

# CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background of The Study

Curriculum reform in Indonesia has long reflected the nation's need to adapt education to societal development, global shifts, and the evolving characteristics of learners. As noted by Prasetyo and Hamami (2020), Indonesia was one of the countries that most frequently revised its national curriculum, emphasizing responsiveness to contextual demands. The transition from the emergency “Kurikulum Kondisi Khusus” implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to the Merdeka Curriculum marked a significant stride in strengthening educational resilience. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Kemendikbudristek (2022) reported that although learning loss was not completely eliminated, Indonesia successfully maintained its performance in the 2022 PISA assessment without substantial decline (Wahyudin et al., 2024). This shift aligned with the Kemendikbudristek Strategic Plan 2019–2024, which underscores that schools should contextualize curriculum according to learners' needs to cultivate meaningful and relevant learning. Philosophically, this direction harmonized with Ki Hajar Dewantara's view that education must guide (“menuntun”) learners' natural potential so they grew according to their unique dispositions (Habsy et al., 2024). Similar ideas resonated in Gardner's Framework of Multiple Intelligences, which challenged monolithic views of intelligence. Einstein's famous analogy encapsulated this humanistic perspective: “If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” As White (2005) argued,

intelligence must have been understood beyond standardized tests, thereby encouraging instruction that celebrated individual variance.

Within this philosophical and curricular landscape, Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a pedagogical cornerstone in the Merdeka Curriculum. DI emphasized adjusting content, process, and product to accommodate students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). DI operationalized the curriculum's flexibility by allowing teachers to design learning experiences that recognized learners' differences as assets rather than obstacles (Purba et al., 2021). Learner-centered approaches aligned with DI also supported the development of autonomy, competence, and engagement—qualities fundamental to meaningful learning. However, despite the theoretical appeal and curricular endorsement of DI, implementation in Indonesian schools remained inconsistent. Studies reported challenges including large class sizes, limited teacher training, and insufficient time for diagnostic assessment (Firmansyah et al., 2024). These obstacles indicated that although DI was promoted conceptually, its realization in the classroom often varies in depth and integrity, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where instructional nuance is crucial.

A dimension of Indonesian schooling that has received limited attention in relation to DI was the practice of gender-separated classrooms. Indonesia hosted tens of thousands of pesantren, boarding schools, and Islamic educational institutions that routinely separated male and female students, a structure rooted in religious tradition and social norms (Satudata Kementerian AGAMA RI, 2022).

International literature on single-sex education demonstrated varied findings. Some studies reported minimal differences in learning outcomes between male and female classrooms, while others documented differences in academic behavior, communication patterns, and learning preferences. Studies from Egypt, Pakistan, and other Islamic educational settings revealed patterns in which male students often show a stronger preference for competitive, active, or hands-on tasks, while female students tended to favor collaborative, reflective, and linguistically mediated activities (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; Metruk, 2021; Clavel & Flannery, 2023; Hosseini & Amirkhani, 2025). Additionally, gender-separated learning environments could create distinct classroom climates, which subtly influenced how students responded to instructional strategies. Although these patterns were not always consistent, they indicated that learning preferences might have been shaped by both gender norms and the structure of the educational setting.

Despite the common practice of gender-separated classes in many Islamic schools in Indonesia, research specifically exploring how differentiated instruction (DI) was implemented in these settings remained limited. Existing studies on DI in Indonesia generally concentrated on teacher perceptions, overall implementation patterns, or challenges related to the Merdeka Curriculum, with little focus on the unique dynamics of gender-segregated classrooms (Tundreng et al., 2025). This gap highlighted the need for deeper investigation into how gender separation influenced instructional strategies and student engagement within Islamic educational institutions. For instance, studies at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang reported uneven DI application due to overcrowded classrooms and limited resources (Firmansyah et

al., 2024). Other studies focused on DI's qualitative impact or teacher attitudes without evaluating how DI components differ across specific classroom structures. This leaves a gap in understanding how DI unfolded in male versus female classes—an important issue because DI fundamentally concerned responding to learner differences. If male and female classes inherently presented different learning dynamics, DI might have needed to be implemented differently across these groups.

In this context, SMP Islam De Green Camp was identified as a relevant and compelling research site. As a school that implemented gender-separated classes and consistently applies the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, it provided a natural setting to investigate DI across male and female groups. A prior study by Aiman et al. (2024) revealed that while the school is committed to DI, its implementation varied across components. Document analysis showed that differentiation in content remained limited due to curriculum constraints; differentiation in process was practiced but not fully optimized; and differentiation in product was more visibly integrated in students' task outputs. These findings, collected through classroom observations and teacher interviews, suggested that DI was present but evolving—leaving room to explore whether the pattern of implementation differs between male and female classrooms under the same institutional conditions.

Although Differentiated Instruction had been increasingly emphasized within the Merdeka Curriculum, its classroom application remains uneven, as seen in varying levels of differentiation across content, process, and product in both

SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang and SMP Islam De Green Camp. At the same time, Indonesia's long-established practice of gender-separated classrooms—particularly in Islamic schools and pesantren—had rarely been examined in relation to DI, despite international studies suggesting that male and female learners might have differed in classroom interaction patterns, task engagement, or learning preferences. Yet Indonesian DI research seldom considered gender as a contextual factor, even though DI itself is grounded in the principle of addressing learner diversity. These gaps revealed the absence of comparative evidence on whether DI components manifested differently across male and female EFL classes and how teachers navigated DI implementation within this structural setting. Addressing this intersection becomes crucial to understanding how differentiated pedagogy operated in Indonesia's unique educational landscape.

Considering the temporal gap since earlier research at SMP Islam De Green Camp, the school's continued commitment to DI, and the growing scholarly interest in gender-based learning environments, a renewed investigation is warranted. Examining how DI was experienced by male and female students—and complemented by teachers' reflections on its suitability and challenges—offered a timely opportunity to generate updated and contextually grounded insights. Through this focus, the study was conducted to analyze the implementation of DI within gender-separated EFL classes, identify patterns in how DI components are manifested in each classroom context, and illuminate teachers' pedagogical considerations in navigating differentiated instruction within this distinctive educational setting.

## 1.2 Identification of The Problem

Differentiated Instruction (DI) has become a key element of the Merdeka Curriculum, designed to respond to students' diverse readiness and learning profiles. Previous studies conducted at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang and SMP Islam De Green Camp have highlighted its varying implementation. However, several issues arise from this context.

1. The consistency of DI implementation remains uneven across content, process, and product due to structural constraints and varying levels of teacher readiness.
2. Limited research specifically examines the application of DI within gender-separated classrooms, despite the prevalence of this setting in Indonesian Islamic education.
3. Although international literature suggests differences in learning styles between genders, Indonesian studies rarely consider gender as a contextual variable when analyzing DI strategies.

. Therefore, this study was conducted to bridge that gap by examining the implementation of DI components and teacher insights within gender-separated EFL classes, particularly at SMP Islam De Green Camp.

## 1.3 Limitation of the Problem

. This study focused specifically on investigating the implementation of Differentiated Instruction components—content, process, and product—in gender-separated EFL classes at SMP Islam De Green Camp. The investigation involves one male class and one female class within the same school environment. Teacher

insights are explored solely to understand the suitability and challenges of implementing DI across these gender-based groups. Findings may differ in other schools that apply different institutional cultures or classroom structures.

#### **1.4 Research Question**

Based on the identified problems and research focus, the study addressed the following questions:

1. Was there a significant difference in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction components (Content, Process, Product) between the male and female EFL classes?
2. Which DI component (Content, Process, Product) was most dominantly implemented in each gender group?
3. How did teachers describe the suitability and challenges of implementing Differentiated Instruction in gender-separated EFL classes?

#### **1.5 The Study's Objective**

In accordance with the research questions, the study aimed to:

1. Determine whether significant differences exist in DI implementation across male and female EFL classes.
2. Identify the most dominantly implemented DI components in each class.
3. Explore teachers' insights, challenges, and pedagogical considerations in applying DI within gender-separated learning environments.

#### **1.6 The Significances of the Study**

The outcome of this study can be used theoretically and practically as follows:

### 1.6.1 Theoretically

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on student-centered pedagogy by providing empirical evidence on how Differentiated Instruction manifests in gender-separated EFL classes. The findings enrich the literature by positioning DI within Indonesia's unique educational structure, where gender-based classroom organization remains widely practiced. This study also deepens the discussion on learner diversity by examining how DI components interact with gendered learning environments.

### 1.6.2 Practically

a) For Teachers:

The study offers insights into how DI components operate in male and female EFL classrooms, helping teachers design instructional strategies that suit each group's learning characteristics.

b) For Policymakers:

The results may inform curriculum adjustment, teacher development programs, and policy evaluation, particularly in schools that apply gender-separated learning as part of their institutional philosophy.

c) For future researchers:

This study provides a methodological reference for classroom-based investigations on Differentiated Instruction and opens avenues for future comparative, longitudinal, or experimental research within single-sex educational contexts.

## 1.7 Key Terms Definition

### a) Differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction refers to the practice of tailoring teaching methods, materials, and learning tasks to address the differing abilities, interests, and learning preferences of students, aiming to help each student achieve their best potential in learning.

### b) Gender-Separated Classes

Classroom settings in which male and female students are placed in different learning groups, commonly practiced in Islamic schools, pesantren, and other religious-based institutions in Indonesia.

### c) English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the learning and teaching of English in contexts where it is not used as a primary means of daily communication. It focuses on developing learners' ability to understand, use, and communicate in English for academic and practical purposes within non-English-speaking environment.