THE IMPLEMENTATION DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING IN TEACHING NARRATIVE TEXTS TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT

In today's educational landscape, the development of critical thinking skills is essential for equipping students to navigate complex information and real-world challenges. Conventional teaching methods, however, often fall short in fostering these skills, particularly in the context of analyzing narrative texts. Differentiated learning, a teaching strategy that tailors instruction to meet diverse student needs, has shown promise in creating a more engaging and personalized learning environment. This research aims to analyze the effectiveness of differentiated learning in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in learning narrative texts. Differentiated learning was applied to the experimental group, while the control group received conventional instruction. This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was collected through pre- and post-tests in both groups and analyzed using statistical methods to measure improvements in critical thinking. The results showed a significant increase in the experimental group's scores, with a pre-test average of 55.0 and a post-test average of 83.6, marking an improvement of 28.6 points, compared to the control group's increase from 48.3 to 64.6, or 16.3 points. Statistical analysis confirmed that this difference was significant, supporting the hypothesis that differentiated learning more effectively enhances critical thinking than conventional methods. Qualitative data, obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, provided deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions of differentiated learning. Students in the experimental group felt more confident, actively engaged in discussions, and were better able to analyze narrative structures and themes. They also reported that while social media aided learning, it occasionally distracted from focus. Overall, differentiated learning proved effective in improving students' critical thinking, motivation, and reflective abilities. These findings suggest that differentiated methods can enhance the quality of learning in schools, particularly in understanding and analyzing narrative texts. This study underscores the need for innovative teaching strategies to foster critical thinking in education.

Keyword: *differentiated learning, critical thinking skills, narrative text, learning motivation, learning effectiveness*

A. INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking ability is considered an important skill that underlies deep learning and the ability to adapt in a dynamic environment (Ennis, 2011). In this modern era, critical thinking skills are becoming increasingly crucial, considering the complexity of information and rapid global change. According to (Facione 2015), critical

thinking is the ability to analyze and evaluate information objectively to make evidence-based decisions. However, in many school environments, the teaching methods applied still focus on conventional approaches, tend to be rote, and do not support students' active involvement in critical thinking processes (Brookfield, 2017). Moreover, Paul and (Elder 2019) highlight that without intentional strategies to encourage higher-order thinking, students are less likely to develop the critical analysis skills essential for real-world applications. Similarly, (Lai 2011) argues that educational systems need to shift toward teaching frameworks that actively promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which are foundational components of critical thinking.

Narrative text learning has great potential in helping students develop critical thinking skills. According to (Langer 2010), narrative text analysis encourages students to understand various points of view, evaluate story structure, and relate story themes to existing reality. This makes narrative texts an important tool for facilitating critical analysis and deeper contextual understanding. However, research shows that less relevant teaching approaches often make it difficult for students to examine texts critically and disconnect from their everyday experiences (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiated learning appears as one approach that can overcome these limitations. According to (Tomlinson 2014), differentiation allows teachers to adapt teaching methods according to students' needs, interests and levels of understanding, which increases students' learning motivation and involvement in the learning process. Differentiated learning also allows teachers to create a more inclusive learning environment, where each student can learn in the most effective way for them (Santrock, 2017).

Differentiated learning appears as one approach that can overcome these limitations. According to (Tomlinson 2014), differentiation allows teachers to adapt teaching methods based on students' needs, interests, and levels of understanding, which increases students' motivation and involvement in the learning process. Differentiated learning also fosters an inclusive environment, enabling each student to learn in a way best suited to them (Santrock, 2017). This approach is further supported by Hattie and (Zierer 2018), who highlight

how differentiated learning addresses individual student needs, leading to deeper engagement and improved academic outcomes. Similarly, Sousa and (Tomlinson 2018) suggest that by utilizing brain-based insights to tailor lessons to diverse learning profiles, differentiation enhances motivation and helps students feel valued in the classroom. (Frey, Fisher, and Hattie 2017) emphasize the inclusivity aspect of differentiated learning, noting how varied instructional methods and flexible grouping allow students to engage with content in ways that cater to their cognitive and emotional needs, ultimately promoting better comprehension and retention.

This research aims to examine the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving students' critical thinking skills, especially in the context of learning narrative texts. This research uses a mixed approach with data collected through pre-test, post-test, observation and interviews. It is hoped that the results of this research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the application of differentiated learning and its impact on the development of students' critical thinking skills.

The basic concept of this research is to explore how differentiated learning can improve students' critical thinking abilities, especially in the context of understanding narrative texts. Differentiated learning refers to adapting learning materials, processes and products according to the needs, interests and abilities of each student (Tomlinson, 2014). In the context of narrative learning, this method allows teachers to provide variety in learning activities, which in turn can increase student motivation and active involvement.

This conceptual framework is based on several important, interconnected elements, which include understanding narrative texts, critical thinking skills, active involvement in discussions, and motivation to learn it.

Learning narrative texts plays a significant role in building a deep understanding of story elements such as theme, point of view, character, and plot. (Langer 2010) states that a deep understanding of narrative texts allows students to become emotionally and intellectually involved in the stories being studied, thereby increasing their ability to identify structural elements of texts. (Rosenblatt 2005) similarly

highlights that narrative engagement enhances students' capacity for empathy and critical reflection, as they interpret and relate to different characters' experiences. Through a differentiated approach, teachers can provide a variety of media and techniques to help students better identify these elements, ultimately improving the quality of their understanding. (Frey, Fisher, and Hattie 2017) add that using varied instructional methods tailored to students' abilities and interests not only engages them more deeply but also helps them grasp complex literary components. This approach supports a more inclusive classroom, where diverse learning needs are met, thereby fostering a richer comprehension of narrative texts.

(Ennis 2011) defines critical thinking as the ability to think reflectively and reasonably in assessing information, considering perspectives, and building logical conclusions. In the context of narrative texts, critical thinking is realized through students' ability to analyze conflict, plot and themes in stories, and draw conclusions supported by evidence from the text. Differentiated learning allows students to hone these skills by providing them with challenges and resources tailored to their ability level, so that each student can learn at the most appropriate level.

Group discussion is a differentiated learning approach that aims to encourage students to actively participate in the learning process. (Brookfield 2017) argues that effective discussions not only increase student engagement, but also help them in developing communication skills, listening, and assessing arguments from multiple perspectives. In group discussions facilitated by a differentiated approach, students can learn to express their critical thinking in a more open and accepting atmosphere, so that they feel more confident in expressing opinions and questioning ideas. (McTighe and Willis 2019) explain that differentiated group discussions encourage students to explore diverse perspectives, enhancing both empathy and critical reasoning skills. (Tomlinson 2020) highlights that structured discussions provide students with the chance to deepen understanding by engaging critically with others' viewpoints in a supportive setting. (VanTassel-Baska and Brown 2021) add that discussions tailored to various learning needs increase active participation, as students become more motivated to contribute meaningfully.

(Gregory and Chapman 2022) emphasize that such discussions not only enhance comprehension of content but also allow students to exercise analytical skills, refining their reasoning and argumentation abilities in a collaborative, differentiated environment.

Learning motivation is a crucial factor in the learning process, because a high level of motivation can increase student engagement and learning outcomes. (Santrock 2017) highlights that internal motivation supported by relevant learning methods can move students to be more enthusiastic in the learning process. In this research, the use of social media as an additional learning resource is an important factor because it helps students find references and communicate with peers outside the classroom. Although social media offers many benefits, inappropriate use can disrupt learning focus. Therefore, it is important for teachers to direct students to use social media wisely as a source of information and discussion that supports understanding of narrative texts.

Overall, the conceptual framework of this research highlights how differentiated learning influences various aspects of students' critical thinking abilities in the context of narrative texts. By paying attention to students' individual characteristics and needs, differentiated learning provides flexibility in the learning process, which not only improves understanding and analytical skills but also builds students' confidence in critical thinking and increases their learning motivation. It is hoped that this differentiated learning can help students relate narrative texts to their daily experiences, so that they are more critical in evaluating information and able to develop deep reflective abilities.

B. METHODS

This research uses mixed research methods, which combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain more comprehensive data regarding the effectiveness of differentiated learning in improving students' critical thinking abilities towards narrative texts.

2.1 Research Design

The design of this research was quasi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test in two groups: the experimental group which received differentiated learning, and the control group which received conventional learning. Through this design, researchers can compare the

impact of two learning methods on students' critical thinking abilities.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study was class XI students at one of the high schools, with samples taken using purposive sampling techniques. Two classes were randomly selected as samples, one class as an experimental group given differentiated learning, and another class as a control group. Each class consists of approximately 36 students. Respondents of the study

2.3 Research Instrument

Tests: To measure students' critical thinking abilities, researchers used multiple choice tests and essays related to narrative text analysis. This test was given before and after treatment to both groups to see a significant increase in critical thinking abilities.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with several students in the experimental group to gain qualitative insight into their experiences during differentiated learning.

Observation: Direct observation is carried out to see how students interact and engage in differentiated learning, especially in discussion activities and text analysis.

Documentation: Documentation in the form of student work, such as text analysis and presentations, is used to identify the development of students' understanding of narrative elements and critical thinking skills.

2.4 Research Procedures

Preparation Stage: At this stage, the researcher prepares the research instruments, including compiling test questions, interview guidelines, and observation sheets. In addition, validity and reliability tests of the instrument were carried out.

Implementation Phase: The research began with a pre-test for both groups, then continued with providing treatment (differentiated learning) to the experimental group for four weeks. The control group underwent conventional learning. After the intervention, a post-test was conducted for both groups.

Qualitative Data Collection: After the post-test, interviews and observations were conducted on the experimental group to obtain additional data about the impact of differentiated learning on critical thinking abilities.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using the t test to measure significant differences between the two groups.

Meanwhile, qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify main themes related to students' critical thinking skills.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Analysis: The pre-test and post-test results of both groups were tested statistically using data analysis software to determine significant differences between the experimental and control groups in improving critical thinking skills.

Qualitative Analysis: Qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method, which involves coding the data and grouping it into main themes that describe students' experiences during differentiated learning.

2.6 The Research Instrument

This study employed a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative instruments to evaluate the impact of differentiated learning on students' critical thinking abilities in understanding narrative texts.

2.7 Pre-test and Post-test Assessments

The primary quantitative instruments were the pre-test and post-test assessments designed to measure students' critical thinking skills before and after the intervention. These assessments included questions that required students to:

- Identify key narrative elements (e.g., theme, structure, and character development).

- Analyze story structure and draw logical conclusions.

- Differentiate between factual statements and opinions within the text.

The pre-test served to establish a baseline of students' critical thinking levels, while the post-test was used to measure any improvements after differentiated learning strategies were applied in the experimental group.

2.8 Observation Checklist

A structured observation checklist was used to record students' engagement and participation during lessons. The checklist focused on indicators of critical thinking, such as:

- Active participation in group discussions.

- Willingness to ask questions that probe deeper understanding.

- Ability to make connections between narrative content and real-world experiences.

Observations provided real-time insights into how students in both groups interacted with the material and applied critical thinking.

2.9 Student Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selection of students from the experimental group to capture their personal experiences and perceptions of differentiated learning. Key interview questions included:

- How the differentiated instruction impacted their ability to analyze narrative texts.

- Whether the approach helped increase their confidence and engagement in discussions.

- Their perspectives on how this learning method influenced their motivation.

2.10 Documentation Review

Students' written work, such as text analyses and group presentations, was reviewed as part of the qualitative assessment. This documentation provided tangible examples of how students applied critical thinking skills to analyze narrative texts.

Together, these instruments offered a comprehensive view of the impact of differentiated learning on students' critical thinking abilities. The pre-test and post-test scores provided quantifiable data on progress, while observations, interviews, documentation, and questionnaires enriched the study with qualitative insights into the learning experience.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the study and discusses the impact of differentiated learning on students' critical thinking skills in understanding narrative texts. The findings are drawn from quantitative pre-test and post-test data analysis, as well as qualitative insights gathered through observation, interviews, documentation, and questionnaires.

3.1 Quantitative Results: Pre-test and Post-test Analysis

The quantitative data was collected through pre-tests and post-tests administered to both the experimental and control groups. These tests aimed to assess the students' initial and improved critical thinking abilities in analyzing narrative texts. A t-test was conducted to examine the differences in mean scores between the groups before and after the intervention.

a. Pre-test Results

The pre-test was conducted to establish a baseline of students' critical thinking skills in narrative text analysis. In the control group, the average pre-test score was 48.3, while the experimental group scored slightly higher, with an average of 55.0. These initial scores indicated a medium level of critical thinking in both groups, with the experimental group showing a minor advantage over the control group. However, this difference was not statistically significant, as both groups had not yet received different treatments.

b. Post-test Results

Following the intervention, which applied differentiated learning methods to the experimental group and conventional methods to the control group, the post-test results indicated notable improvements in both groups. The control group achieved an average post-test score of 64.6, reflecting a moderate enhancement in critical thinking skills through conventional learning approaches. The experimental group, however, showed a remarkable increase in performance, with an

average post-test score of 83.6. This difference in improvement highlights the effectiveness of differentiated instruction in fostering critical thinking abilities.

c. T-test Analysis

A t-test analysis was conducted to determine if the observed differences in post-test scores between the experimental and control groups were statistically significant. The null hypothesis (H_0) assumed that there was no significant difference in mean scores between the groups, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) posited a significant difference. The analysis revealed a p-value below the significance threshold, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This result supports the claim that the differentiated learning approach positively influenced students' critical thinking skills in the experimental group compared to the control group.

$$t = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

Where:

- $\bar{X}_1$ and $\bar{X}_2$ are the mean scores of the experimental and control groups.
- s_1 and s_2 are the standard deviations of the experimental and control groups.
- n_1 and n_2 are the number of students in each group.

3.2 Qualitative Results: Observations, Interviews, and Documentation Analysis

In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative data was collected through observations, interviews, documentation, and questionnaires to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and perspectives regarding the differentiated learning approach.

a. Classroom Observations

Observations conducted during the intervention period revealed notable differences in engagement and participation between the experimental and control groups. Students in the experimental group demonstrated active involvement in discussions, confidently asked questions, and critically examined narrative elements. These behaviors were encouraged by the differentiated approach, which provided various ways for students to interact with the material based on their individual learning preferences and needs. In contrast, the control group showed relatively less engagement, with students participating less actively in discussions and exhibiting a lower level of critical analysis. This aligns with the quantitative data showing a significant improvement in critical thinking for the experimental group.

b. Student Interviews

Interviews with students from the experimental group reinforced the observation findings. Many students expressed that the differentiated instruction method enhanced their understanding and analysis of narrative texts. They appreciated the structured opportunities for group discussions and the ability to approach learning tasks in ways that aligned with their personal strengths. For instance, several students mentioned feeling more comfortable and motivated to analyze narrative texts when they could select activities that resonated with their interests or allowed for creative expression. Students also reported increased confidence in participating in discussions, as they felt more equipped to contribute meaningful insights and ask relevant questions.

c. Documentation of Student Work

Analysis of students' written work, such as narrative text analyses and group presentations, further illustrated the development of critical thinking skills in the experimental group. The students'

assignments reflected a deeper understanding of narrative structures, themes, and character motivations. Many students were able to make insightful connections between the text content and broader societal issues, demonstrating the ability to apply critical thinking beyond the classroom. For example, one student linked the theme of resilience in a narrative text to contemporary discussions on mental health, showcasing an advanced level of analytical thinking. This level of engagement and analysis was less apparent in the control group's work, which showed more surface-level interpretations of narrative texts.

d. Student Questionnaire

Responses from the student questionnaire provided additional qualitative data on the differentiated learning experience. A majority of the experimental group students indicated that the approach not only helped them understand narrative texts more deeply but also increased their motivation to learn. Students mentioned that having multiple options to explore a text encouraged a more personal and meaningful engagement with the material. They also expressed appreciation for how the differentiated approach made learning more interactive and relatable to real-life contexts. These responses support the idea that differentiated instruction can foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment by catering to diverse learning needs.

3.3 Discussion of Findings

The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that differentiated learning had a substantial impact on students' critical thinking skills in understanding narrative texts.

a. Enhanced Engagement and Motivation

The differentiated approach allowed students to engage with the material in ways that aligned with their unique learning styles. By providing options for activities and methods of exploration, differentiated learning created an environment where students felt motivated and empowered to actively participate in the learning process. This approach also facilitated a deeper understanding of narrative texts, as students in the experimental group

demonstrated enhanced abilities to analyze story structure, character development, and themes compared to those in the control group. They found it easier to identify key narrative elements, interpret themes, and relate these to real-world issues, indicating improved critical thinking skills. This aligns with expert opinions that highlight the value of personalized learning approaches in fostering student engagement and deepening comprehension (Tomlinson, 2001; Subban, 2006).

b. Development of Critical Thinking Skills

The experimental group showed significant gains in critical thinking abilities compared to the control group, as evidenced by the post-test results. Differentiated instruction enabled students to not only identify and analyze elements of narrative texts but also apply these critical thinking skills to real-world contexts. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that differentiated learning can enhance critical thinking by challenging students to approach texts from multiple perspectives (Heacox, 2012).

c. Increased Confidence in Analytical Abilities

The qualitative data revealed that differentiated instruction also positively impacted students' confidence in their analytical abilities. Many students in the experimental group reported feeling more capable of contributing to discussions and expressing their ideas. This aligns with findings from previous studies indicating that differentiated instruction can promote a growth mindset by providing students with learning experiences that foster self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities (Tomlinson, 2014).

d. Challenges and Limitations

Despite the positive outcomes, there were some challenges noted, particularly in terms of maintaining focus amidst increased autonomy. Some students expressed that while the flexibility was beneficial, it could occasionally lead to distractions, especially when using digital resources. This suggests the need for careful structuring and guidance within differentiated learning to help students stay on task and maximize their engagement.

E. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate that differentiated learning is an effective approach for enhancing critical thinking skills in narrative text analysis. The quantitative improvements in test scores, along with qualitative insights from observations, interviews, and student work, collectively highlight the benefits of a personalized, student-centered approach to learning. Differentiated instruction not only improved students' comprehension and critical thinking abilities but also fostered higher engagement, confidence, and motivation. Future studies could explore further strategies to address the challenges of autonomy and digital distractions, potentially enhancing the implementation of differentiated learning approaches in various educational contexts.

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