiation. They were also unaware that the learning strategies implemented by their teachers were forms of differentiated instruction.<sup>18</sup>

This condition indicates that differentiated instruction is still implemented in a top-down manner, where the understanding of the concept is primarily possessed by teachers without fully involving students as active subjects who are consciously aware of their own learning processes. In fact, one of the fundamental principles of differentiated instruction is the active involvement of students in selecting and adjusting their learning styles according to their needs and interests. Therefore, it is important for teachers not only to apply differentiated learning strategies at a technical level but also to provide students with an understanding of the objectives and meaning of this approach. By doing so, students can take an active role in creating an inclusive and adaptive learning process.

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<sup>18</sup> X. Kelas, *Hasil Wawancara Mendalam Dengan Peserta Didik* (Cilegon, 2025).

## 1. Students' Positive Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction

The results of the interviews indicate that the differentiated instruction implemented by teachers at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah has had a positive impact on students' learning experiences. Although most students do not explicitly understand the term *differentiated instruction*, they are able to perceive changes in the learning atmosphere, which has become more comfortable, enjoyable, and less stressful. This approach makes students feel more valued and recognized because teachers adjust the learning materials, assignments, and activities according to each student's abilities and needs. One of the prominent positive perceptions is the feeling that teachers pay greater attention to students' individual conditions. Before the implementation of differentiated instruction, some students felt left behind and lacked confidence because learning was delivered uniformly to all students. However, after this approach was applied, students became more confident and more willing to participate, as the materials and tasks were adjusted to their respective abilities. This also strengthened the emotional connection between teachers and students.

In addition, learning has become more engaging and enjoyable. Teachers employ various methods such as group discussions, language games, the use of visual media, and conversational simulations, which make the classroom atmosphere more dynamic and interactive. These varied approaches help students learn according to their preferred learning styles and increase their motivation and engagement in the learning process. In practice, differentiated instruction also makes it easier for students to understand the material according to their individual potential. Through product-based assignments, students are given opportunities to express their understanding in different ways, such as creating dialogues, short videos, or Arabic-language comics. This freedom encourages creativity, enhances students' self-confidence, and makes learning more meaningful.

Thus, differentiated instruction positively influences students' perceptions, particularly in fostering a sense of being valued, increasing motivation and self-confidence, and creating a more inclusive, adaptive, and enjoyable learning environment. This approach also enables students to learn more effectively according to their abilities and learning styles.

## Conclusion

The implementation of differentiated learning is based on the assumption that each student possesses different levels of readiness, learning profiles, and learning

interests. Therefore, the indicators of success in differentiated learning are reflected in students' sense of comfort during the learning process and the improvement of each student's abilities based on their initial starting point in learning.

The Practice of Differentiated Learning in the Arabic Language Subject at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the implementation of differentiated learning in the Arabic language subject at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah has been carried out systematically and in alignment with the diverse needs of students. The process begins with mapping students' learning readiness, interests, and profiles, followed by the design of differentiated instruction in terms of content, process, and product, and is strengthened through continuous evaluation and reflection. The findings reveal that the success of differentiated learning is not solely measured by the attainment of the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM), but rather by the meaningful improvement in each student's learning outcomes based on their initial abilities. This approach enables all students, regardless of their starting point, to experience progress, feel valued, and engage comfortably in the learning process. Thus, the study confirms that differentiated learning effectively accommodates student diversity and enhances learning outcomes, highlighting the crucial role of teachers as facilitators in creating inclusive and adaptive learning environments.

Teachers' and Students' Experiences in Implementing Differentiated Learning in Arabic Language Instruction, Including Strategies Used and Challenges Faced Based on the social conditions at SMAIT Raudhatul Jannah, where students come from heterogeneous backgrounds, teachers recognize the necessity of implementing differentiated instruction. In practice, teachers experience an increased understanding of learning concepts and gain a sense of professional satisfaction. For students, this approach contributes to increased creativity, greater learning independence, and improved relationships between teachers and students. However, several challenges are also encountered in the implementation process. These include more complex instructional planning, the need for effective time management in the classroom, and the requirement for teachers to develop learning materials that are more flexible and adaptable to diverse student needs.

The Meaning of Differentiated Learning for Students, Particularly in Relation to Motivation, Engagement, and Active Participation in Arabic Language Learning The findings related to this point indicate that differentiated learning holds meaningful value

for students. Based on the interviews conducted by the researcher, students reported that this learning approach makes them feel appreciated and provides them with opportunities to develop according to their individual strengths. The learning process becomes more enjoyable, which positively influences their comfort and interest in learning Arabic. Furthermore, the learning materials are perceived as easier to understand, which significantly contributes to the enhancement of students' intrinsic motivation and active participation in the classroom. This approach also helps students feel more confident, motivated to engage in the learning process, and more active in various learning activities. These findings demonstrate that differentiated learning is not merely a pedagogical strategy, but also a humanistic approach that respects and values the uniqueness of each student.

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