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Differentiated Instruction in EFL Classrooms: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

This article systematically reviews recent publications (n = 21) on Differentiated Instruction in diverse English language classrooms. Differentiated instruction (DI) plays a crucial role in meeting the needs of diverse learners, particularly in EFL settings. Employing the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, this review identifies four major themes related to DI strategies and research methodologies: 1. Perceptions of differentiated instruction, 2. Implementation strategies and classroom practices, 3. Effects of DI on learner outcomes, and 4. Challenges and barriers for implementation. The findings suggest that DI has positive effects on diverse learners, resulting in increased engagement, positive learning outcomes, and motivation. However, challenges also exist due to time constraints, limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and classroom management issues. Methodologically, most studies employed a mixed-methods approach, followed by qualitative methods, and the fewest used quantitative methods. The review highlights the need for teacher training, policy support, and enhanced resourcing, concluding with recommendations for additional long-term studies on DI practices to examine the lasting effects.

INTRODUCTION

As classrooms become more diverse, differentiated Instruction (DI) can be a significant strategy to address the various needs of the learners, especially in diverse English classrooms. The concept of DI focuses on creating teaching environments and practices that develop opportunities for all students to learn, regardless of their learning style, proficiency level, cultural background, or individual needs (Tomlinson, 2014). In mixed-ability classrooms, the students are supposed to study together despite their learning differences. In such a scenario, the teacher's challenge is to find tools and methods to provide suitable support while maintaining a conducive learning atmosphere. (Al-Subaieci, 2017). Besides teaching methods, helping students work together builds peer support and makes the classroom more welcoming. Providing students with opportunities to choose activities helps them stay interested and participate more. Due to various kinds of students, teachers also need to adapt different teaching strategies to meet the needs of every student. Tomlinson mentions, "Teachers in differentiated instruction accept and act on the premise that they must be ready to engage students in instruction through different approaches to learning by appealing to a range of interests" (2014). Innovative use of technology can further support DI by allowing flexible content delivery and personalized learning paths, especially in resource-constrained settings. Differentiated Instruction is not about allocating more tasks for strong students and fewer tasks for weak students. Instead, it is a very thoughtful approach to teaching-learning, where all students are supposed to work for the same learning goals, but the teacher can change the way of content to align with the

students' needs and style (Tomlinson, 2014).

The key terms in DI include differentiation in content, process, and product, peer learning, individualized support, flexible grouping, and tiered assignment (Tomlinson, 2014). Such strategies prioritize identifying the students' individual needs and managing their pace, content, and delivery of the instruction accordingly. It is important to keep assessing and giving feedback on DI tactics, so that teachers can change how they teach and make sure that students are learning. Similarly, when teachers collaborate and share ideas, it becomes easier to implement DI in the classroom. Although these strategies have been widely discussed in the theory, there are not enough systematic reviews that can analyze the major themes that emerged on DI strategies employed by the teachers and research methods used in DI research. The findings discuss teacher training, management of the tools, curriculum design, and policy improvement for supporting inclusive language learning.

Many teachers face different problems, such as large class sizes, limited resources, and limitations in professional development training that hinder the proper application of DI (Tomlinson, 2014). To overcome these challenges, schools need strong support, like funding, good policies, and ongoing training that fits the local needs. Knowing these factors can help close the gap between DI theory and practice. Most previous studies have focused on individual cases rather than synthesizing findings to provide a comprehensive overview. We need a clear and integrated understanding of DI practices and strategies based on evidence across the countries. Knowing these factors can help bridge the gap between DI theory and practice (Tomlinson, 2014). This systematic review aims

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to carefully study the recent research on DI in English language classrooms and to identify the main ideas, strategies, challenges, and research methods that offer insightful approaches for differentiated instruction. The study will focus on two questions as mentioned below:

1. What major themes emerge regarding the DI strategies employed by teachers in diverse EFL classrooms?
2. What methodologies have been used in DI research?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was employed to ensure a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive review process. PRISMA is a systematic way to find insightful research by searching databases, examining titles and abstracts, verifying complete texts for inclusion criteria, and collecting data for synthesis. This is the best option because it reduces selection bias, makes the process more rigorous, and clearly specifies which studies are included and excluded. Because PRISMA is organized, it is easier

to apply a in-depth search of the literature, which enables for a valid analysis of themes and methodologies (Page *et al.*, 2021). The articles were searched through the different databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR, Sage Journals, ProQuest, and the NELTA Journal, using the keywords, such as “differentiated instruction,” “diverse EFL/ESL classroom,” “perception,” and “challenges.” This study included the peer-reviewed empirical articles published between 2017 to 2025 and written in English only. The review included the articles with clear research methods and findings. In the screening process, at first, titles and abstracts were read to ensure that they were relevant for the study, and then, full texts were reviewed. The duplicate and unrelated studies were removed, and important information, such as the purpose of the study, strategies, challenges, methods, and themes, was taken out. Major themes included perceptions, strategies, effects on learner outcomes, and challenges. The articles were downloaded from various countries to explore how DI is implemented in different contexts.

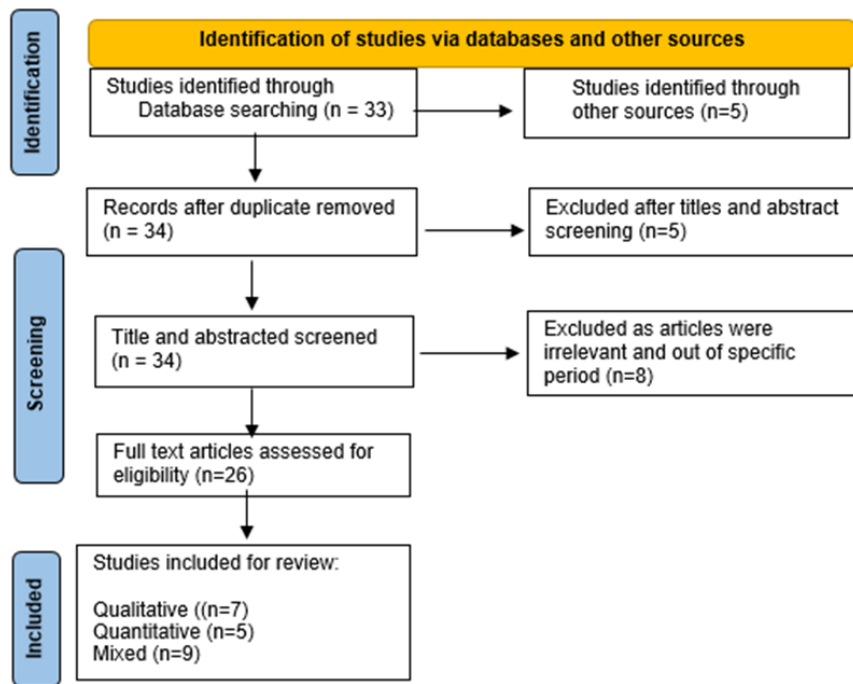


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart

At first, 38 articles were downloaded, and 4 were removed as duplicates. From the remaining 34 articles, 5 were excluded because they were not written in English language contexts. Then, from the 29 articles left, 8 were excluded because they were published before 2017. After careful consideration, only 21 were selected for the systematic review. The key details, such as the focus of the research, participants, methods, and major findings, were recorded to identify the major themes and methodological trends in DI.

In the table given above, it can be observed that 21 articles were selected for the systematic review. These articles come from various contexts, such as Indonesia (n =1), Turkey (n =1), Afghanistan (n =1), Kenya (n =1), Russia (n =1), Nepal (n =4), Saudi Arabia (n =3),

Malaysia (n =2), Uzbekistan (n =1), Hungary (n =1), China (n =1), Egypt (n =1), Iraq (n =1), Jordan(n =1) and Ukraine (n =1). The review includes the research articles based on Differentiated Instruction (DI) in English language classrooms. For analysis, a table of thematic focus, methods used, context, target groups, and major findings was prepared after carefully reading all the selected articles. Then, the studies were compared, contrasted, and synthesized to address the first research question related to major thematic areas. Similarly, for the second research question, methodological details, such as research design, participants, research sites, data collection tools, and analysis procedures were outlined in the same table to analyze the methodological trends.

Table 1: Research on Differentiated Instruction in EFL Classrooms across Contexts

S.N.	Author (s) &Year	Thematic Concentration	Context
1.	Fajariyah, L.A., Retnawati, H., & Madya, S. (2023)	Investigating how diverse student learning preferences shape DI practices in EFL classrooms	Indonesia
2	Melek Sapan & Enisa Mede (2022)	Effects of DI on English learners in terms of achievement, motivation, and autonomy	Turkey
3	Ibrahim Sulciman Ibrahim Magableh Amelia Abdullah (2020)	Impact of DI strategies on students' academic outcomes in mixed-ability EFL classrooms	Jordan
4	Omid Tajik, Shagofah Noor and Jawad Golzar (2024)	Students value DI when applied effectively. Teachers report time and preparation challenges, but agree DI enhances classroom inclusivity and effectiveness	Afghanistan
5	Yasmin Sitabkhan, Matthew C. H. Jukes, Eileen Dombrowski, Indrah Munialo (2022)	Resource limitations, large class sizes, and differentiating content for diverse abilities	Kenya
6	Aaysha Sagir Khan & Anam Khan (2024)	Comparing DI implementation levels to determine their effectiveness in promoting language acquisition in mixed-ability TEFL classes	Saudi Arabia
7	Galina S. Abramova & Victoria S. Mashoshina (2021)	Analyzing teacher and student perspectives to identify effective DI strategies for promoting a synergistic learning environment	Russia
8	Muncerah S. Al-Subaieci (2017)	Challenges in Mixed-Ability Classes, Strategies for Coping	Saudi Arabia
9	MohdHasrul Kamarulzaman, Hazita Azman, Azizah Mohd Zahidi (2017)	Identifying DI strategies that effectively enhance motivation and achievement among gifted EFL students	Malaysia
10	Ramesh Prasad Adhikary (2023)	Challenges and strategies in teaching mixed-ability English language classes	Nepal
11	Khagendra Baraily & Dawa Sherpa (2024)	Exploring Challenges in implementing Differentiated Instruction for vulnerable Students	Nepal
12	Ibrahim Magableh & Amelia Abdullah (2020)	Demonstrating teacher perspectives on DI implementation and its effects on learning outcomes in the EFL context	Malaysia
13	Nilufar Jamoliddinova (2024)	Exploring how teacher experience influences the application and challenges of DI in EFL classrooms	Uzbekistan
14	B.L. Bhandari, L.P. Bhandari, N.S. Baguinat (2025)	Examining the practical implementation of DI by English language teachers in mixed-ability classrooms	Nepal
15	Basanta Raj Dhakal (2021)	Examining in-service teachers' beliefs and practical strategies for differentiated reading instruction in diverse EFL classrooms	Nepal
16	Annamária Kótay-Nagy (2023)	Exploring how technology-enhanced DI shapes primary EFL students' perceptions, engagement, and self-efficacy	Hungary
17	Mina Liang & Bin Zou (2025)	Exploring how DI is adapted in bilingual settings, emphasizing cultural diversity and collaborative practices	China
18	Bayan AlHashmi & Tariq Elyas (2018)	Examining DI's role in enhancing grammar learning through tailored instruction that accounts for cognitive profiles and learner autonomy	Saudi Arabia
19	Sadiq Abdulwahed Ahmed Ismail & Khayal Al Allaq (2019)	Investigating the integration of cooperative learning with DI to enhance teacher and student engagement in EFL	Iraq
20	Larysa Kupchyk & Alona Litvinchuk (2020)	Assessing the impact of DI on foreign language proficiency and motivation among non-language majors in higher education	Ukraine
21	Abdelkareem Ali Abdelnaeim Mehany (2022)	Evaluating the effectiveness of DI on enhancing writing fluency through visualization and mind mapping strategies in secondary EFL classes	Egypt

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents a systematic and rigorous analysis of the 21 selected articles on Differentiated Instruction in the EFL classrooms. First, the major themes revealed through the review are discussed, including perception, implementation strategies, effects on learner engagement, and challenges for implementation. Following this thematic analysis, the section examines the methodological trends across these studies, spotlighting the research designs and data collection methods employed to explore DI practices.

Perceptions of Differentiated Instruction

Many studies examined the perceptions of teachers regarding the implementation of Differentiated Instruction in English language classrooms. For example, in Russia, Abramova and Mashoshina (2021) stated that teachers view DI positively, acknowledging its significance in meeting diverse learners' needs and optimizing a conducive learning atmosphere. Similarly, Al-Subaieci (2017) from Saudi Arabia discussed that teachers use various differentiated instruction strategies and emphasize the students completely, although mixed-ability classes seem very challenging. In Afghanistan, Tajik *et al.* (2024) observed that while teachers appreciate the influence of DI on classroom inclusivity, they experience time constraints in lesson preparation. In Malaysia, Kamarulzaman *et al.* (2017) found that English language teachers perceive DI as a supportive tool for motivating gifted students and improving their performance level. The research also showed that teachers became more aware of the different learning needs of the learners and tried to pay equal attention to all the students. In addition to this, Sitabkhan *et al.* (2022) observed that teachers creatively implement DI with locally available materials despite having limited resources in Kenyan pre-primary schools. Magableh and Abdullah (2020) identified that although the teachers recognize the importance of DI for active student engagement, many lack sufficient teaching materials and institutional support. In Central Asia, Jamoliddinova (2024) noticed that in Uzbekistan, more experienced teachers are more interested in using differentiated instruction (DI). For example, more experienced teachers implemented DI activities and found that it worked very well for both teachers and students. Less experienced teachers also used DI but expressed a need for more training and support. This suggests that it is effective to think about the future training for the teachers in Uzbekistan (Jamoliddinova, 2024). Dhakal (2021) found that teachers in Nepal hold positive perceptions of differentiated reading instruction and believe it addresses diverse student needs. However, despite these beliefs, practical implementation is limited by large class sizes and insufficient resources. Adhikary (2023) stated that Nepalese teachers often used peer teaching methods as a strategy of DI to manage mixed-ability classrooms. Fajariyah *et al.* (2023) from Indonesia found that the students liked to do the tasks and tests that matched their

needs, interests, and readiness. According to Sapan and Mede (2022), the students from Turkey preferred DI and reported that it became helpful for increasing their motivation, independence, and success in the English language classroom. Abramova and Mashoshina (2021) in Russia, stated that students' preferences were changing based on the background and way of the lessons they were taught in the class. In Egypt, Mehany (2022) found meaningful improvements in writing fluency after the DI implemented techniques of visualization, such as mind mapping. In Hungary, Kótay-Nagy (2023) noticed that students loved using digital tools and various activities that could make them confident and more motivated in learning English. Liang and Zou (2025) focused on the study of Chinese bilingual schools and concluded that a collaborative teaching environment and an institutional support system are crucial for making DI successful. Bhandari *et al.* (2025) revealed that English teachers in Nepal view differentiated instruction positively, seeing it as a valuable tool for student engagement and inclusion in mixed-ability classrooms. However, they struggle with large class sizes, limited training, and a lack of resources, which affects the effective implementation.

Implementation Strategies and Classroom Practices

The research showed that teachers implemented different techniques in Differentiated Instruction (DI) strategies related to the needs in the classroom, such as flexible grouping, tiered assignments, modifications in content, process, along the inclusion of technology for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching. (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) found structured approaches, such as tiered assignments, to be effective for addressing mixed-ability gaps. Khan and Khan (2024) explored DI practices in secondary EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia and observed that a high level of DI use, especially the combination of content and language differentiation that improved language learning outcomes. The results indicate that it is crucial to implement teaching strategies designed to meet the needs of diverse learner groups. In Indonesia, Fajariyah *et al.* (2023) observed that the DI designed for students' preferences in media, content, and assessment was essential to deal with the broad spectrum of needs identified in EFL classrooms. They emphasized that offering a choice of learning goals and assessment types to students helps fulfill their learning profiles, contributing to more effective involvement and learning outcomes. In Turkey, Sapan and Mede (2022) observed that both students and teachers felt technology-based DI was essential for amplifying the motivation and autonomy of the English language learners. The incorporation of digital tools, such as interactive platforms, provided learners with the opportunity to participate more efficiently with content at their own pace. In Jordan, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) observed that the effective implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) significantly relied on strategic grouping methods such as homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. These

strategies, along with tiered assignments, empowered students to engage in tasks that were appropriately challenging and aligned with their readiness levels. Tajik *et al.* (2024) in Afghanistan explored DI practices at the collegiate level and found that teachers often relied on learners' reviews and formative assessments for instructing the differentiation of content and tasks. It involved adjusting learning materials in accordance with students' strengths, preferences, and readiness. Furthermore, in Kenya, Sitabkhan *et al.* (2022) identified that teachers implemented differentiated content and collaborative learning methods to meet the diverse needs of young learners. In Nepal, English language teachers employ several implementation strategies for differentiated instruction, including flexible grouping, peer collaboration, and the adaptation of learning tasks to match students' interests and readiness levels. Bhandari *et al.* (2025) highlight the use of group and pair work, interactive activities, and collaborative learning as common approaches, while also noting the integration of technology and library lessons to support diverse learners. Similarly, Dhakal (2021) observed that teachers use strategies such as flexible grouping, peer tutoring, and varied support based on individual student needs.

Effects of DI on Learner Outcomes

Empirical studies showed that DI can positively impact learner outcomes such as academic performance, motivation, autonomy, and classroom engagement. For example, Abdelkareem Ali Abdelnaeim Mehany (2022) found that a DI-based program in Egypt brought major improvements in students' writing fluency and linguistic skills. Likewise, Sagir Khan and Khan (2024) wrote that students felt more confident, motivated, and better at learning English when teachers used more DI strategies. Similarly, Sapan and Mede (2022) found that as DI was used in a Grade 8 class in Turkey, it was helpful to increase the students' motivation, outcomes, and autonomy. The teachers and the students both took it positively. Similarly, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) showed that DI strategies had a strong impact on improving academic performance among the students of Jordan in mixed-ability EFL classrooms, particularly when it was compared to traditional teaching methods. These studies vividly show that DI helps to improve language learning in diverse contexts and age groups in the classroom. The research also showed that when teachers adjust their lessons to match students' individual needs, it helps in two major ways. First, it helps students to learn and think in better way. Second, it makes them more enthusiastic and confident in the classroom. These effects are supported by findings from Fajariyah *et al.* (2023), who found that students expressed clear preferences for learning goals and types of assessment in DI-implemented English classrooms. It means that if we respect the diversity of the learners, it can improve both learning and motivation of the learners. When these things happen together, the students not only improve their grades but also grow to be

better individuals. Such teaching supports both academic success and personal development at the same time. Similarly, Tajik *et al.* (2024) found that even at the college level, DI improved the students' learning experiences and helped the teachers create more inclusive classrooms, although they were facing time and preparation problems. Overall, the differentiated teaching method brings not only academic benefits but also becomes supportive in learners' emotional and social growth.

Challenges and Barriers for Implementation

Despite the numerous benefits of DI, it is challenging to implement effectively in the English classroom due to various problems in many schools across the country. One of the common problems is large class sizes. When classes are large, teachers find it difficult to plan and manage various tasks for different students. This challenge was identified in Kenya by Karue and Amukowa (2014). Similarly, Nepali teachers struggle to implement differentiated instruction effectively due to large class sizes, lack of resources, and insufficient professional development. Both in public secondary and community schools, teachers often feel unprepared to adapt instruction because their training has not emphasized differentiated strategies. The demands of managing many students, limited teaching materials, and time constraints further complicate efforts to adapt lessons for individual learning needs. This results in a gap between teachers' intentions and actual classroom practices, underscoring the urgent need for targeted training and stronger institutional support (Bhandari *et al.*, 2025; Dhakal, 2021). Furthermore, many of the schools lack sufficient teaching materials and technological tools. The teachers of rural Kenyan and Malaysian schools (Karue & Amukowa, 2014; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) mentioned that they have not been provided with sufficient materials for DI implementation. Some of the teachers had a misconception about DI, thinking it meant giving more tasks to fast learners and fewer or easier tasks to slower learners (Jamoliddinova, 2024). These problems indicate that although DI carries huge potential in teaching-learning activities, it needs enough support, such as teacher training, sufficient resources, and some



Figure 2: Major Themes in DI Strategies

changes in the educational system to make proper use of a flexible and student-centered teaching approach in the classroom.

Methodological Trends

Researchers used various methods to study differentiated instruction (DI) in English language classroom contexts. Seven studies employed qualitative research approaches, such as classroom observation, teacher interviews, thematic analysis of qualitative data, in-depth analysis, book analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The major purpose of these studies was to explore more about how teachers feel about DI, how they utilise it, and the challenges that come up when there aren't enough resources or there are a lot of diverse learners in the classroom. Using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews as the major ways to collect data was quite a common tendency. For example, Sitabkhan *et al.* (2022) studied eight pre-primary classrooms in Kenya and talked to instructors to find out how DI works in English language classrooms with low resources and pupils of varied grades. Adhikary (2023) and Jamoliddinova (2024) also looked into how teachers in Nepal and Uzbekistan adjusted how they taught and adapted to their circumstances by watching them in class and talking to them. Thematic analysis was another method used in DI research. It was the major tool for looking at the data. Liang and Zou (2025) and other researchers were able to use this strategy to learn what teachers and students thought of DI strategies. Some of the studies were set up in a way that made them easier to understand. For instance, Baraily and Sherpa (2024) undertook a hermeneutic phenomenological study to find out how teachers who utilised DI with at-risk pupils felt about it. It helped me understand some of the issues better, such not enough training and too many students in each session. The researchers picked between 3 and 15 EFL teachers to take part in these investigations. The main sources of data were interviews, classroom observations,

and sometimes other methods like book analysis or field notes (Liang & Zou, 2025). These methods provided important information regarding DI processes.

Five studies used quantitative research methods to find out how differentiated instruction might help children learn a language, notably in English language courses with students from different backgrounds. The majority of the quantitative research utilised experimental or quasi-experimental designs, which included tests before and after the study. Magableh and Abdullah (2020) undertook a quasi-experimental study with eighth graders in Jordan and found that DI helped students perform better in school. Mehany (2022) also used exams before and after to indicate that DI helped a lot of Egyptian high school students get better at writing. A lot of the research also used t-tests, ANOVA, and regression analysis to find out how well students did in English class. Khan and Khan (2024) studied three groups in Saudi Arabia that used DI in different ways. They observed that the group with maximum use of DI had considerably superior language results. Most of the information came from standardised surveys or exams that were the same for everyone.

Fajariyah *et al.* (2023) surveyed 885 students in Indonesia to identify diverse learning preferences that could shape the practices of DI by using descriptive statistics for data analysis of the study. In some of the studies, like Al-Subaieci (2017), large-scale questionnaires were used to find how teachers try to address challenges in mixed-ability classrooms. Even though they were smaller-scale studies, such as Kótay-Nagy (2023) with 37 Hungarian students, they implemented validated survey tools with Cronbach's alpha to ensure data reliability. Most of the quantitative studies used a larger sample size, for example, 60–200 participants, which was very effective for generalizable results.

Furthermore, nine studies used mixed methods, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches, to better understand DI. Those studies often used pre-/post tests or surveys along with interviews, teacher reflections,

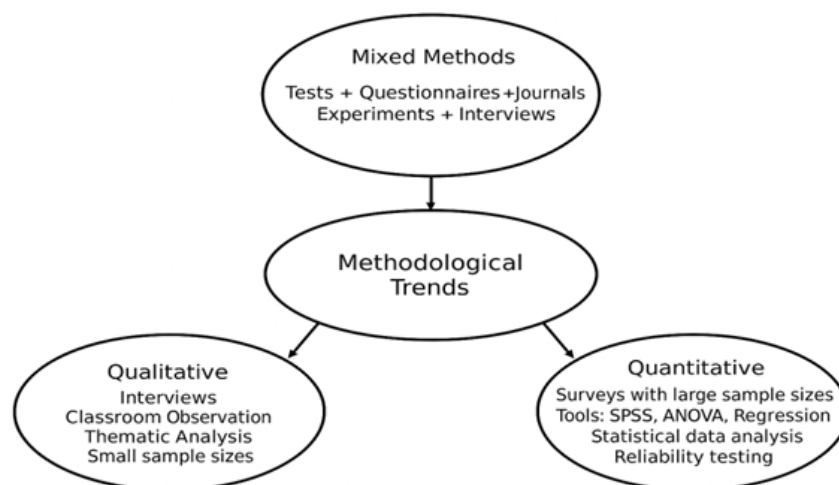


Figure 3: Methodological Trends in Differentiated Instruction Research

and observations for the study. Sapan and Mede (2022) studied the impact of DI on motivation, achievement, and learner autonomy among Grade 8 students in Turkey. They used test scores, questionnaires, and interviews with students and teachers. It shows that DI has both academic and emotional benefits. Similarly, Magableh and Abdullah (2020) in Malaysia used test results from students' and teachers' interviews. Tajik *et al.* (2024) surveyed 102 students and interviewed 3 teachers to investigate how DI met the needs of the diverse students in Afghanistan. The mixed-method approach was helpful to capture both the statistical trends and practical classroom insights. Abramova and Mashoshina (2021) also implemented this dual approach for understanding the teacher strategies and student attitudes. Their use of online surveys and NVivo software clearly showed how teachers used DI and how student preferences connected to their classroom experiences.

CONCLUSION

The review concluded that Differentiated Instruction is supportive for all kinds of learners, including fast, average, and slow learners. It helps improve their language skills, self-confidence, and motivation for English language learning. Learners enjoy different tasks designed for their level and like working in groups during language learning. However, many teachers face problems implementing DI in EFL/ESL contexts due to large class sizes, lack of teacher training, and limited resources such as books and technology. Flexible teachers, use digital tools and collaborate with others tend to be more successful with DI. Most of the studies used mixed methods, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Additionally, some studies employed only qualitative methods, such as classroom observations, thematic analysis and interviews, while a few of them used quantitative tools like surveys, SPSS, and ANOVA.

The findings suggest that teachers are encouraged to start with small steps, like grouping students by ability and interest, and using free educational apps. Schools should provide DI training, minimize class sizes if possible, and provide teachers basic materials such as picture cards and leveled books. Policymakers are called upon to support teacher development and ensure all schools have the necessary tools. Researchers are urged to prioritize DI in remote schools and on students' experiences, and conduct long-term studies to observe DI effects over time.

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