



Promoting EFL Students' Agency for Learning (AfL) Through Differentiated Instruction: Experiences, Challenges, and Strategies

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Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) boosts students in developing 21st century skills to ensure they are qualified for the future and global competition (Anggraeny & Kongput, 2022; Çinar, 2021; Halverson, 2018; Idrees, 2023; Plucker et al., 2016). The students' agency for learning (AfL) equips and shapes them with these crucial competences during the language learning process (Harris et al., 2018; Little & Erickson, 2015; Xiao, 2014; Xu & Kim, 2022). Code (2020) mentions that the four aspects of AfL namely intention, self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and forethought are directly linked to the student's performance. Thus, agency, a theoretical construct in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that emphasizes learners' ability to make thoughtful decisions, exercise influence, oppose, or submit to social pressures (Duff, 2012), in which it is crucial to be established in the educational context and pedagogical practices.

Differentiated instruction (DI) is reportedly one of the classroom efforts to achieve an agentic situation in the teaching and learning processes due to its adaptability (Tomlinson, 2005). By facilitating students' diversity and puts their needs, characteristics, and interests as the main orientation of the learning process (Ortega et al., 2018; Stanford & Reeves, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014), DI adjusts the content, process, and product to maximize all students' abilities and potentials (Tomlinson, 2000; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). The benefit of interplaying DI and students' individual uniqueness at some points showed it correlates with the shaping of students' agency in classroom settings that can be captured comprehensively through classroom curriculum, groupings, interactions, and assessment (Coubergs et al., 2017). Classroom curriculum in DI promotes student agency as it involves learners' voice in a collaborative curriculum design, in which diverse students' perspectives are inclusively enhanced (Andrzejewski et al., 2019; Mbat, 2021). DI's flexible groupings that celebrate diversity can enhance students' agency in the sense of ownership and responsibility while promoting social values, unity, and cooperation (Balungaya, 2018; Brulles & Brown, 2018). Classroom interactions in DI foster a dynamic learning environment, empowering students by acknowledging personal voices, promoting active participation, and fostering a collaborative and



communicative learning community (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2009; Valiandes et al., 2018). Additionally, DI's assessments can empower students to take ownership of their learning by allowing students to showcase their understanding in ways that suit their strengths and preferences (Cumming et al., 2019; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

Although DI has been perceived as a positive approach to meeting students' needs and promoting their agency, several studies reported the challenges faced by the teachers in implementing it due to some issues related to time management, planning, administrative support, and professional development trainings (Ardi et al., 2025; Sabb-Cordes, 2016) and possible conceptual misunderstandings (Suwastini et al., 2021). Moreover, the process of how the implementation of DI promotes students' agency for learning has also not been widely explored. Pertaining to the current issue, this case study focuses on exploring 1) how teachers implement DI to promote AfL in EFL classrooms and 2) how EFL teachers cope with the challenges encountered.

Literature Review

AfL refers to a student's ability to tackle challenges and set goals, acquired through the educational process (Little & Erickson, 2015). It is influenced by teachers, learning environment, and other students' conditions, allowing them to make decisions and assume responsibility (Casanova et al., 2021; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Scanlon & Connolly, 2021). Code (2020) introduced four core components of learners' agency: intention, forethought, self-regulated learning (SRL), and self-efficacy. Intention involves the awareness of students and well-led initiation, forethought motivates goal achievement, self-regulation encourages decision-making and monitoring, and self-efficacy reflects performance and assessment for learning goals. As citizens of a complex and uncertain world, these students need to possess AfL competencies in order to be prepared to face global competition that enable them to become mindful of their personal qualities, ready to tackle challenges and demonstrate resilience in adversity (Buckingham et al., 2016). To demonstrate learning agency, students have opportunities to adjust and control valued educational outcomes in a positive manner (Charteris et al., 2017).

DI realizes effective classroom management by promoting diverse learning which adjusts the contents or what is learned, processes corresponding to how students learn, and products representing how learning is observed and evaluated. It caters to students' unique needs, traits, interests, abilities, and learning profiles that enhance their optimal performance (Ortega et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2000, 2014). DI promotes equity and academic excellence through its varied learning activities, content demands, assessment modes, and a conducive classroom environment (Hidayat et al., 2025). In Indonesian settings, the urge to foster students' AfL through DI has been noted in its latest curriculum, recommending teachers to apply DI in a natural, agentic, and fun manner, according to students' needs within a learning environment where they feel valued and empowered.

Methods

Research Design & Participants

A case study proposed by Yin (2011) was adopted to collect data focused on exploring teachers' implementation of DI to promote students' AfL and how they coped with challenges encountered while providing an agentic atmosphere in EFL classrooms. The relevant information was acquired through non-participant classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The classroom observations were realized through the video recordings of five different face-to-face classroom meetings and online learning aimed to explore how teachers implemented DI, and their instructional designs, including instructions and interaction during the teaching and learning processes. Regarding the previously acquired data, these

interviews were used to determine the teachers' strategies in coping with challenges encountered and their elaborations of DI pedagogical efforts in promoting students' AfL. The participants were excellent teachers selected from a government-funded DI training program who were recommended by the board of instructors. They were six teachers from the multicultural background of senior high schools in one of the well-developed educational cities in Indonesia. Considering their backgrounds, they consisted of five female and a male EFL teacher as shown in the table below.

TABLE 1.
Demographic Information of Research Participants

Research participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age Range	Time Teaching Experience Range	Teaching Affiliation and Center of Excellence
Ami	Female	41 to 50	>16	Vocational high school: Manufacturing & Engineering
Berta	Female	41 to 50	>16	Vocational high school: Tourism
Cindy	Female	31 to 40	11 to 15	Secondary high school: General English
Dita	Female	41 to 50	11 to 15	Vocational high school: Information technology
Ela	Female	41 to 50	11 to 15	Vocational high school Arts and Creative economics
Fariz	Male	41 to 50	>16	Vocational high school: Arts and Creative economics

Data Collection & Analysis

A series of systematic activities were conducted to collect the research data. The non-participant classroom observations were conducted to six EFL teachers who implemented DI during classroom activities in three meetings in different modes of learning (face-to-face meeting and online learning). The observations dealt with teachers' implementation of DI to boost students' agency which covers teachers' activities in pre-activity, main activity, and post-activity of teaching. The core focuses of the observations were classroom assessment, types of activities of promoting AfL, instructional procedures of activities, and product of students' learning. The interview sessions lasted for an hour for each of the six selected participants. The Indonesian language was used during the interview to avoid the ungainly situation of using English due to grammatical errors and inappropriate use of vocabulary. This activity consisted of the aspects of teachers' challenges and strategies in providing DI mediation to promote AfL. All the collected data of observation and interview were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis method through several procedures. First, we familiarized ourselves with the collected data referring to the research questions. Second, we transcribed and translated the data from Indonesian language into English for the interview. Third, we marked relevant excerpts and generated codes of the data. Fourth, we specified the found codes into themes and subthemes, and lastly we interpreted and performed the final analysis.

Results and Discussion

Results

To answer how EFL teachers promote students’ four multidimensional learning agency in classroom activities, classroom observation data were used, and we discovered that teachers employed extremely good instructional strategies of DI which is described in the table below.

TABLE 2
Classroom Observation Data on DI to Promote Learning Agency

Theme (AfL)	Subtheme	Classroom Activities (DI)
Intention	Classroom preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers distributed commitment rubrics for learning goals b. Teachers provided various activities to nurture their awareness of strengths and weaknesses
	Main Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers conducted formative assessment to assess learning progress b. Teachers brainstormed students’ ideas of learning c. Teachers run the class based on students’ profile
	Classroom assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers administered diagnostic assessment to do need analysis b. Teachers provided summative assessment through project
Foretaught	Types of activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers provided information through video watching on how importance in learning English for future b. Teachers distributed guessing games and boardgame to contextualize the English and real need c. Teachers provided motivation video during learning
	Purposes of activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The activity aimed to motivate students to learn English b. The activity aimed to connect students’ need in learning English with real life purpose c. The activity aimed to promote students’ creativity and curiosity
Self-regulated learning	Instructional designs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Student-centered learning b. Cooperative learning
	Task types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Project based learning b. Experiential project
	Task-types objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The project-based learning aimed at accommodating students’ peer learning, how to handle feedback from peers and teachers, and control team member emotion b. The experiential project dealt with students’ cultivation of experience which promote their cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational purposes
Self-efficacy	Process type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teachers grouped students with similar learning profile b. Teachers considered students heterogeneity to create greater atmosphere c. Teachers provided interesting activity to nurture inclusive students’ needs of learning
	Product type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Project based product based on learning profile b. Hands-on exercise based on their learning profile

Pertaining to answer the research question on to what extent do EFL teachers cope with challenges and strategies in promoting students’ learning agency through DI, semi-structured interviews were used to cultivate teachers’ perception on how to deal with challenges and solve these challenges through strategies. Regarding the framework of the four multidimensional learning agencies (Code, 2010, 2020), the student’s intention is to self-courage to accomplish goals by engaging in diverse activities.

Teachers encountered several challenges during implementing DI. The first challenge was time limitation on lesson allotment and a lack of teachers’ resources on interesting activities to promote the first dimension of students’ AfL. To overcome these challenges, they agreed that delivering learning objectives during classroom pre-activity sessions effectively ensured that students understood the materials being taught. Interestingly, the data showed that teachers employed different strategies and tools during the virtual sessions and face-to-face meetings. In virtual meetings, they delivered certain topics and set the learning goals together by utilizing a mediated platform such as Padlet, Mentimeter, and Powerpoint, while in the

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face-to-face sessions, they set a learning contract by illustrating students' ideas in colorful sticky notes to highlight the learning objectives. Although delivered differently, these practices similarly promote students' AfL's intention aspect, in which DI provides space to measure the learners' readiness, delve into their learning profiles, and offer different learning sources and assessments.

In the foretaught dimension of students' AfL, teachers encountered certain barriers due to students' heterogeneous backgrounds with different levels of motivational belief, outcome analysis capacity, and contextualizing materials based on their needs. To cope with these challenges, teachers differentiated the learning products while ensuring the assigned tasks are either analyzed in groups or individually. Teachers also adopted a strategic method through teacher-student and student-student interactions before conducting project works and during the project to discuss ways to accomplish the intended works and to increase students' task analysis skills. Relating to classroom motivation, some strategies were implemented to sustain and ensure students are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated during the learning processes. Intrinsically, they remind students of their set goal and actualize it through self-commitment, which led to learning contract. Meanwhile, extrinsically, they engage students through motivational videos, indulge in ice breaking activities, and use local wisdom to contextualize the learning material into students' needs.

Although teachers reported that they promoted SRL by employing DI during classroom activities, the efforts spent preparing these tasks are extremely time and energy-consuming in face-to-face meetings and online learning. On the other hand, they were highly mindful that setting up these activities greatly facilitated the students' SRL. For instance, they offered project-based learning to assess their comprehension of the materials. In addition, performance-based assessment served as an alternative strategy to evaluate language proficiency of learning. They usually manage to monitor and assess their group works to be submitted to the teachers. Interestingly, implementing DI is part of the teachers' responsibility to facilitate students' needs and interests. They elaborated on several challenges in promoting self-efficacy including its diverse processes, contents, and products. The students' efficacy is boosted directly and indirectly through reflection and self-recognition activities. It was reported that interaction between teachers and students reflected through question-and-answer sessions related to the material also increased their efficacy. Self-recognition activities in the form of multimodal resources such as songs, movies, and pictures helped teachers deliver efficacy which deals with promoting AfL for students in current educational needs, as indicated in the following figure.

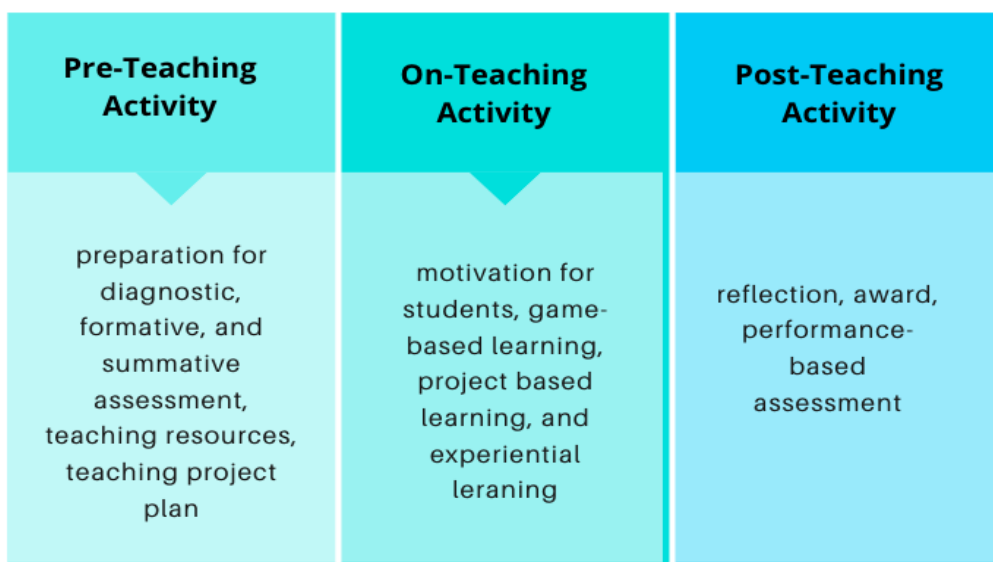


Figure 1. Teacher strategies for promoting AfL.

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Discussion

The present study revealed the EFL teachers' implementation, challenges and strategies on DI execution to promote students' AfL in the classroom. Based on their pedagogical practices, teachers were captured trying to promote four multidimensional students' AfL in their EFL classrooms through several teaching strategies in both face-to-face meetings and online learning. The pre-teaching activity is powerful in stimulating their thinking and engagement in content delivery. Although, it is frequently associated with higher students' cognition and instruction quality (Phan & Nguyen, 2021; Nappi, 2017). Teachers' skills and knowledge of practices that enable the allocation of power in classroom relationships is a crucial enhancer of learner agency (Charteris et al., 2017). In the learning process, SRL is important for students to accomplish their goals and execute tasks and classroom projects. This agentic feature can be optimized inside and outside the classroom through a project-based learning method that involves group awareness and peer assessment (Lin, 2018; Tusiono et al., 2022). The various learning resources that resulted in the creations of group work products showcased in front of their classmates align with Sharples' (2005) research that learners' agency is best enhanced in a socio-cultural synergy between all individuals in the classroom who are willing to advance the learning process together (Suarez et al., 2018), in which peer collaboration is more effective in exercising collective agency than individualistic learning (Tseng et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the successful implementation in DI classrooms forces teachers to expand the assessment role to more than just some forms of instruction or measurement (Andrade & Brookhart, 2019; Penuel & Shepard, 2016). Nevertheless, it emphasizes the importance of student agency as a part of their self-regulated learning (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Their teachers must strike an appropriate balance between enabling learners' agency and supporting them (Suarez et al., 2018). Otherwise, it can only lead to less desirable learning outcomes (Sawyer, 2005). Teachers' support to students is usually in the form of feedback, and their active involvement in the entire process optimizes this procedure. This is because they are involved in making decisions on the feedback choices and flexibilities offered by the teachers (Chalmers et al., 2018). The beneficial views on EFL teachers' strategies in promoting the four multidimensional students' AfL as it is a key indicator for new generation learning practices and conditions (Charteris et al., 2017; Zhunussova, 2023). Istance (2015) stated that learning becomes more personalized through DI, with the learners' active role in leadership processes becoming more evident.

Conclusion

The present study has portrayed EFL teachers' pedagogical experience and process in implementing DI to boost multidimensional students' AfL. First, tasks focusing on students' intentions were promoted through pre-activities by utilizing goal-setting commitment, ice-breaking, and interactive discussion on the learning objectives. Second, they exposed interesting activities and multimodal learning resources to promote students' foretaught. Additionally, to foster students' SRL, teachers employed different products, processes, and contents which emphasized their interests and needs. Lastly, teachers provided conducive learning atmospheres, and most offered interesting activities during learning through reflection and self-recognition tasks. Meanwhile, several challenges were coped with actualizing various strategies to facilitate an agentic atmosphere that aids in achieving students' AfL. In the context of the 21st-century era of DI exertion, their needs and interests are the core voice to be reckoned with in offering classroom activities. Integrating various multimodal learning resources tends to imply optimum effect while conducting project-based learning would affect learners' flexibility, creativity, and group communication. The implementation of students-centered activities is beneficial to both teachers and students in DI intervention which covers active engagement and positive interaction in the classroom.

The results obtained need to be evaluated considering the limitations of this study. Firstly, only partial teachers were sampled in the present study. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more teachers in a broader scope of areas to gain data from all perspectives. Secondly, the specific dimension of

DI (process, content, or produce) is recommended to be explored critically for getting a new model of DI learning that effectively promotes students' AfL in EFL classrooms.

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