

Level of Practice and Challenges in Implementing Differentiated Pedagogy among Form One Tamil Language Teachers

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the level of practice and the challenges in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy among form one Tamil language teachers. The research was conducted in the state of Johor using a qualitative approach. A total of five form one Tamil language teachers from Johor were randomly selected as study participants. The research instrument employed was a semi-structured interview. Data collection was carried out through telephone conversations and online sessions via google meet. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and manually analysed by assigning appropriate codes to each respondent's input. Findings revealed that all participants possessed sound knowledge of Differentiated Pedagogy and actively applied it in their teaching and learning processes. The interviews identified five key challenges faced by Tamil language teachers in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy. That is time constraints in planning and management, infrastructural limitations, teaching aids, and workload burden. These challenges hinder the effective implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy among form one Tamil language teachers in Johor. Relevant authorities must take appropriate measures to address these challenges to enable more efficient and effective implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy.

Keywords: Differentiated Pedagogy, Tamil Language, Form One, Johor State, Tamil Language Teachers

Introduction

The Malaysian education system is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by a commitment to inclusivity and holistic student development. In response to evolving pedagogical norms, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2018), through Circular Letter Number 14 Year 2018, abolished the examination system for primary school students. This policy shift replaced standardized assessments with holistic evaluations conducted by school teachers, leading to the discontinuation of academic-based class streaming.

As a result, classrooms now comprise students with diverse attitudes, interests, and academic abilities. This diversity is particularly evident in form one Tamil language classes, where mixed-ability groups present unique instructional challenges. To address these challenges and ensure equitable learning opportunities, educators must adopt flexible and responsive teaching approaches. In this context, Differentiated Pedagogy emerges as a viable solution. It is a contemporary instructional strategy that enables teachers to tailor instruction according to students' cognitive levels and learning contexts, thereby promoting optimal learning outcomes.

Differentiated Pedagogy involves strategic modifications in content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate student diversity (Zurina et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 1999; Ain Nur Atika, 2021). However, despite its pedagogical promise, studies reveal that many teachers continue to deliver lessons without accounting for students' varying readiness levels. This often leads to disengagement and diminished interest in subjects such as Tamil language (Theepa Asualingam, Siti Hajar Halili & Selvajothi Ramalingam, 2023). Alagesan (2020) further emphasizes that engaging instructional strategies can enhance student motivation, particularly in learning Tamil grammar.

Despite the widespread use of Tamil in Malaysia's multilingual education system, where it is taught in national primary schools and offered as an elective subject in national secondary schools from form one to form six (Theepa, Siti Hajar & Selvajothi, 2023), there remains limited understanding of how Differentiated Pedagogy is practiced and the challenges faced by Tamil language teachers. The Tamil language subject is offered as an elective subject with diversity of learners. Effective implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy is essential to ensure meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

Recent research indicates that while some teachers hold positive perceptions of Differentiated Pedagogy, its implementation remains inconsistent (Ginja & Chen, 2020; Zurina et al., 2021; Safiek, 2021). This is often attributed to limited pedagogical knowledge, reliance on traditional teacher-centered methods, and misconceptions about the approach (Ain, 2022). Moreover, challenges extend beyond individual competencies to include infrastructural constraints and the influence of educational leadership. Support from school administrators, District Education Offices, State Education Departments, and the Ministry of Education is crucial in shaping teachers' readiness and confidence to implement Differentiated Pedagogy.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the level of knowledge and practice of Differentiated Pedagogy among form one Tamil language teachers, and analyse the challenges they face in implementing this approach within the Malaysian secondary school context. By focusing on Tamil language instruction, a subject often offered as an elective in national secondary schools, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature on differentiated teaching in multilingual environments. It offers a novel contribution to the social science field by providing empirical insights into teachers' pedagogical readiness, classroom practices, and the structural barriers they encounter. The findings are expected to inform educational policy, teacher professional development, and curriculum design, thereby advancing equitable and culturally responsive teaching strategies in Malaysia's diverse educational landscape.

Lituratione Review

Theepa, Siti Hajar, and Selvajothi (2023), in their study titled *“Analysis of the Need for Developing a Tamil Grammar Website for Year Four SJKT Students”*, emphasized that during teaching and facilitation sessions, teachers must recognize that every individual in a classroom possesses varying levels of ability. These differences, influenced by multiple intelligences, result in diverse attitudes, learning styles, and values among students. The quality of teaching and learning in the classroom is closely linked to the instructional practices employed by teachers on a daily basis. Therefore, teaching methods and techniques must be carefully planned and adapted to achieve optimal impact. Elangovan (2023), in his study titled *“Factors Influencing the Teaching and Learning Outcomes of Tamil Language”*, demonstrated that the status of Tamil whether as a first or second language and the instructional objectives are among the key factors influencing Tamil language education. Additional factors include students’ age, prior knowledge of Tamil, and the teaching-learning environment. Rameshraaj (2022) identified that uncreative teaching aids and poor communication between teachers and students are among the challenges in TnL, which ultimately hinder the achievement of learning objectives. A lack of student interest in Tamil language TnL can negatively affect their academic performance, especially in Tamil language subjects. This underscores the importance of meticulously planning daily lessons according to students’ levels. This aligns with the principles of Differentiated Pedagogy, which emphasize the modification of course content, diverse instructional strategies, and outcomes tailored to students’ abilities. Zurina, Zaharah, and Abdul Muhsien (2021) noted that this approach serves as a tool to meet the varied needs of students. Meanwhile, Mazen & Malak (2019) highlighted that student diversity is not only reflected in interests and learning styles but also in readiness, mastery levels, skills, and prior knowledge. Time constraints and large class sizes are major challenges faced by teachers, along with the lack of suitable teaching materials (Nur Hanisah Radi, 2023). Furthermore, Moosa & Shareefa (2019) found that teachers often hold inaccurate perceptions of Differentiated Pedagogy, leading to a lack of confidence in implementing the approach.

Research Methodology

This study aims to examine the level of practice and the challenges in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy among form one Tamil language teachers in the state of Johor. A qualitative research approach was employed. The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview. A total of five form one Tamil language teachers from Johor were randomly selected for interviews to obtain research data. The random selection of participants was intended to help gather more in-depth and diverse information (Chua Yan Piaw, 2014).vThe semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the level of practice and the challenges faced by form one Tamil language teachers in Johor in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy in teaching and learning. Data collection was carried out through telephone conversations and online sessions using google meet. The interview data were transcribed verbatim. These verbatim transcripts were then manually analysed by assigning appropriate codes to each respondent’s input. According to Huberman (2014), interview data must be categorized, subcategorized, and subsequently analysed using a method known as coding to generate specific themes. The identified themes were then validated using Cohen’s Kappa Index Analysis. Three expert Tamil language teachers were appointed to verify the relevance of the identified themes. The resulting agreement value was 0.82. An agreement value above 0.60 is considered a good scale.

Research Findings

Participant Demographics

Based on Table 1, all five research participants (RP) were from one Tamil language teachers from the state of Johor. Three of the RPs were female teachers, while the remaining two were male. They voluntarily participated in this study. All five RPs were Tamil language teachers at secondary schools in Johor. Among the five RPs, three held postgraduate degrees, while two had attained undergraduate qualifications. In terms of teaching experience, three RPs had more than 30 years of experience in teaching Tamil language subjects, while two had between 15 to 20 years of experience. Regarding age, three teachers were over 55 years old, while two were between 40 and 49 years old.

Table 1

Profile of Research Participants

Category	Tamil Language Research Participant (PKP)				
	RP1	RP2	RP3	RP4	RP5
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	43 years	58 years	46 years	58 years	59 years
Educational Level	Master's	Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Master's	Master's
Teaching Experience	17 years	30 years	20 years	35 years	33 years
Teaching Location	Secondary school – Johor State	Secondary school – Johor State	Secondary school – Johor State	Secondary school – Johor State	Secondary school – Johor State

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Table 2

Themes and Sub-themes Identified through interviews

Theme	Sub-theme	Research Participants				
		RP1	RP2	RP3	RP4	RP5
1. Teachers' Understanding of Differentiated Pedagogy	Understanding the concept of Differentiated Pedagogy	/	/	/	/	/
	Confidence in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy	/	/	/	/	/
	Understanding student differences	/	/	/	/	/
	Awareness of students' cognitive level differences	/	/	/	/	/
	Understanding the effectiveness of Differentiated Pedagogy in enhancing student comprehension	/	/	/	/	/
	Considering student diversity	/	/	/	/	/

2. Practice of Differentiated Pedagogy	Designing learning content based on student understanding	/	/	/	/	/
	Availability of sufficient resources	/	X	X	X	X
	Availability of sufficient time	X	X	X	X	X
3. Constraints in Practicing Differentiated Pedagogy	Time planning challenges	X	X	X	/	/
	Time management challenges	X	X	X	/	/
	Difficulty in determining teaching strategies	X	X	X	X	X
	Lack of infrastructure	/	X	/	X	X
	Unsupportive administrators	X	X	X	X	X

Theme 1: Understanding of Form 1 Tamil Language Teachers on Differentiated Pedagogy

Based on the interviews conducted, RP1 to RP5 stated that they have a good understanding of Differentiated Pedagogy.

Understanding the concept of Differentiated Pedagogy

Through the interviews conducted, RP1 to RP5 expressed that they understand the concept of Differentiated Pedagogy.

“...According to my understanding, Differentiated Pedagogy means implementing teaching and learning according to students’ levels — that is, excellent, average, and weak students. My class indeed consists of students from various levels...” (RP1)

Confidence in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy

All five participants (RP1 to RP5) stated that they are confident in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy. This confidence stems from their teaching experience, which exceeds 15 years.

“...I am indeed confident in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy in my classroom. However, it requires early preparation. I need to prepare materials before starting my lesson...” (RP3)

Understanding student differences

RP1, RP2, RP3, RP4, and RP5 expressed that they understand each student differs in terms of comprehension, socio-economic background, and abilities.

Understanding differences in students’ cognitive levels

Based on the interviews conducted, all five participants (RP1 to RP5) stated that each student possesses a different cognitive level.

“...Throughout my teaching experience, I understand and know that every student has a different cognitive level. Therefore, teachers need to diversify their teaching and learning strategies according to the students’ cognitive levels...” (RP5)

Understanding the effectiveness of Differentiated Pedagogy in enhancing student comprehension

All respondents stated that Differentiated Pedagogy has helped improve students' understanding of the topic taught on that particular day.

"...My students easily understood what I taught through the implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy. It makes my work easier. Therefore, I prefer using Differentiated Pedagogy in my teaching and learning sessions..." (RP4)

Theme 2: Practice of Differentiated Pedagogy

Considering student diversity

All five respondents stated that they conduct their teaching and learning sessions by taking into account the diversity among students.

Setting learning content according to students' understanding

"...Yes, I set my learning content based on the understanding and levels of my students. For example, when preparing practice materials, high-achieving students are given more advanced exercises, while lower-level students require more guidance..." (RP1)

RP1, RP2, RP3, RP4, and RP5 stated that they consistently tailor their learning content according to their students' levels of understanding.

Availability of adequate resources

RP1 reported having sufficient resources to implement Differentiated Pedagogy. However, RP2, RP3, RP4, and RP5 indicated that they lack adequate resources to effectively carry out Differentiated Pedagogy.

"...I do not have sufficient resources for the form one Tamil Language subject to implement Differentiated Pedagogy more thoroughly. Most of the time, I rely solely on the textbook. Each topic in the textbook does contain a variety of exercises..." (RP3)

"...I rely only on the textbook to provide exercises for students. Apart from the textbook, there are no external practice materials available. This becomes a constraint for me, as I have to prepare a variety of exercises on my own each time..." (RP4)

"...In my opinion, resources are indeed insufficient. I rely solely on the textbook..." (RP2)

"...I usually depend on the textbook..." (RP5)

Availability of sufficient time

RP1 to RP5 stated that they do not have enough time to implement Differentiated Pedagogy effectively.

"...I feel that I do not have enough time to implement Differentiated Pedagogy. This is because only four periods per week are allocated for the form one Tamil Language subject. Yet, each theme in the textbook contains four sub-themes comprising listening, speaking, reading, writing, and language system skills. Moreover, the students vary in ability levels. So, I have to race against time to complete one theme within those four periods..." (RP1, RP2, RP3, RP4, RP5)

Theme 3: Constraints in the Practice of Differentiated Pedagogy

Time constraints in planning

RP1, RP2, and RP3 stated that they face time constraints when planning their teaching and learning sessions based on the principles of Differentiated Pedagogy.

In contrast, the feedback from RP4 and RP5 is as follows:

“...I do not face time constraints in planning Differentiated Pedagogy because there are two Tamil language teachers at my school. I teach the lower secondary levels, while my colleague teaches the upper secondary levels. So, I have sufficient time to plan my lessons...” (RP4)

“...My school has three Tamil language teachers due to the large number of Tamil language students. I only teach Tamil for Form 1 and Form 2. Therefore, I am able to plan my lessons thoroughly...” (RP5)

Difficulty in determining teaching strategies

All participants (RP1 to RP5) stated that they do not face difficulties in determining teaching strategies. This is because each of them has over 15 years of teaching experience.

Lack of infrastructure

RP2, RP4, and RP5 reported that they have a special Tamil language classroom. Students go directly to this special classroom whenever Tamil lessons are scheduled. These teachers have made the classroom conducive for learning.

“...I have sufficient infrastructure for my Tamil language class. Students enjoy coming to the Tamil class because the classroom environment is conducive. They feel comfortable learning in the Tamil language room...” (RP5)

RP1 and RP3 stated that they do not have a dedicated classroom for the Tamil language subject. They use any available vacant classroom instead.

Issues with administrative support

RP1 to RP5 reported that they do not face any issues from their school administrators. In fact, all administrators encourage the practice of Differentiated Pedagogy in the Tamil language subject.

Research Discussion

Based on the research findings, it was found that the form one Tamil language teachers who participated in the study (RP) demonstrated an understanding of the concept of Differentiated Pedagogy. They expressed confidence in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy in their Tamil language teaching and learning sessions. The teachers were also aware that each student differs in terms of comprehension and cognitive level. They acknowledged that the implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy has helped enhance form one students' understanding of each theme taught.

In terms of the practice of Differentiated Pedagogy, all study participants are actively implementing differentiated strategies in their teaching and learning sessions. Each participant (RP) takes into account student diversity when planning their lessons. This aligns with the view of Zamri, Ruslin, and Mohamed Amin (2015), who emphasized that teachers

must consider the differences among students during the teaching process. Students are less likely to be left behind when teachers consistently attend to individual differences.

Learning content is tailored according to students' levels of understanding during the preparation of daily lesson plans. This differentiated planning is crucial for enhancing students' comprehension of the topic. Levy (2008) explains that learning outcomes vary across student groups depending on their learning levels, as the materials provided are adapted to their capabilities.

Only RP1 reported having sufficient resources to implement Differentiated Pedagogy. The remaining four participants acknowledged facing resource constraints, relying primarily on textbooks. This finding is consistent with Nur Hanisah Radi (2023), who identified the lack of suitable teaching materials as a key barrier to implementing differentiated approaches in teaching and learning. Norhidayah and Zamri (2023) further support this, noting that when teachers fail to determine appropriate instructional materials for Differentiated Pedagogy within the SKPMg2 framework, it disrupts the execution of daily lesson plans (DLP) and makes it difficult to articulate the pedagogical objectives to students.

Jessica Michal and Zamri Mahamod (2023) found that the most commonly practiced aspects of Differentiated Pedagogy in Malay language instruction are differentiated processes and content. Challenges highlighted in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy include the need to prepare extensive teaching aids, lengthy preparation time, insufficient time to support students at basic and intermediate levels, and large class sizes. All participants in this study reported facing time constraints in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy.

In terms of the challenges in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy, schools with only one Tamil language teacher responsible for teaching the subject from Form 1 to Form 5 face significant time constraints in planning differentiated lessons. The same issue applies to time management. A single teacher must handle all matters related to Tamil language education at the school, district, and state levels. As a result, they encounter challenges in managing their time effectively to implement Differentiated Pedagogy.

This finding is supported by Ain Nur Atika Agus (2021), who identified teacher-related issues such as workload and additional commitments, lack of understanding regarding the concept of Differentiated Instruction, and limited computer and technological skills as key barriers to effective implementation.

All participants (RP1 to RP5) stated that they do not face challenges in determining teaching strategies. RP1 and RP3 reported experiencing infrastructural limitations in implementing Differentiated Pedagogy. In contrast, RP2, RP4, and RP5 indicated that they do not face such issues, as they have access to dedicated classrooms and ICT facilities. Form one Tamil language students learn in a conducive environment, which plays a crucial role in sustaining student interest throughout the teaching and learning sessions.

Dickey (2012) demonstrated that effective classroom management styles are associated with emotional intelligence, highlighting the importance of a well-managed learning environment.

Furthermore, all five participants affirmed that their school administrators actively support the implementation of Differentiated Pedagogy.

These research findings are consistent with several previous studies, which highlight that elements of Differentiated Pedagogy have been adapted to enable teachers to plan instructional processes that suit students' abilities, moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" teaching approach (Nuraishahtun et al., 2019). Teachers can diversify their methods and instructional choices through teaching aids in terms of content, process, and product, based on students' readiness, interests, learning profiles, and learning needs (Ain Nur Atika, 2021). The practice of Differentiated Pedagogy effectively addresses diverse student needs, allowing teachers to tailor their instructional practices to meet current educational demands.

Conclusion

Overall, the level of Differentiated Pedagogy practice among form one Tamil language teachers is commendably high. All participants verbally affirmed that they are currently implementing Differentiated Pedagogy in their Form One Tamil language teaching and learning sessions. All five teachers demonstrated a strong understanding of the concept. However, three participants reported facing challenges in implementation, particularly related to workload, time management, availability of teaching aids, and the conduciveness of the learning environment.

The findings also indicate that schools with more than one Tamil language teacher do not face significant difficulties in planning and executing Differentiated Pedagogy. It is hoped that, through this study, relevant stakeholders will provide appropriate facilities and support to Tamil language teachers to effectively implement Differentiated Pedagogy—specifically for Form One, and more broadly across Forms Two to Six.

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