

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Research

The curriculum played a pivotal role in the learning process, particularly in junior high schools (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023). In Indonesia, the implementation of the curriculum underwent continual changes to keep pace with the developments of time and the evolving demands of educational needs. In response to these demands, the “Merdeka Curriculum” was developed and had been in implementation since 2021. This curriculum was launched through the Sekolah Penggerak program, marking the seventh episode of the Merdeka Belajar grand program by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, with Sekolah Penggerak serving as the pilot project for the Merdeka Curriculum (Nurjanah & Syamsudin, 2023).

The background of the emergence of the Merdeka Curriculum, as mentioned above, was to follow the demands of educational needs. A few years ago, Indonesia faced the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated online learning for all schools. This situation led to a decline in the quality of education in Indonesia, affecting both educators and students (Sammi & Amir, 2023). This prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to innovate by introducing the Merdeka Curriculum, with its core component being an emphasis on student-

centred learning. One effective approach to student-centred learning was Differentiated Instruction (Nurjanah & Syamsudin, 2023).

If compared to the previous curriculum, the 2013 Curriculum (K13), it was observed that teachers often grouped students without considering their individual learning needs. This practice resulted in students with lower readiness being grouped with those who were more prepared, leading to issues of confidence and creativity among students (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023). Differentiated Instruction, as outlined in the Merdeka Curriculum, aimed to address these issues by catering to students' individual learning profiles and needs, thus enhancing the overall quality of learning (Sofiah & Hikmawati, 2023). This approach also extended support to learners with special needs through inclusive education, ensuring their specific needs were met (Lestari & Purbasari, 2023).

However, the implementation of Differentiated Instruction was often misinterpreted. Some reports indicated a misunderstanding of Differentiated Instruction as individualized instruction, which was more suitable for exceptional schools rather than regular or inclusive schools (Moosa & Shareefa, 2019). It was crucial to distinguish between these concepts. Individualized instruction focused on specific interventions associated with special services offered to students, whereas Differentiated Instruction emphasized evaluating students' readiness, interests, learning profiles, and learning environments to tailor the instructional approach (Shareefa et al., 2019). Essentially, Differentiated Instruction aimed to consider each student's unique learning style, potential, and needs (M. Marlina et al., 2023).

According to Hasanah et al. (2022), Differentiated Instruction was still new in Indonesia. M. Marlina et al., (2023) noted that several schools had not implemented Differentiated Instruction well. Some of the reasons included the paradigm of thinking that demanded the curriculum to be achieved by all students. Teachers still believed that students had to master the same material in the same way and simultaneously. This was due to the old-fashioned way of thinking which believed that education was "one size fits all". In this way, teachers did not have to bother preparing different lesson materials, but in the end, students were forced to learn in ways they did not necessarily like.

Based on the Distribution Map of Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum (IKM) released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, in Tanjungpinang City, Riau Islands Province, in 2024, there were 29 junior high schools that had implemented this Merdeka Curriculum. Out of these 29 junior high schools, only SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang accepted both regular and special needs students. Therefore, the possibility of misinterpretation and misconception mentioned above could have occurred at this school. A preliminary interview with an English teacher at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang indicated this misinterpretation in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction as a part of the Merdeka Curriculum. Although SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang served as Sekolah Penggerak, it did not mean it was immune to potential errors in implementing Differentiated Instruction as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. There appeared to be a bias in applying Differentiated Instruction for regular students versus students with special needs (PDBK), particularly in the

English subject. This preliminary interview sparked the researcher's interest to conduct a qualitative descriptive research entitled "An Analysis of Differentiated Instruction Implementation in English Subject at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang", aiming to address whether the implementation of Differentiated Instruction at the said school aligned with the existing theories of Differentiated Instruction, as part of the Merdeka Belajar form in the Merdeka Curriculum.

1.2. Limitation of the Research

Based on the research background stated above, this research was confined to analysing the Differentiated Instruction implementation at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, limiting the generalisability of findings to other schools implementing Differentiated Instruction as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. The focus was specifically on the English subject, which may not have reflected the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in other subjects.

1.3. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the elaboration above, the researcher formulated the problems in the following questions:

1. To what extent was Differentiated Instruction being implemented in the English subject at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, as guided by the Merdeka Curriculum?

2. How were the differentiated elements being implemented by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang to differentiate instruction for the students?
3. What challenges or limitations did English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang face in implementing Differentiated Instruction?

1.4. Research Objectives

Based on the problem formulation above, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To find out to what extent Differentiated Instruction was being implemented in the English subject at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang, as guided by the Merdeka Curriculum.
2. To find out how the differentiated elements were being implemented by English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang to differentiate instruction for the students.
3. To find out what challenges or limitations English teachers at SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang faced in implementing Differentiated Instruction.

1.5. Significances of the Research

It was expected that the result of this study would give some contributions to:

1. Schools

This study contributed to the understanding of Differentiated Instruction in the context of the English subject in junior high schools, particularly in inclusive schools like SMP Islam De Green Camp Tanjungpinang.

2. English Teachers

The findings informed the development of more effective ways for implementing Differentiated Instruction in English subject learning, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of students with diverse learning needs.

3. Researcher Himself

This research could enhance the knowledge and experience to prepare oneself as a teacher who will engage with students with diverse learning preferences in the English subject.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

1. Merdeka Curriculum

Indonesia's latest curriculum as of 2021 guided teachers to implement Differentiated Instruction as an approach that was considered capable of meeting students' learning needs according to their individual learning profiles, with the aim of improving the quality of education.

2. Differentiated Instruction

A learning approach that combined the four elements of differentiation (content, process, product, and learning environment) with students' diverse

characteristics (readiness to learn, interests, and learning profiles) in its implementation.

3. Implementation

The process of applying specific approaches, methods, procedures, techniques, styles, or strategies within the classroom or educational setting.

4. English Subject

A subject within the Merdeka Curriculum that was designed to help students achieve proficiency in six language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, viewing, writing, and presenting across various texts.

