



Improving Junior High School Students' Reading and Writing Skills Based on Diagnostic Assessment

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Abstract: This research aims to improve the reading and writing skills of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok grade VII students by applying differentiated learning based on diagnostic assessment. The qualitative approach used in this study focuses on the student's experiences during the transition period from primary school to junior high school. This research is motivated by the variation in reading and writing skills among grade VII students, which is influenced by differences in educational backgrounds in elementary schools. Diagnostic assessments are used to identify the learning needs of each student, which further becomes the basis for designing differentiated learning. The study results show that differentiated learning improves students' reading and writing skills. Students learning according to their needs significantly improve text comprehension and writing ability. In addition, the study also found that this approach helps students adapt to the new learning environment in junior high school. This study concludes that diagnostic assessment and differentiated learning are effective strategies for overcoming Indonesian learning challenges in grade VII. This study recommends that teachers continue to develop skills in carrying out diagnostic assessments and designing differentiated learning to meet the various learning needs of students.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan keterampilan membaca dan menulis siswa kelas VII SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok melalui penerapan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi yang berbasis pada asesmen diagnostik. Pendekatan yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kualitatif, dengan fokus pada pengalaman siswa selama masa transisi dari sekolah dasar ke sekolah menengah pertama. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh adanya variasi kemampuan membaca dan menulis di antara siswa kelas VII, yang dipengaruhi oleh perbedaan latar belakang pendidikan di sekolah dasar. Asesmen diagnostik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi kebutuhan belajar masing-masing siswa, yang selanjutnya menjadi dasar dalam merancang pembelajaran berdiferensiasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajaran berdiferensiasi efektif dalam meningkatkan keterampilan membaca dan menulis siswa. Siswa yang menerima pembelajaran sesuai dengan kebutuhan mereka menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam pemahaman teks dan kemampuan menulis. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa pendekatan ini membantu siswa beradaptasi dengan lingkungan belajar baru di SMP. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa asesmen diagnostik dan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi adalah strategi yang efektif untuk mengatasi tantangan dalam pembelajaran bahasa Indonesia di kelas VII. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan agar guru terus mengembangkan keterampilan dalam melaksanakan asesmen diagnostik dan merancang pembelajaran berdiferensiasi untuk memenuhi berbagai kebutuhan belajar siswa.

A. Introduction

Literacy, which includes reading and writing skills, is a key educational foundation. Istiqomah (2022) states that literacy is important for academic success, personal development, and active participation in society. Good reading skills enable students to understand information critically, while writing skills allow them to express their thoughts logically and systematically. Unfortunately, literacy remains a significant challenge in many developing countries, including Indonesia. The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show that Indonesian students' literacy scores are below the average of OECD countries (OECD, 2018). This indicates a serious problem in mastering these basic skills.

Literacy issues become more complex during the transition from elementary school to junior secondary school. This transition includes not only changes in curriculum and learning methods, but also psychological, social and emotional changes experienced by students. According to Yusciantara (2024), this transition period is often a vulnerable point in students' academic development due to new, higher demands. Students are expected to read and understand more complex texts, as well as write with more organized structures and arguments.

At SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok, based on the results of observations and initial interviews conducted by researchers in the 2024/2025 school year, it was found that many seventh-grade students had difficulty understanding reading texts and composing simple writing. Most students can only understand the text's content literally but have difficulty making inferences, summarizing the content of the text, or responding critically to the reading. In the writing aspect, it was found that the paragraph structure was still not coherent, the use of vocabulary was limited, and errors in spelling and grammar were numerous.

The causal factors are diverse. First, there were differences in the educational backgrounds of the students' primary schools, leading to initial abilities disparities. Second, some students are not used to the higher academic demands in junior high school, such as summarizing, writing opinions, and reading various nonfiction texts. Thirdly, teachers have not fully implemented learning strategies tailored to students' needs. This issue is becoming increasingly important because literacy skills play a significant role in successful learning across subjects. If not addressed immediately, students will continue to experience ongoing learning difficulties, which impact their motivation and confidence.

To answer these challenges, this research offers the application of differentiated learning based on diagnostic assessment as a solution. Differentiated instruction is a teaching approach that customizes content, processes, products, and learning environments according to student's readiness, interests, and learning styles (Swandewi, 2021). Meanwhile, diagnostic assessment identifies students' learning conditions and needs (Arta, 2024). Combining these two approaches is believed to provide more relevant, targeted, and effective learning in improving students' literacy skills.

Several previous studies have proven the effectiveness of this strategy. A study by Pratama (2022) showed that differentiated learning increased the reading interest of

secondary school students in Yogyakarta. [Pidrawan et al](#) (2022) also found that this approach encourages students' creativity and active participation in writing learning. However, most of these studies have not explicitly integrated this approach with diagnostic assessment and have not been conducted in the context of transitioning education levels in peripheral areas such as Bahorok, which has different geographical and sociocultural backgrounds.

Although there are several studies on differentiated learning, studies that specifically combine diagnostic assessment with differentiated learning at the primary to junior secondary transition in the context of reading and writing skills are very limited. Most studies only address one aspect of diagnostic assessment or differentiated learning and are primarily conducted in big cities with more adequate educational facilities.

This research contributes novelty through A unique contextual focus on grade VII students in a semi-rural area (Bahorok) where disparities in initial ability are evident. The integration of two strategic approaches, diagnostic assessment, and differentiated learning, in one literacy intervention cycle. Strengthening the transition period, which often goes unnoticed in education policy and research. Thus, this research has both practical and theoretical urgency: practically, it helps teachers identify and meet students' learning needs more precisely; theoretically, it enriches the literature on applying assessment-based differentiated approaches in the Indonesian educational context.

According to [Tomlinson](#) (2015), differentiated learning is an effective way to respond to diversity in the classroom. He suggests that teachers adjust the curriculum based on initial and ongoing assessments of students' readiness and interests. This aligns with the findings of [Black & Wiliam](#) (2018), who emphasize the importance of formative and diagnostic assessments in improving learning quality. Furthermore, according to [Maryani](#) (2021), integrating diagnostic assessment in differentiated learning helps students build metacognitive awareness of their weaknesses and strengthens teacher-student interaction. The study also found that this strategy effectively improves critical thinking skills in reading.

In the Indonesian context, [Nandini](#) (2024) stated that implementing diagnostic assessments is still limited, mainly due to the lack of teacher training in developing valid and reliable instruments. Therefore, this study also reflects the importance of teacher professional training to realize learning that favors the needs of students. Based on this background, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of diagnostic assessments in identifying the learning needs of grade VII students in the aspects of reading and writing, assess the impact of implementing differentiated learning based on diagnostic assessments on improving students' literacy skills, provide an overview of the implementation of differentiated learning in the context of primary to secondary education transition in peripheral areas.

B. Method

In this study, we used a qualitative approach focusing on diagnostic evaluation to understand and improve the reading skills of Grade VII of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok. A qualitative approach was chosen to investigate researchers examining students' experiences, perceptions, and learning needs in the context of primary to secondary school transition. The diagnostic assessment determined students' strengths and weaknesses in literacy skills and learning styles.

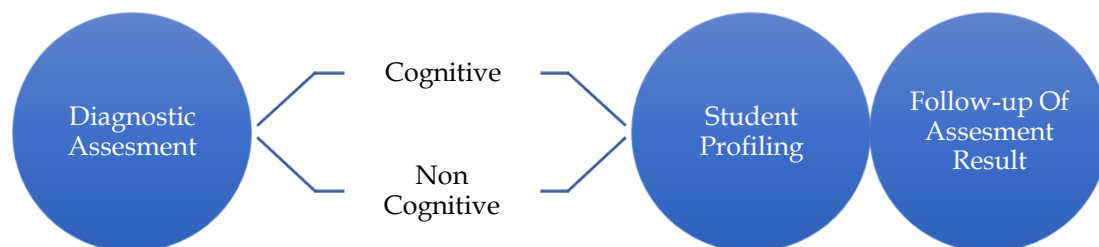


Figure 1. Assessment Process and Follow-up

This research uses a case study design, allowing researchers to investigate improving reading and writing skills in a real and specific context. Case studies were chosen because they are suitable for research that aims to understand the complexity and richness of data in an educational context (Yin, 2018). In this context, the case study will focus on grade VII students at SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok transitioning from primary to junior high school.

Students in class VII of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok were the participants in this study. Students are assessed based on various levels of reading, writing, and learning styles, and participants are selected by purposive sampling. In addition, Indonesian language subject teachers of grade VII will participate as participants to collect their opinions on the problems and learning approaches.

Thematic analysis analyzes qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data, Naeem (2023). The process of thematic analysis consists of several stages:

1. Data Inclusion: The researcher read and absorbed the data repeatedly to gain a deeper understanding of the content.
2. Code Generation: The researcher created the first code to identify semantic units in the data.
3. Theme Search: The researcher will look for broader code patterns to identify relevant themes.
4. Theme Review: The researcher reviews and refines the identified topics to ensure they are accurate and representative of the data.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: The researcher will define and name each theme and identify examples that support each theme.
6. Report Preparation: The researcher will compile a report presenting the findings systematically and clearly.

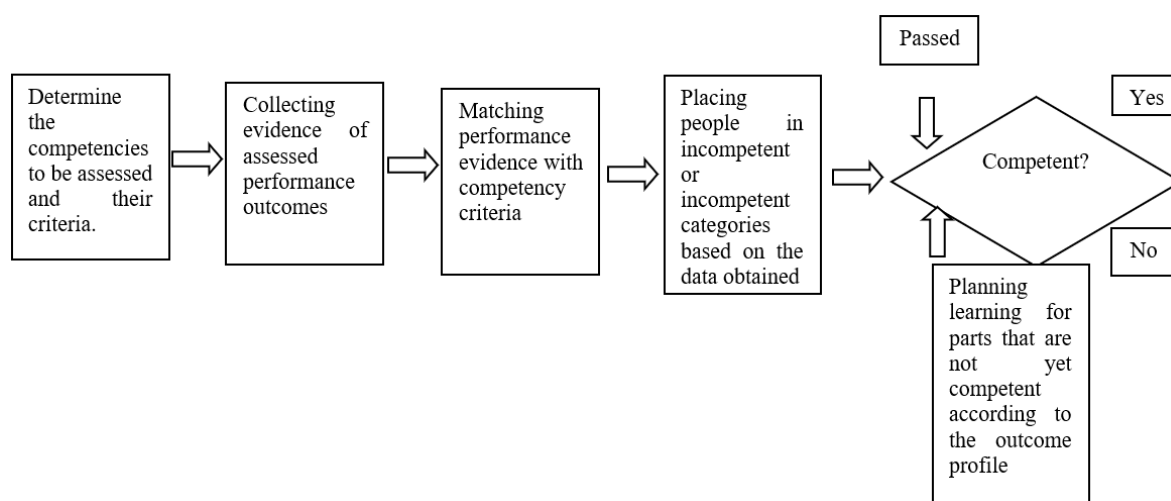


Figure 2. Research Ethics

This research also pays attention to ethical aspects of research, such as informed consent and data confidentiality. Research ethics is critical in qualitative research, especially involving human participants (Putra et al., 2023). Therefore, the researcher sought permission from the student's principal, teachers, and parents before conducting the study. In addition to knowing the purpose of the study, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The data collected was kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes.

Based on the qualitative approach and diagnostic evaluation, this study is expected to provide valuable recommendations for teachers and schools to improve the quality of reading, writing, and learning skills at SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok.

C. Result

Based on the results of diagnostic assessments, observations, and interviews conducted in class VII G of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok with the teacher, it was found that students' reading and writing skills still faced some challenges at the beginning of the school year. Most students in class VII G experienced barriers in starting the learning process. Without any special assistance from the teacher, only 15 students could read with relatively good fluency. The reading difficulties found can be classified as follows:

1. K (Less): Has not recognized letters or has recognized letters but has not been able to put words together. Two students (6.67%) have not been able to combine words at all.
2. C (Fair): Has recognized letters but still stammers in reading, so it is not yet fluent. A total of 13 students (43.33%) fall into this category.
3. B (Good): Can read fluently. This category includes 10 students (33.33%).
4. SB (Very Good): Able to read well and properly using punctuation, intonation, and articulation. There are five students (16.67%) who almost fulfill this criterion.

The same applies to writing skills. Most students have difficulty in expressing ideas in writing. Without the teacher's intensive direction, only a few students could write with a pretty good structure. The writing difficulties found can be categorized as follows:

1. K (Less): Has been unable to write letters or words completely and correctly. The writing is still illegible or inconsistent in letter forms. There are three students (10%) who fall into this category.
2. C (Fair): Can write but often make spelling, grammar, and sentence writing mistakes. About 12 students (40%) showed proficiency at this level.
3. B (Good): Can write sentences with the correct structure, although they still need vocabulary and idea development improvement. There are nine students (30%) who fall into this category.
4. SB (Very Good): Able to write well and coherently, use proper spelling, and convey ideas clearly and regularly. A total of 6 students (20%) approached this category.

Based on the results of a survey on learning styles conducted in class VII G of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok, there were 30 students. The data shows a fairly diverse variety of student learning styles, with the following details:

- 2 students have a visual dominant learning style.
- 1 student tends to use an auditory learning style.
- 2 students are more suited to the kinesthetic learning style.
- 1 student combines visual and auditory learning styles.
- 1 student tends toward visual and kinesthetic learning styles.
- 1 student showed a blend of auditory and kinesthetic.
- Most students, namely 22 people, have a combination of learning styles from all three: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Then, the Venn Diagram of Learning Styles:

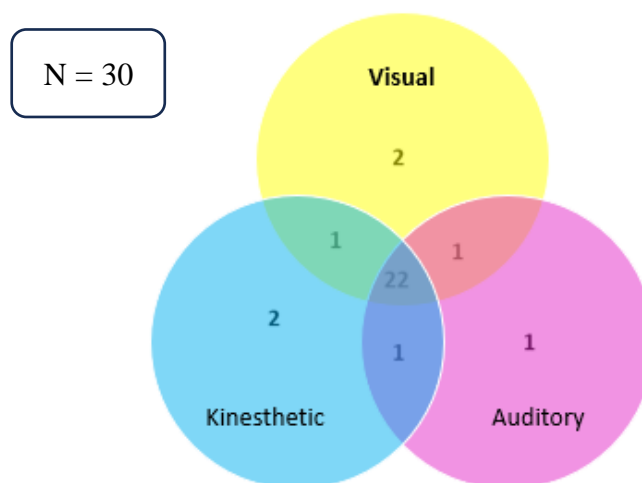


Figure 3. Learning Style Slices

Based on the results of the diagnostic assessment of reading, writing, and learning styles of students in grades VII and VIII of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok, educators need to implement learning strategies that accommodate the diverse needs of students through a differentiated learning approach. In reading and writing, it was found that many students still have difficulties, ranging from not recognizing letters to not being fluent in stringing words and composing sentences. Meanwhile, the learning style survey results show that most students have a combination learning style (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), with only a few students having a single learning style.

With this condition, educators can implement differentiation in three main aspects: content, process, and product. In terms of content, learning materials need to be adapted to students' reading abilities. For example, students who are not fluent readers are given simpler texts or images and audio-based materials to support comprehension. Various methods must be applied to the learning process according to students' learning styles. Visual students can be helped with concept maps and visual media, auditory students with discussions and sound recordings, and kinesthetic students can be helped with moving activities or hands-on practice. In addition, to develop writing skills, teachers can facilitate gradual writing exercises, starting from composing words and simple sentences to paragraphs, with intensive assistance.

In the product aspect, students can demonstrate their understanding through various forms, such as creating posters, audio recordings, or practical projects. This approach gives students space to express their abilities according to their strengths and encourages self-confidence and active participation. Teachers can also form heterogeneous learning groups so that more able students can help their friends who are still struggling. In addition, emotional support and motivation are essential to build students' enthusiasm for learning. By implementing differentiated learning consistently, educators can ensure that every student gets equal and meaningful learning opportunities according to their potential and needs.

D. Discussion

Based on the assessment of reading, writing, and learning styles carried out in class VII G of SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok, it was found that various student learning needs require the application of adaptive learning strategies. This result is closely related to the basic concept of differentiated learning developed by [Purba \(2021\)](#), an approach that adjusts learning content, processes, and products based on students' learning readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This concept emphasizes that in a heterogeneous classroom, teachers must understand that students do not learn in the same way and do not start from the same point. Therefore, uniform learning will tend to ignore students' individual needs.

The findings from class VII showed that students' reading and writing skills were still relatively low. Out of 30 students, only 15 could read relatively fluently, and the rest experienced varying degrees of difficulty. Some students did not fully recognize letters, while others stuttered when reading and writing. This shows that many students do not

have a strong literacy foundation when entering junior high school. Meanwhile, class VII's learning style survey results revealed that most students (22 out of 30) had a combination learning style (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), indicating that they absorb information more effectively when given various learning media and methods. The rest have a single learning style or a combination of two aspects.

The link between this finding and the concept of differentiated learning is clear. Suppose teachers continue applying a single learning method (such as lecturing or reading the textbook). In that case, most students, especially those with reading and writing difficulties or non-auditory learning styles, will be left behind (Nurhasanah, 2019). Differentiated learning provides an alternative by designing materials and activities to suit various learning styles and readiness levels. For example, students with reading difficulties can be given materials in visual or audio form. At the same time, those who are more physically active can learn through kinesthetic activities such as simulations or educational games.

Some facts and previous research results also support this finding. According to Buri et al (2024), implementing differentiated learning in classrooms with students with special needs and varying literacy levels showed increased student participation and achievement of learning outcomes. In their study, students with reading disabilities were more engaged when the material was delivered through a multimodal approach (visual, audio, and kinesthetic). This fact aligns with the SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok observation, where most students have a combined learning style, thus requiring varied materials to achieve learning effectiveness.

Furthermore, research by Miftakhuddin (2022), who developed the VARK model (Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, Kinesthetic), states that students with multimodal learning styles will better absorb information if the material is presented in multiple formats. They assert that most students are not single learners but require a combination of learning styles for optimal information comprehension. This is consistent with the data obtained, where only a few students have a single learning style, and most rely on more than one way to learn effectively.

The data also shows that students have various levels of writing ability. Some students have not even been able to arrange letters correctly, unlike students who can write sentences with good structure. This indicates that giving writing tasks with the same standard for all students will lead to inequality of results. In differentiated learning, teachers need to organize gradual writing tasks, such as guiding students to organize words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, etc. In addition, teachers should provide various alternative writing tasks according to the student's level of readiness. This strategy aligns with Purwowododo (2023) opinion that learning products produced by students do not have to be uniform but must reflect achievements by their development and needs.

Interestingly, these findings are also consistent with research conducted by Rahmat et al (2023), which states that differentiated learning can significantly increase student engagement and understanding of the material, particularly in subjects that demand basic

skills such as reading and writing. Rahmat stated that this approach is very relevant to be applied at the junior high school level because, at this stage, students show very diverse cognitive and social development.

Differentiated learning strategies can be applied in several forms, such as flexible grouping based on reading ability, providing additional audio-based materials for students with difficulty reading, and using visual aids and media to strengthen concept understanding. Teachers can also give students choices in conveying learning outcomes, for example, through posters (visual), oral presentations (auditory), or practical projects (kinesthetic), according to their dominant learning styles.

However, although many research results support the effectiveness of differentiated learning, its implementation still has challenges. One is teachers' readiness to understand each student's needs and the ability to develop flexible learning tools. Not all teachers have enough training or experience to routinely assess students' learning needs. In addition, time constraints and the large number of students in one class can also be obstacles to the optimal implementation of differentiation. Therefore, there needs to be support from the school and education office through continuous training, provision of varied learning resources, and flexible curriculum policies to implement differentiated learning consistently and effectively.

Based on the description above, it can be concluded that there is a strong relationship between the assessment results of students' reading, writing, and learning styles and the basic principles of differentiated learning. The results obtained also conform to various studies conducted by experts in education. These facts reinforce that the application of differentiated learning is not just a choice of method but an absolute necessity in a heterogeneous classroom context such as SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok. By adopting this approach, teachers not only help lagging students catch up but also provide space for students who are already developing to continue to grow according to their potential.

E. Implication

The implications of these results suggest that teachers need to change the paradigm in the learning process. It is not enough to deliver material in general to all students; they must understand the learning needs of each student in more depth through routine and systematic diagnostic assessments. In practice, teachers must be able to manage the classroom with flexible strategies, for example, by giving varied tasks, using diverse learning media, and giving students the freedom to choose the way that best suits their learning style. This approach requires creativity, commitment, and support from the school and related institutions. Implementing differentiated learning also opens up opportunities for a more inclusive learning climate where all students feel valued, understood, and supported in their learning process. Thus, learning becomes more meaningful and can encourage increased motivation and overall student learning outcomes.

F. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As for future research, it is suggested that a broader study be conducted both in terms of the number of participants and the coverage area to strengthen the findings and obtain a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of differentiated learning in various educational contexts. In addition, it would be beneficial if further research uses a quantitative or experimental approach to more accurately measure the effect of differentiated learning on student academic achievement, especially in improving basic literacy skills. Research could also be expanded to explore the factors that support and hinder the implementation of differentiated learning, including teacher readiness, resource availability, and existing education policies. With more scientific evidence and good practices in the field, differentiated learning is hoped to be widely and sustainably implemented, thus truly realizing the principles of justice and equality in education.

G. Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the assessment results of students' reading, writing, and learning styles strongly relate to the basic concept of differentiated learning. In the context of a class that shows the diversity of students' abilities and characteristics, as happens at SMP Negeri 1 Bahorok, a differentiated learning approach is the right and relevant solution to answer the challenges in the learning process. Reading and writing difficulties that are still experienced by most students, as well as the diversity of learning styles that are dominant in combination (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), show that uniform learning is no longer adequate. Differentiated learning allows teachers to adjust materials, methods, and assessment forms according to students' learning readiness and methods to provide a fair opportunity for each learner to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

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