# TS25 SCHOOLTEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN DIVERSE ESL CLASSROOMS

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## ABSTRACT

*Equal access to robust learning experiences is essential for learners regardless of their academic levels, especially in a mixed-ability classroom. The diversity among the learners has to be the focus for teachers in planning, designing and delivering their lesson efficiently. This focus is to make sure that the lesson will satisfy both learners' academic needs and the nature of the current 21st-century classroom to increase students' outcomes holistically. Furthermore, catering to learners' diversity is one of the key areas in the recent educational transformation initiatives in Malaysia, along with the launched of School Transformation 2025 Program (TS25) in 2015. Meanwhile, the differentiated approach has been suggested as a beneficial educational approach in teaching academically diverse learners. Simultaneously, differentiated approach is one of the suggested techniques in TS25 modules on active learning. This article aims to explore TS25 schoolteachers' perceptions of managing differentiated learning (DL) in their diverse ESL classrooms. Twenty English language teachers from four different TS25 schools in Klang district, Selangor were involved in this study. The data were analysed descriptively using frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation gained from the questionnaire. The results indicated four teachers' perceptions as awareness towards the DL approach, DL lesson planning and materials building, DL classroom practices, and self-competency towards the approach. TS25 schoolteachers perceived differentiation as a beneficial approach in teaching diverse academic learners, which also promotes better, enjoyable, and satisfactory student-centered teaching and learning session. However, instead of having systematic and organised lesson planning, the findings revealed that the process of designing, planning, and implementing the DL lessons could be as challenging since it is time-consuming, and teachers are lacking of funding in constructing and designing the teaching and learning materials. The findings also suggested that in order to successfully implementing the DL in an ESL classroom, teachers need ongoing workshops of DL approach. Implications and suggestions for future development and research were discussed at the end of the paper.*

Keywords: Differentiated learning, diverse classrooms, ESL classroom, TS25 schools.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, diversity in education has been expanding every day especially when it comes to the students' learning capabilities (Tomlinson, 2004) as effects of the variance in cultural backgrounds, languages, religions, socioeconomic statuses, and globally educational expansion that are directly affecting their education (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Chiu & Chow, 2015; Dumanig, David, & Symaco, 2012; Konan et al., 2010; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). As elaborated by Chapman and King (2005), the varying in students' learning potential, interest, and their intellectual has to be carefully catered, so it would provide equal opportunities for them to success since the academic diversity could affect the way they comprehend and demonstrate their learning. Thus, teachers have to acknowledge the differences between their students in order to recognise the needs of the diverse learners in their teaching and obligate the students to their learning (Bartolo et al., 2007). Meanwhile, Novak (1990) argues that the teaching method should make the lesson more effective and meaningful for the students. Teaching and learning the second language as an example, should be carefully planned, so that the students with different levels of language comprehension would not withdraw themselves from the learning process as the effect of alienness of one language (AlQahtani, 2015).

Globally, the differentiated approach has been practised as an effective teaching method in order to place importance on learner differences (Burkett, 2013; Erickson, 2010; Karadag & Yasar, 2010; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Tomlinson, 2001). Millen and Gable (2016) mentioned that the effective practice of deep learning as to engage and soliciting higher-level achievement of individual learners came in the right direction in early 2000, when differentiated approach slowly moved into the mainstream education in America. Tomlinson et al. (2003) defines differentiated instruction as a philosophy of teaching that is premised on the idea that learning best takes place when the teachers accommodate differences and diversity in the levels of readiness, learning profiles and interests among students. The method provides chances for students with different academic capabilities to achieve their learning tasks differently as planned by their teachers (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). In order to respond to the learning needs of students with different skills, Tomlinson (2001) suggested that the content, process and product in learning stages are adapted according to students' various interest and readiness level. Different methods of accessing content, processing ideas, formulating meaningful comprehension and developing outcomes are afforded the learner so effective learning can take place. However, based on the literature, the key element in the DL practice to be successfully implemented is the teachers (Butt & Kausar, 2010; Geel et al., 2019; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Kaur, 2010; Levy, 2008; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012; Wan, 2015).

In Malaysia, the national education reform, as mentioned in Malaysia Education 2013-2025 Blueprint (PPPM 2013-2025), is aiming to minimise the achievement differences, resulted due to diversity in education through an equal and flexible education (MoE, 2013). The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MoE) remains committed to fulfilling the potential needs of the students and to providing better access to quality education for every student (Kaur, 2017). MoE has also outlined in the PPPM 2013-2025 that bilingual proficiency is one of the six key attributes needed by every student in order for them be competitive globally. Apart from the Bahasa Malaysia as a national language, English language is one of the compulsory subjects to be taken

in school since primary schooling, yet English-language-in-education policy is not a new implementation (Macalister, 2017). Malaysia as a multicultural multilingual country, the policy is that to ensure every student are proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English language, while encouraging every child to learn an additional language by 2025 as targeted by the MoE (MoE, 2013). Nevertheless, after many years, Malaysian students are not yet proficient in English language even though it is considered as the second language (Hazita, 2016; MoE, 2019; Nurmazidah, Kow & Hazita, 2012; Ramiza & Albion, 2013).

On the other hand, the MoE has called for a 'streaming system' according to a pupil's academic level as well as 'controlled school' to be abolished (Anon, 2018). Azlin et al. (2016) defined streaming practices in Malaysia as "permanent ability grouping for a whole year, based on the students' previous year-end results". It is a common management strategy by schools to group their students into classes based on their academic ability. However, the abolishment would increase number of diverse or mixed-ability classrooms, yet it aligns the schools with the 21st-century learning environment that promotes equality and learning opportunities for each learner in the same educational setting. Apart from the step taken, to achieve the education goals stated in the PPPM 2013-2025, MoE has launched School Transformation 2025 Program (TS25) as one of the educational transformation initiatives to improve students' outcomes and the quality of the schools (Zubaidah & Kamarul Arifin, 2018). Simultaneously, the current abolishment of the streaming system in schools is aligned with the norm practised in the TS25 schools. Muhammad Sidek and Arfah (2017) mentioned that TS25 program is developed to ameliorate school management and teaching practices, which included the use of 21st-century learning styles, techniques, and tools in enhancing students thinking skills. In conjunction, the differentiation approach is one of the focused techniques in the TS25 modules along with the implementation of the i-Think program, active and cooperative learning (Safii, 2017).

Meanwhile, many people think that differentiation helps teachers in catering needs of their diverse classroom (Burkett, 2013; Erickson, 2010; Mior et al., 2017; Mohd Hasrul & Hazita, 2016; Noriah et al., 2012), yet there are no scientific applications or studies on teachers' perceptions in managing the approach in Malaysia context. Mest (2016), cited in Ismajli and Imami-Morina (2018), stated that for a successful differentiated approach implementation, teachers must consider four aspects of their learners which include (a) motives, (b) abilities, (c) interest, and (d) learning styles. In this context, the teachers are required to provide learning opportunities with all students in class, create suitable education settings to students, design teaching activities, get aware of the most effective method required for teaching, and apply different teaching approaches in teaching process (Levy, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perceptions of primary TS25 schoolteachers on differentiated learning in their ESL classrooms. It can further support, or perhaps, adding different views in Malaysia context of the past studies' gap that mostly focusing the approach applications on gifted and talented students of PERMATA Pintar (Mior et al., 2017; Mohd Hasrul, Hazita & Azizah, 2015, 2017; Noriah et al., 2012) and certain critical subjects such as Science and Mathematics. Thus, this paper addressed the following research question – What are the TS25 schoolteachers' perceptions of managing differentiated learning in their diverse ESL lessons?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### English as a Second Language in Malaysia

The English language has always been referred to as an apt symbol for the theme of globalisation, diversification, progress, and identity (Crystal, 2003). It is widely known as the global language for its function as a lingua franca to serve as the international language of business, diplomatic relations, and educational purposes. In a multilingual country like Malaysia, the English language holds an important status as a second language, and it is used as a medium of instruction in both formal and informal setting (Dumanig, David, & Symaco, 2012; Haida & Melor, 2018). The second language is a traditional term for the use of the language by non-native speakers in a target-language environment. Hazita (2016) mentioned that the English language in Malaysia has an established role in the national curriculum as a compulsory subject in school, and the language in education policy guides the implementation. However, it is not compulsory for the students to pass the subject in completing their school years.

On a different note, Macalister (2017) stated that the English language position in Malaysia had been debated since Malaysia's independence in 1957 due to the status of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic nation. The Malay language was adopted as the national language in order to work towards building the nation as well as to establish national identity and unity (Dumanig, David, & Symaco, 2012). Regardless, other communities, Indian and Chinese have been allowed to utilise their mother tongues in the system which has led to the development of today's vernacular school system. Therefore, it is either the English language generally acted as a second language or third language for those communities.

According to Radzuwan, Shireena and Kamariah (2017), some middle and upper-middle class Malaysians use the English language as their first language. Despite the fact, the majority of the Malaysian students are not yet proficient in the English language, as reported in Primary School Assessment Report 2018 (MoE, 2019). According to the statistical report, the English language performance in Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) 2018 was not satisfying since only 14.28% (Comprehension paper) and 12.02% (Writing paper) out of 427 163 candidates able to achieve excellent level (A grade), while 15.68% and 24.29% respectively did not achieve minimum level (E grade) for both English language papers (MoE, 2019).

### English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Malaysian Schools

Jeon-Ellis, Debski and Wiggleswort (2005), as cited in Ramiza and Albion (2013), defined the L2 classroom as "a social context to which learners bring themselves and their past experiences in which they establish certain relationships and attempt to participate and engage in tasks in ways that best fit their social needs". The status of the English language as a second language in Malaysia and the arising awareness of its global importance have resulted in English subject is now a compulsory subject to be taught in school. This implementation is in line with the education policy, and the content syllabi were also enacted where a formal style of English language learning takes place in classrooms (Hazita, 2016; Ramiza & Albion, 2013). Ramiza and Albion (2013) stated that Malaysia is known as one of the Asian countries that are adopting a bilingual education system.

Recently, it was reported that there was a decline of the standard and low literacy attainment in the English language even after eleven years of learning the language in school (Hazita, 2016; Nurmazidah, Kow & Hazita, 2012; Ramiza & Albion, 2013). Hamidah et al. (2017) and Malini and Gooi (2016) stated that students' motivation towards learning the English language in Malaysia is still low, and it can be varied if students' learning style match the teachers' teaching approach. Students can also be demotivated if the English content does not relate to the students' interest and needs. In contrast, other studies reveal that Malaysian students' motivation level was high, and they possess a positive attitude towards the language and high awareness of the importance of English language (Kalai & Parilah, 2018; Melor & Nur Rashidah, 2011; Siti Sukainah & Melor, 2014; Thang, Ting & Nurjanah, 2011). Therefore, attitude and motivation are vital aspects of learning the second language as it will directly affect the students. With current diversity in the school environment, teachers should be aware of the different and diverse groups in their classroom, so they could choose the appropriate teaching approaches to suit students' learning style, interest, and needs.

Meanwhile, the recent changes in the national curriculum have allocated 160 hours of minimum time allocation per year for the English language period in national school, and 96 hours per year for national-type schools. The current English language syllabus was adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to promote the communicative approach and to focus on increasing the literacy level and compete globally (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Sallehhudin, 2018).

**Mixed Ability Classrooms**

The mixed-ability or heterogeneous classroom generally refers to the differences among the learners in their achievement and learning, seated in the same educational setting. However, different scholars have defined the terms in many ways, using different perspectives. Chapman and King (2005) defined a mixed ability classroom as a group of learners with different levels of learning abilities, interest, and skills. Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) explained on learners' diversity through explaining that learners in the same class are not making progress in their learning at the same speed rate, learning techniques, behaviours, or interest, so teachers have to make plans and adjustments in order to promote individual's development. Furthermore, Kaur (2010), in her study on mixed-ability teaching, stated that teachers are the key factor in reaching out to their student, and they should be aware of the differences among the learners. She added that two students could not be the same at their learning and capabilities.

Le and Renandya (2016) distinguished the terms "mixed-ability" and "heterogeneous" in language learning since they were commonly used interchangeably. They defined "mixed-ability" class as a group of the academically or proficiently diverse learners mixed together, while "heterogeneous" class means a class of group students who are different in terms of their age, mother tongues, and learning styles. However, the common problems arouse in mixed-ability ESL classroom are differences in language content, learning abilities, prior language learning experiences, attitude, motivation, and interest (Kaur, 2010; Le & Renandya, 2016) which need teachers to address them carefully. Dornyei (2001), as cited in Le and Renandya (2016), listed some strategies for teachers in approaching mixed-ability students in order to help them with their learning:

- Provide chances for learners to succeed.
- Adjust the difficulty level of the tasks given to match the learners' abilities.
- Design tests that focus on learners' capability, including the improvement options.

Nevertheless, Tomlinson (2000) had long proposed differentiated approach as a teaching and learning method to meet the needs of the diverse learners' population. Besides, recent educational expansion has contributed to learners' diversity that needs the teachers to address learners' variance (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

**Differentiated Learning Approach**

Bender (2012) mentioned that the diverse learning characteristics displayed by learners have expressed the need for teachers to implement different learning activities in their classroom. Tomlinson (1999) stated that "Children already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense that we would differentiate our instruction in response to them". Differentiated learning (DL) is one of teachers' efforts in the educational setting to respond to the diverse academic needs while considering students' readiness, interest, and learning styles (Burkett, 2013; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010; Tomlinson, 2000). The approach coincided with the theories of social constructivism (Lev Vygotsky), multiple intelligent (Howard Gardner) and thinking styles (John Dewey), and Tomlinson proposed DL as what learners are able and capable to do (Burkett, 2013; Erickson, 2010; Whipple, 2012). Erickson (2010) stated that Tomlinson's DL model is regarded as a valuable resource for teaching students in the 21st-century, which is responding to students' varying needs.

Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) have stated, "the core of the classroom practice of differentiation is the modification of four curriculum-related elements – content, process, product, and affect – which are based on three categories of student needs and variances – readiness, interest, and learning profile". Thus, it is vital for teachers to be aware of the differences among their students so that they will implement a successful DL. Throughout DL practices, teachers have the opportunity to provide choices for their students in learning, to vary the assessments, and to monitor their academic growth. This approach will help students to engage and achieve more in their learning. Tomlinson (2000) has also listed several ways to ensure high-quality curriculum and instruction of DL in the classroom:

- the curriculum are focused on the information and understanding
- the learners fully utilise designated lessons/activities/products in their learning
- materials and tasks provided should be attractive and relevant to the learners
- teachers provide an active learning
- each learner should be enjoyed and satisfied in their learning

A few studies suggested that the efficacy of the differentiated approach as it is increasingly becoming popular globally. Empirical evidence, although are slowly being accumulated, demonstrated that differentiation increased student engagement to the learning and achievement level, and reduced the achievement gap. Santisteban (2014) revealed that there are positive impacts

on language literacy among the learners with interrupted schooling when presented with the approach. Little impact is shown on writing production and vocabulary acquisition, but there was more evidence on higher incidence in reading comprehension skills. Another study focusing on reading comprehension among Iranian learners by Aliakbari and Haghighi (2014) also mentioned the effectiveness of the approach. The learner group who attended to differentiation approach performed better in comparison to the other group. In placing more emphasis, Pablico, Diack and Lawson (2017) revealed in their study on the application of the DL in Science classroom that teachers perceived the approach as an effective instructional method in improving students' engagement and academic performance. The findings also stated that the approach positively affected student learning outcomes and engagement in class. Furthermore, Karadag and Yasar (2010) mentioned that differentiation also positively influenced students' interest and attitude in Turkish course as it enhanced the students' academic interest, learning level and their participation toward the lessons. In recent studies, AlHashmi and Elyas (2018) have reasserted that DL practice is indeed able to increase student motivation, and enhancing the way they access the lesson. Hence, in differentiated teaching method practices, the use of student-centered techniques was observed to have positive contributions on students' success, motivation, effective participation to process, and to increase their interests towards lesson.

On the other hand, literature also suggested that most of the teachers perceived DL as beneficial educational approach in addressing student diversity in learning. According to Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012), their study revealed that teachers are highly value and prioritize creating a positive learning environment. Some of the beliefs and practices reported by the teachers are harmonious with Tomlinson's model and they are using a variety of strategies that support differentiation of content, process, and product. Burkett (2013) in exploring teacher perceptions on differentiated instruction stated that teachers understood that DL brings benefits to maximize students learning and they took the responsibility for implementing it in their classroom. The findings also mentioned that the teachers placed importance on student readiness and used assessment to guide their instruction. The planning and preparation of the approach could affect the implementation in the classroom. This claim can also be supported by similar studies done by Sabb-Cordes (2016) and Charles Sr. and Luard (2018). However, Sabb-Cordes mentioned that teachers are facing challenges in implementing the approach as for time management, planning, administrative support, and lack of professional development opportunities. Meanwhile, a study by Melesse (2015) focusing on Ethiopian primary school teachers' perception and practice of DL, the majority teachers did not have enough exposure to differentiated instruction and resulted in lower conceptions. The teachers were also less familiar with the main instructional strategies of differentiated instruction. The study also revealed that most of the teachers did not addressing the students' readiness, interest, and learning profile.

According to Levy (2008) and Kaur (2010), in meeting the needs of the mixed-ability classroom, teachers are the key factor to establish the suitable teaching method and to ensure that the individual development of diverse classroom is a success. Boe, Shin, and Cook (2007) contended that teacher preparation affects teachers' perceptions of well preparedness for catering for student learning. Butt and Kausar (2010) revealed in their comparative study of differentiation instruction among private and public schoolteachers stated that private schoolteachers are more differentiated. According to the study, teachers in public schools are aware of the importance of the differentiation approach, yet they are facing challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher's training, lengthy syllabus, and lack of teacher's interest. This is consistent with the findings by Tomlinson and Imbeau (2012). They mentioned that teachers were not implementing differentiation in their classroom because it was too difficult to employ with the bigger number of students, the number of standards required to cover, and because of the perception to keep pace with other teachers.

Furthermore, Wan (2015) mentioned that in Hong Kong, the teachers are making adaptations to accommodate differences among their learners, yet they lacked of confidence and were unprepared for the DL approach implementation and practice. The study revealed that the teachers showed positive attitudes toward the approach, yet there existed different concerns including class management and conflicts with personal teaching beliefs. Mavroudi (2017) in her study, revealed that teachers in Greek state schools also showed positive attitude towards differentiation approach, but happened to be misconceptions of its underlying principles, and lack in training and resources. Besides, Geel et al. (2019) in their analysis of differentiation complexity mentioned that the key for successful differentiation is not the application of strategies, but the actual adaptation of teaching by the teacher themselves to the thoroughly identified needs of all students. They suggested that teachers have to be prepared with two type of knowledge that are considered essential in delivering DL: knowledge about the students and subject-matter knowledge. Both of this knowledge would lead to the minimal challenges in the DL lesson practices. Meanwhile, another recent study by Ismajli and Imami-Morina (2018) revealed that the understanding and implementation of DL in Kosovo schools is still not at the right level as teachers are only focusing in product differentiation compared to content and differentiated learning process. Hence, the studies mentioned showed that teachers are the crucial element in implementing DL practices and to address students' diversity, while to ensure the success of students' individual development.

**Differentiated Learning in Malaysia practices**

The differentiation concept in Malaysia has not been emphasised until recently in line with PPPM 2013-2025 to introduce 21st century teaching and learning. The literature on differentiated approach suggests that DL is a beneficial educational approach for teachers with diverse students. Mohd Hasrul and Hazita (2016) defined DL as a teaching approach that emphasises on the importance of learner differences in delivering knowledge. Since the method caters to the needs of diverse learners, it is essential for teachers to acknowledge their learners' needs, readiness, and proficiency levels (Nooreiny & Hamidah, 2010). Kaur (2017) mentioned that Malaysian teachers are lack of exposure and do not have knowledge of differentiation. Thus, the situations led to the unfavourable practice of the technique in classrooms. Meanwhile, the review on the practices of DL in Malaysia has shown that it is mostly focusing on gifted and talented students (Mior et al., 2017; Mohd Hasrul, Hazita & Azizah, 2015, 2017; Noriah et al., 2012) and investigating the effectiveness of DL in certain subjects such as Mathematics and Science (Mior et al., 2017; Najiba et al., 2014; Noriah et al., 2012). Compared to the United States, despite the DL has been implemented to the gifted and talented students, it has also been practised widely among the public schools with mixed-ability students.

Since DL provides teachers with flexibility for their students to manage their learning, Najiba et al. (2014) proved that the differentiated approach is an effective and exemplary method in improving students' motivation towards learning the foreign language in Malaysia. The flexibility in learning increases the motivation level among the students towards their learning (Mohd Hasrul, Hazita & Azizah, 2015). Mohd Hasrul and Hazita (2016) further stressed that DL links to students' motivation and the increase in students' achievement in English language learning among gifted students in PERMATA Pintar, UKM. Moreover, for the ESL learning, MoE launched the Differentiated Teaching and Learning of English Language program to improve the teaching and learning and to increase students' achievement on the subject (Mohd Hasrul, Hazita & Azizah, 2017). The empirical evidence shown in studies by Noriah et al. (2012) and Mior et al. (2017) which focused on gifted and talented students, concludes that the use of DL as a means for improvement in academic skills among the learners. Even though most studies revealed positive outcomes of DL on students' learning, some other studies exposed the otherwise. Mohd Hasrul, Hazita and Azizah (2015) reported the undesirable outcomes of language performance of the target students even when DL was provided; regardless the students are gifted and talented, they are still varied in learning styles and levels.

Despite the success associated with DL, several studies reported some challenges while performing the approach in Malaysia. Teachers continue to struggle with the challenges of students' diversity in a classroom (Joseph et al., 2013; Nooreiny & Hamidah, 2010). Joseph et al. (2013) mentioned that in a large classroom setting, teachers require more time in planning, organising and scheduling the students, either to separate them individually or in a group. Mohd Hasrul, Hazita, and Azizah (2015) highlighted that teachers are also struggling in preparing and implementing the DL lessons due to the limited exposure of the approach and they are unable to manage their teaching and learning session successfully. It is essential for them to be able to plan and manage their DL well so that they could provide a promising learning chance to all the students in their classroom. Tomlinson et al. (2003) stated that for DL to be successfully implemented in the classroom, teachers need to have high motivation and a positive attitude towards practising the approach since it is daunting and time-consuming. Moreover, there is a small number of empirical evidence on the impact of the use of DL in primary or secondary school learners of mixed-ability classrooms in Malaysian public schools. Most of the studies, however, point out the gaps in the literature investigating the DL in TS25 schools practice, the ESL context of Malaysian public schools, and teacher perceptions toward the differentiation approach.

**Transformation School 2025 Program (TS25)**

The MoE launched TS25 program in 2015 as a major agenda in transforming schools in Malaysia. It is a part of MoE transformational initiatives for the Malaysian education system to increase the success rate of Malaysian students and to produce quality schools (Zubaidah & Kamarul Arifin, 2018). The efforts can be observed through the application of good administration practice and leadership in teaching and learning process in accordance with PPPM 2013-2025 in transforming Malaysian education towards a better system (Raamani & Arumugam, 2018; Webmaster, 2018). This transformation is done to prepare the nation to face the 21st-century challenges and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Raamani & Arumugam 2018; Webmaster 2018). Furthermore, TS25 is an attempt towards generating human capital through; a) fun learning environment, b) quality and visionary administrators support, c) highly competent and aspirational teachers, and d) communal community commitments. However, there are limited researches on TS25 program done by previous researchers since the program has been newly implemented across the country.

Muhammad Sidek and Arfah (2017) in their study focusing on the i-Think program as a tool in leading the success of TS25 program, stated that TS25 modules guide the schoolteachers in improving their teaching and learning activities. The expected improvement is to enhance students' thinking skills, as the main-focus of TS25 is to create a quality school and to improve students' outcomes. The literature from Muhammad Sidek and Arfah (2017) also mentioned that teachers are the leading forces in TS25 schools that will fulfil the 21st-century learning styles, guided and facilitated by the middle leader teams (MLT teachers). This transformation is to ensure that teachers' teaching style is moving towards cooperative learning that incorporates high order thinking skills (HOTS) and i-Think as the key requirement.

TS25 program aims to escalate the teachers' and students' potentials by enhancing the quality of teaching and learning process. Professional Learning Community (PLC) is one of the professional development practices in TS25 modules, which helps to increase the quality of teachers' teaching and learning practices. Siti Nafsiah et al. (2018) mentioned that TS25 and Trust schools were selected as the pioneers for MoE's schools to spread the PLC practices in Malaysia. They found out that PLC practices in TS25 schools are among the highest level of practise compared to other schools in Selangor, while the teachers' teaching practices are focusing on collaborative culture, followed by personal practice sharing. Dufour and Mattos (2013), as cited in Siti Nafsiah et al. (2018), noted that collaborative cultures are the most effective strategy to improve teaching in schools. Besides, the study revealed that focus on students learning dimension in TS25 schools is among vital practices. The target of each school is to ensure that students' learning is improved.

**METHODOLOGY**

This quantitative study applied survey method as the research design by using questionnaires to collect the relevant data from the primary TS25 English language schoolteachers towards the DL approach. Nardi (2018) in comparison of research methods stated that a survey is an ideal method to explore people's opinions and attitudes towards certain topic. Brace (2018) also mentioned that survey is useful in obtaining information and investigate people's attitudes to an issue. A set of questionnaires consisted of two parts were used in this study as the instrument to obtain the information on teaching background of the respondents, and teachers' perceptions towards managing differentiated approach in teaching and learning practice of diverse ESL classrooms. An alike Likert Scale was used in the provided questionnaires which consisted of Scale 1 – 4: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree. Neutral scale, commonly scale-3 in the Likert Scale, was removed as the researcher tried to avoid ambivalence and ambiguity from the data obtained (Nowlis et al. 2002). Past studies suggested that when presented with a neutral response option, participants would be more likely to select that option rather than report their actual opinion. According to Nowlis et al. (2002), the neutral position either showing a truly neutral attitude or ambivalent that is the mixed feelings, which

is considering positive and negative aspects of a focus. Edwards and Smith (2014) agreed with Nowlis and mentioned that there are three factors likely influence a participant's decision to falsely report via the neutral option: cognitive effort, ambivalence, and social desirability.

Questionnaire is used in this survey method as it facilitates them to collaborate with the respondents. Besides, it is also easily administered and convenient for the data to be collected and analysed but at first, researchers have to understand that the questionnaires have to define the objectives that a study is to answer (Brace, 2018). The sample for this study was collected using purposive sampling method. The purposeful selection of research participants would provide the researcher with useful information (Creswell, 2012). A total of twenty English language teachers from four different primary Transformation School 2025 Program (TS25) schools in Klang district of Selangor participated in this study. Data analysis was done through descriptive statistical analysis procedure. This method of analysis was used to describe the percentages and frequencies of demographics obtained from the research samples. According to Loeb et al. (2017), descriptive statistics are used to give a general summary on the sample and the measures. They stated that the procedure focused on answering the questions about who, what, where, when, and to what extent of a study. In addition, here the descriptive statistical analysis is used to show the respondents' demographic information and explore the perceptions of teachers towards differentiated learning in four aspects; 1) background knowledge of DL, 2) lesson planning and materials building, 3) classroom atmosphere and practices, and 4) teachers' competency.

## FINDINGS

### Respondents' Profile

Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic information. Based on the presented data, it can be observed that the respondents in this study varied in terms of their specialisation, teaching experiences, school types, involvement in TS25 program, and familiarisation towards DL. Majority of the participants (75%) are English-optionist teacher, possess more than five years of teaching experiences (80%), and attended or are familiarised with DL content knowledge (90%). It is also noteworthy that the majority of the participants (75%) are newly involved with the TS25 program, while 25% of participants have been involved for three years.

**Table 1: Respondents profile**

| Factor | Categories | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 6 | 30 |
| | Female | 14 | 70 |
| English-optionist | Yes | 15 | 75 |
| | No | 5 | 25 |
| Teaching experience | 0 - 5 years | 4 | 20 |
| | 6 - 10 years | 5 | 25 |
| | 11 - 20 years | 5 | 25 |
| | 21 and above | 6 | 30 |
| School-type | National School (SK) | 10 | 50 |
| | National Type Chinese School (SJKC) | 5 | 25 |
| | National Type Tamil School (SJKT) | 5 | 25 |
| | Others | - | - |
| TS25 Program experience | 1 year | - | - |
| | 2 years | 15 | 75 |
| | 3 years | 5 | 25 |
| | 4 years | - | - |
| DL Familiarisation | Yes | 18 | 90 |
| | No | 2 | 10 |

**Teachers' Awareness of Differentiation Approach**

Table 2 below shows the mean scores for the teachers' awareness of the use of DL in catering to students' academic diversity in the classroom. As shown in Table 2, the overall mean value for teachers' awareness of DL is m = 3.07, s.d. = 0.343. The highest mean item for Table 2 is item 1, with a mean value of 3.20 and a standard deviation of 0.410. The lowest mean score can be found in item 3, with a mean value of 2.95 and a standard deviation of 0.394. Based on the analysis, the teachers are aware of the use of DL as a means to cater to diversity in the classroom (100%) and the diverse academic ability among their students (100%), yet some teachers (10%) do not find that DL will be able to fulfil the needs of their students.

**Table 2: Teachers' awareness toward differentiation approach**

| | N | | SDA | DA | A | SA | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Differentiation is widely known as a teaching method to cater the needs of diverse abilities in a classroom. | 20 | *f* %| - | - | 16 (80.0) | 4 (20.0) | 3.20 | .410 |
| 2. Teacher is aware of the diversity among the students in their language abilities. | 20 | *f* % | - | - | 19 (95.0) | 1 (5.0) | 3.05 | .224 |
| 3. The differentiated learning method has been useful in fulfilling the different needs of your diverse ESL classroom. | 20 | *f* % | - | 2 (10.0) | 17 (85.0) | 1 (5.0) | 2.95 | .394 |
| | | | | | Overall Mean Value | | 3.07 | 0.343 |

**Teachers' Perceptions of DL Lesson Planning and Materials Building**

Table 3 shows the mean scores for teachers' perceptions towards DL lessons' designing, planning and building of materials for teaching and learning. From Table 3, the highest mean item for teachers' perceptions of lesson planning and materials building is item 6, with a mean score of 3.35 and a standard deviation of 0.489. The lowest mean item is item 4, with a mean value of 2.90 and a standard deviation of 0.308. The findings reveal the overall mean score and standard deviation for the teachers' perceptions of lesson planning and materials building of DL approach (m = 3.15, s.d. = 0.471). It can be concluded that majority of the participants in this study agreed that DL makes their lesson planning more systematic and organised (90%), but it is challenging for them (100%), and it is time-consuming (100%). Some of them pointed out that they are lack of funding to design the teaching and learning materials (85%). However, for both item 4 and 7, some teachers disagreed that DL makes lesson planning systematic and organised (10%) and that they are do not have enough funding to create materials (15%).

**Table 3: Teachers' perceptions of DL lesson planning and materials building**

| | N | | SDA | DA | A | SA | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Differentiated learning makes lesson planning more systematic and organised. | 20 | *f* % | - | 2 (10) | 18 (90.0) | - | 2.90 | 0.308 |
| 5. Designing a differentiated learning lesson is challenging. | 20 | *f* % | - | - | 15 (75.0) | 5 (25.0) | 3.25 | 0.444 |
| 6. The differentiated learning needs a teacher to spend more time in planning and preparing materials for teaching and learning. | 20 | *f* % | - | - | 13 (65.0) | 7 (35.0) | 3.35 | 0.489 |
| 7. There is a lack of funding in building materials for differentiated learning. | 20 | *f* % | - | 3 (15.0) | 12 (60.0) | 5 (25.0) | 3.10 | 0.641 |
| | | | | | Overall Mean Value | | 3.15 | 0.471 |

**Teachers' Perceptions of DL Classroom Practices**

Table 4 shows the mean values analysis of teachers' perceptions of DL practices in the classroom. The highest mean item for teachers' perception of DL classroom practice is item 13, with a mean value of 3.00 and standard deviation = 0.000. The lowest mean score is item 10, with a mean score of 2.80 and standard deviation = 0.523. Based on the teachers' responses towards DL practice in the classroom to item 8, 9, and 12, a majority (90%) of the teachers agreed that DL promotes better, enjoyable and satisfactory, and learner-centred teaching and learning session. However, some teachers (25%) found that DL lesson was unmanageable, while some (10%) disagreed on the statement in item 8, 9, and 12. The findings show that the overall mean value and standard deviation for teachers' perceptions toward DL in classroom practice are 2.93 and 0.341, respectively.

**Table 4: Teachers' perceptions of DL classroom practices**

| | N | | SDA | DA | A | SA | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. Differentiated learning promotes better teaching and learning session | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 2 (10.0) | 17 (85.0) | 1 (5.0) | 2.95 | 0.394 |
| 9. Differentiated learning makes language learning in the classroom enjoyable and satisfactory. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 2 (10.0) | 17 (85.0) | 1 (5.0) | 2.95 | 0.394 |
| 10. Differentiated learning in the ESL classroom is manageable. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 5 (25.0) | 14 (70.0) | 1 (5.0) | 2.80 | 0.523 |
| 12. The differentiated learning leads to the perceived shift from teacher-centred style to learner-centred learning. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 2 (10.0) | 17 (85.0) | 1 (5.0) | 2.95 | 0.394 |
| 13. Differentiated learning provides a means of aligning assessment to proficiency level. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | - | 20 (100.0) | - | 3.00 | 0.000 |
| | | | | | Overall Mean Value | | 2.93 | 0.341 |

**Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Competency of DL Approach**

Table 5 shows the mean scores of teachers' perceptions towards their self-competency on DL approach. On Table 5, the overall mean value of teachers' perception on self-competency is accumulated (m = 2.93, s.d. = 0.573). More than half of the participants (60%) agreed that they are lack of expertise in the DL approach. Meanwhile, 40% of the participants disagreed to the statement. However, the majority (90%) of the teachers agreed that there should be workshops and training organised on DL approach for ESL classroom as shown in item 15, with a mean score of 3.15 and standard deviation = 0.489.

**Table 5: Teachers' perceptions of self-competency towards DL**

| | N | | SDA | DA | A | SA | Mean | Std.Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 14. Teachers are lack of expertise in differentiated learning. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 8 (40.0) | 10 (50.0) | 2 (10.0) | 2.70 | 0.657 |
| 15. Workshops and training should be organised on the differentiation approaches for ESL classroom. | 20 | *f* *%* | - | 2 (10.0) | 14 (70.0) | 4 (20.0) | 3.15 | 0.489 |
| | | | | | Overall Mean Value | | 2.93 | 0.573 |

**DISCUSSION**

This study tried to seek for primary TS25 English language teachers' perceptions towards managing the differentiation strategies in their diverse ESL classrooms. The results indicated four teachers' perceptions as awareness towards the DL approach, DL lesson planning and materials building, DL classroom practices, and self-competency towards the approach. The result has confirmed that the teachers are aware of DL as widely known as an excellent strategy in catering to students' differences in the classroom. They are also aware of the academic diversity among their ESL learners, as Tomlinson (2000) stated that to maximise students' potential, teachers have to attend to the differences. Similarly, Kaur (2010) mentioned that teachers are the key to the

mixed-ability classroom and must be aware of their students' diversity to ensure the success of an individual's development. The findings of this study also proved that the majority of the involved TS25 schoolteachers in Klang district (90%) have shown a positive perception that DL able to fulfil the academic needs of their students especially in the ESL classroom. However, some of the respondents (10%) are disagreed to that idea. Undeniable, teachers are yet struggling to face the challenges of the students' diversity and by the frail perspicacity towards the TS25 idea and practices since they are new to the system. Tomlinson et al. (2003) mentioned that effective teachers are able to modify their teaching and learning routines without ignoring the students' variances in readiness, interest and learning profile. Hence, it is crucial for teachers to support that diversity of their students in order for the learning to take place and succeed, simultaneously developing students' individual potential as desired by the MoE to increase students' well-being and outcomes holistically.

The overall data on teachers' perceptions of designing and planning the DL lessons and materials building among TS25 schoolteachers has revealed that the teachers are struggling in implementing the approach from the first step. Based on the analysis, teachers are believed that DL practices make their lesson planning more systematic and organised. However, they are yet struggled as 1) it is challenging to design a differentiated lesson plan, 2) it is time-consuming, and 3) they are lack of funding in materials building. The planning or designing of a lesson would be challenging if teachers were not really attending to an approach's essences. According to Burkett (2013), Tomlinson proposed DL model as what the learners are able and capable to do based on their readiness, interest, and learning styles. Dealing with the aforementioned students' profiles, teachers should grasp the understanding of DL principles and concepts before designing a lesson so that they could come out with a teaching and learning note with minimal challenges (Geel et al., 2019). Therewithal, Nooreiny and Hamidah (2010) stated that in order to have more time in organising the differentiated classroom, teachers could conduct multilevel tasks using workstations and act as an assistant while monitoring the learning processes. The careful selection of learning activities in DL classroom could make it easy for teachers to plan the learning process, monitor the activities and implement it smoothly.

Meanwhile, Bajrami (2013) explained that differentiation in the classroom is different according to the subjects to be taught, and there are different reasons according to the needs of the learners. Every learner is unique and having different level of understanding and struggle towards certain knowledge and disciplines. The content designed in the DL lesson plan should be the same for all students, yet it should also be modified accordingly on how it is presented for the learners. Tomlinson (2017) discussed that DL is focusing on meaningful learning, which is to ensure all students engage with the ideas. Besides, the results of this study highlights that planning of DL lesson is time-consuming because it takes long hours of planning, organising activities and materials and scheduling the individuals and groups (Joseph et al., 2013; Sabb-Cordes, 2016) The findings have also revealed that teachers are lack of funding to build the teaching and learning materials. Instead of funding, the materials and facility provided by school through the subject committee such as stationeries, colour papers, learning tools and photostatting services are helpful for teachers to come out with their own learning materials. Najiba et al. (2014) mentioned that teacher's efforts to provide a variety of materials for differentiated content, process, and product would help to motivate and engage the students in their learning, and eventually will eliminate the barriers that limit students' access to the materials. Thus, teachers should be more creative and have initiatives in preparing the materials without burdening them.

Over again, teachers should have a clear understanding of differentiation concept in order to conduct and implementing it successfully. Geel et al. (2019) mentioned two types of knowledge are considered essential in DL implementation, which contribute to success: knowledge about the students and subject-matter knowledge. The data on teachers' perception of DL practices in the classroom has proved that the teachers believe that DL promotes a better, enjoyable and satisfactory teaching and learning session. Relating towards previous teachers' perceptions, enjoyable and satisfactory learning occurs when teachers are preparing their lesson by taking consideration of the students' learning style and learning environment (Geel et al., 2019; Mohd Hasrul & Hazita, 2016, Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The teachers agreed that DL practices in the classroom help to assess students according to their academic level while encouraging the learners to perform better. It would be easier for teachers to recognise and cater the academic diversity among the learners.

Besides, majority of the teachers consider that using the DL approach in their classroom will promote learner-centered learning style throughout the teaching and learning activities. Teacher as learning facilitator makes students more active in classroom by encouraging them to interact with one another and the student achievement is measured based on individual performance, instead of comparing each person to their peers. Teacher's functions in learner-centered learning style are much aligned with the current practice of 21st century learning style. Despite the above beneficial findings, some teachers (25%) also revealed that they were unable to manage the DL lesson properly during the activities implementation. Serin (2018) mentioned that student-centered classrooms control may become difficult due to behaviour problems, yet teachers can turn it to an advantage by encouraging their students to increase their sense of responsibility. Since the differentiation approach much related to the collaborative learning activities, Kaur (2017) suggested that teachers should employ classroom management techniques that support a safe and supportive learning environment, and the use of 'traffic lights' and 'parking lots' as to develop manageable routine among the students while teachers are busy facilitating other learners. Hence, the study shows that teachers' perception on DL practices in ESL classroom are both positive and negative based on their experiences in conducting the lessons.

The findings on teachers' perception towards their self-competency on DL approach have revealed that teachers view themselves as capable yet need more guidance in practicing the differentiation approach. Lack of training would hinder teachers from implementing a suggestional approach (Butt & Kausar, 2010). Kaur (2017) mentioned that the approach are not favourably practice by Malaysian teachers since they do not have knowledge of differentiation, teachers need to make a lot of preparations due to large heterogeneous group of students, and they are lack of exposure. Training and support for teachers has proved to be a key to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction by teachers and it is defined as a basic need for effective implementation and the reason for the failure of implementation of differentiation in a similar study (Tomlinson et al., 2003). The data reported that some teachers (40%) disagreed on their lack of expertise in DL. This disagreement reflects that teachers are believed they are capable of conducting the DL approach in the classroom. Meanwhile, a majority of the respondents (90%) agreed that they need ongoing workshops and training on the DL approach focusing in ESL classroom. In order for them to grasp the concept and successfully implement the DL in their ESL classroom, at the same time to develop student's potential, further

professional development should be allocated for them as such exposure could enhance their teaching using differentiation (Sabb-Cordes, 2016; Wee, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, an essential feature of this study is an attempt to explore TS25 schoolteachers' perceptions of managing the differentiated learning strategies in their diverse ESL classroom. In literature, the differentiation approach is quite effective on addressing students' diversity and enhancing their academic potential. Focusing on four aspects of teacher's perceptions as awareness, planning, practice and competency, this study has highlighted both positive and negative perceptions of the teachers. The findings have revealed that TS25 schoolteachers in Klang district have grown positive perceptions towards the DL approach in diverse ESL classroom as differentiation brings advantages in monitoring and catering students' academic diversity (Burkett, 2013; Erickson, 2010). As mixed-ability classroom are the TS25 School's norm, the results showed that the teachers are fully aware of their diversely academic learners. Responses from the survey have also indicated that the majority of the teachers perceived that DL in the classroom is indeed a beneficial teaching method, which promotes better, enjoyable and satisfactory teaching and learning session, and it leads towards a student-centered learning style (Tomlinson, 2001). However, the results also suggested that the teachers are struggled in implementing and managing the strategy in their classrooms, from the planning part to the practice. It is reported that the DL lesson planning are challenging, time-consuming and teachers are lack of funding in materials building (Butt & Kausar, 2010; Sabb-Cordes, 2016).

As to achieve the standard 4: Learning and Facilitation in the second wave of Malaysia Education Quality Standard (SKPMg2), a teacher is a facilitator in developing student's potential holistically and optimally. Thus, teacher as a planner has to have a vivid understanding towards the suggested pedagogies. For an additional note, teachers should have a depth understanding so that they could adapt and adopt the approach in their ESL classroom with minimal challenges. Meanwhile, in term of competency, teachers need to be flexible and open minded to accept changes and incorporate new teaching approaches (Butt & Kausar, 2010). Geel et al. (2019) mentioned that DL is considered an important method in current teaching and learning but a complex teaching skill which many teachers have not mastered and feel unprepared for. They added that to be successful in differentiation implementation is not the application of strategies, but the actual adaptation of teaching to the thoroughly identified needs of all students. Although TS25 school's modules prepare the teachers for 21st-century learning styles, the findings suggested that teachers still need on-going courses and training on suggestional approaches. Aforementioned, teachers play important roles in ensuring the success of DL practice and application in their diverse classrooms (Butt & Kausar, 2010; Geel et al., 2019; Ismajli & Imami-Morina, 2018; Kaur, 2010; Levy, 2008; Mavroudi, 2017; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012; Wan, 2015).

Recently, 21st-century learning style has becoming a basis in our education system as the MoE trying to increase students' outcomes holistically (MoE, 2013). As of 21st-century learning styles currently promoted by the MoE are focusing on meaningful learning, the findings of this study hopefully will redound to the benefit of the educational society considering that differentiation strategies as part of the learning styles, play an important role in achieving the MoE's desire. The urgency to get familiar with DI and apply it in the classroom becomes even more immediate because in many classrooms diversity is obvious, and because of the uncertainty of how to deal with it, it is neglected. The results of the present study can be considered as a benchmark study for the Malaysian context. This study would benefit and prepare teachers not only the English language teachers in TS25 schools, but also for other teachers and public schools in Malaysia to be aware of and able to successfully implementing and managing the differentiation in their classrooms as aligned with current 21st-century learning style. The schools that currently applying the approach discussed in the study will be able to gain insights to the vision of TS25 program, the practices and the differentiation as an active learning approach, the shifting of teacher-centered learning style into student-centered learning style. The MoE targeting that by 2025, all schools are able to increase their students' outcomes and improving the school's quality as desired in PPPM 2013-2025. Teachers have to always aware of the academic diversity among their learners so that they could assist them with appropriate methods in their learning, and improve students' performances. Meanwhile, for the researchers, the study will help them uncover the areas in the educational setting that other researchers were not yet able to explore.

The topic of differentiation in Malaysia context is a field that still needs further research. It is even considered as unknown field among the local researchers and teachers, thus more focuses are suggested to be put on this approach in the country. In terms of future research, this study should be broadened to a larger respondent of TS25 schools in Malaysia in order to show a stronger composition of TS25 schoolteachers' perceptions towards the focused approach, as it is one of the components of it modules. The next limitation points at the research design building on survey data. To strengthen the research, future research should therefore build on observational data about actual teaching practices. Instead of using a sole data gathering method, the data could be integrated or triangulated such with interview and observation, so that it would provides a depth view of the focus. Even though some researchers have reported certain DL strategies worldwide, yet strategies that are more detailed are needed to focus on Malaysian primary ESL classroom. Indisputably of its advantages, further studies could also be focusing on teachers and students' readiness and motivation in implementation of the strategies in any public educational setting. In addition, other than reading literacy, it is suggested that there should be more studies carried out focusing on other English language skills learning using differentiation approach. Besides, in the Malaysia context focusing on the differentiated approach in educational practice, it should not only be focusing on gifted and talented students so that the effectiveness of the approach can be generalised thoroughly.

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