

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of The Study

English language learning at the primary school level is commonly viewed as an introductory stage in foreign language education. At this level, the primary goal is to build a basic linguistic foundation that prepares students for more advanced language learning in later stages of education (Nufus, 2018). Instruction typically emphasises fundamental skills such as vocabulary recognition, simple sentence construction, accurate pronunciation, and structured language exercises designed to ensure correctness and comprehension (Pinter, 2017). This foundational approach is essential, particularly for young learners who are still developing cognitively and linguistically. However, when such instructional practices are applied uniformly to all learners, they may unintentionally limit students' opportunities for exploration, creativity, and higher-order thinking. As a result, learning experiences may become less challenging and less motivating, especially for students with above-average abilities who require greater intellectual stimulation (Shin, 2020).

In practice, classrooms at the primary school level are inherently heterogeneous. Students enter the classroom with diverse backgrounds, interests, learning styles, levels of readiness, and cognitive abilities (Segura & Met, 2021). This diversity is particularly evident in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where learners acquire language skills at varying rates and through different strategies. Within the same classroom, some students demonstrate

sustained enthusiasm and strong focus even when instructional methods are repetitive or lack variation (Safriana et al., 2016). These students often display high curiosity, rapid comprehension, strong memory retention, and the ability to work independently—characteristics commonly associated with gifted learners (Renzulli, 2005).

At the same time, other students may struggle to remain engaged, particularly when learning activities are not interactive or do not align with their learning needs. These students may become easily distracted or bored, requiring more explicit instruction, repetition, and structured guidance to support their learning. Such contrasting characteristics highlight the reality that students do not learn in the same way or at the same pace. Unfortunately, these differences are frequently overlooked in everyday classroom practices, especially when teachers rely on a single instructional approach for all students (Tomlinson, 2001). When instruction does not respond to learner diversity, both gifted and non-gifted students risk not receiving learning experiences that adequately support their potential development.

The challenge of addressing student diversity is further intensified by teacher-related factors. Not all primary schools are staffed with English teachers who have received specialised training in teaching young learners or in managing heterogeneous classrooms (Yuen et al., 2023). Many teachers encounter significant constraints, including limited instructional time, insufficient teaching resources, large class sizes, and a lack of professional development opportunities focused on inclusive pedagogy (Agustina, 2007). These constraints make it difficult for teachers to recognise individual student differences and to design instruction that effectively accommodates diverse learning needs. Consequently, gifted students

may feel under-challenged, while non-gifted students may struggle to keep pace, resulting in unequal learning outcomes.

Gifted education has long been a prominent topic in educational research and practice. Scholars have proposed various definitions of giftedness, multiple identification criteria, and diverse instructional practices for serving gifted learners (Callahan et al., 2017; Dare & Nowicki, 2019; Johnsen & Kaul, 2019; McGrath, 2019; Russell, 2018; VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020). Despite these variations, there is general agreement that gifted learners require instructional approaches that recognise their advanced abilities and provide appropriate levels of challenge. Among the strategies recommended for serving gifted learners, differentiated instruction is widely regarded as one of the most effective approaches (Tomlinson, 2005).

In contrast, non-gifted learners often referred to as typically developing or average learners generally demonstrate developmental patterns that align with age-based expectations across cognitive, social, and academic domains. These learners tend to progress at a steady pace and benefit from structured learning environments in which objectives are clearly defined and instruction is systematically sequenced. They often require explicit explanations, guided practice, and opportunities for repetition to consolidate understanding and achieve mastery of new concepts (Slavin, 2018; Woolfolk, 2020).

Characteristics commonly associated with non-gifted learners include a preference for familiar routines, reliance on teacher direction, and a need for scaffolded support when engaging with complex or abstract material. Unlike gifted learners, who may exhibit rapid information processing, early abstraction skills, and

a strong inclination toward independent inquiry, non-gifted learners may require more time to analyze information, make connections, and apply knowledge in new contexts. They also tend to demonstrate more gradual development in critical thinking and problem-solving skills, particularly when tasks demand higher-order cognition (Santrock, 2019).

Additionally, motivation and engagement among non-gifted learners are often influenced by instructional design and classroom environment. These learners typically respond well to interactive, structured, and supportive teaching approaches that include modeling, feedback, and incremental challenges. Without appropriate instructional support, they may experience difficulty maintaining engagement, especially when tasks are either too complex or insufficiently guided (Hattie, 2009). It is important to emphasize that non-gifted learners possess diverse strengths and the capacity for meaningful academic growth when provided with effective instruction. Differentiated instruction, therefore, is not only essential for gifted learners but also plays a crucial role in supporting non-gifted students by adjusting content, process, and learning outcomes to match their readiness levels and learning needs (Tomlinson, 2005). By addressing the full spectrum of learner variability, educators can create inclusive classroom environments that promote equitable access to learning and foster the development of all students.

Differentiated instruction refers to a teaching approach that adapts content, process, product, and learning environment based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). Research suggests that differentiation is particularly important for meeting the needs of gifted students, as it allows them to engage with more complex tasks, work at an appropriate pace, and explore topics

in greater depth (VanTassel-Baska et al., 2020). However, despite its theoretical prominence, differentiated instruction is often not implemented effectively in classroom practice. VanTassel-Baska et al. (2020) reported that only 46% of observed classrooms actively accommodated individual student differences. Similarly, Tomlinson et al. (2015) found that many teachers have a limited understanding of what differentiated instruction entails and face challenges related to planning time and instructional demands.

Although differentiated instruction is widely acknowledged as a best practice for addressing learner diversity, its implementation in classroom practice remains limited. Many teachers continue to rely on a one-size-fits-all approach, providing minimal curriculum differentiation for gifted learners while simultaneously facing difficulties in supporting non-gifted students with varying learning needs (Callahan et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2015a). This inconsistency between theoretical recommendations and classroom realities suggests that teachers may encounter practical constraints or possess differing levels of understanding regarding how differentiation can be effectively applied. Such challenges are particularly evident in primary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where classrooms are highly heterogeneous and research examining differentiated instruction for mixed-ability learners is still relatively limited, especially within the Indonesian educational context.

Within this broader issue, Dyatmika Elementary School in Bali offers a meaningful and relevant setting for further investigation. As a national-plus school implementing a bilingual curriculum in a multicultural and inclusive environment, Dyatmika Elementary School accommodates students with diverse linguistic

experiences, academic readiness, and learning profiles. English is introduced from an early age as part of the school's commitment to developing global competence and international-mindedness. However, despite these aspirations, classroom practices often continue to prioritise structured language instruction that emphasises foundational skills, resulting in noticeable variations in student engagement and participation (Laila et al., 2022). This context highlights the tension between curriculum goals and classroom practices, reinforcing the need to examine how differentiated instruction is understood and implemented in response to the diverse characteristics of gifted and non-gifted learners.

Within this context, differences between gifted and non-gifted students are evident in both learning behaviour and cognitive engagement. Some students remain highly motivated and capable of independent learning despite repetitive instructional approaches. Others show reduced engagement when instruction lacks variety or meaningful challenge. These observable differences highlight the importance of instructional flexibility and teacher responsiveness. A uniform approach to teaching is no longer sufficient in such diverse classrooms. Instead, teachers must design adaptive learning experiences that challenge gifted learners while providing structured support for non-gifted learners, ensuring equitable opportunities for progress.

Central to this process is teachers' perceptions of student characteristics. Teachers' perceptions influence how they identify student needs, interpret learning behaviours, and select instructional strategies. When teachers have a clear understanding of learner differences—including the presence of gifted and non-gifted students—they are better positioned to implement differentiated instruction

effectively. Therefore, examining teachers' perceptions becomes a critical component in understanding how differentiation is enacted in real classroom settings.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring differentiated instruction strategies implemented by English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School. Specifically, it investigates teachers' perceptions of gifted and non-gifted students' characteristics, how these perceptions inform instructional practices, and the challenges teachers face in implementing differentiated instruction in heterogeneous EFL classrooms. By linking classroom practices to Tomlinson's theoretical framework, this study seeks to contribute to the development of more inclusive, adaptive, and impactful English language learning experiences for all students.

## **1.2 Problem Identification**

Based on the research background above, several problems in the field were identified. These problems are described as follows. In inclusive classrooms such as those in Dyatmika Elementary School, teachers often face challenges in addressing the diverse needs of gifted and non-gifted students. Gifted students tend to require more complex and higher-level tasks to stay engaged, while non-gifted students may need more time, scaffolding, and support to grasp the same material. This discrepancy can lead to a gap in learning experiences and outcomes if not properly addressed through instructional planning.

Differentiated instruction is known to be a useful strategy in mixed-ability classrooms. However, its implementation varies depending on the teacher's understanding, training, and willingness to adapt their teaching. In some cases,

teachers may resort to a “one size fits all” approach due to limited resources or time constraints. As a result, gifted students may feel unchallenged, while non-gifted students may struggle to keep up, both of which can impact motivation and academic achievement.

In Dyatmika Elementary School, which adopts an international curriculum and emphasises individual student growth, understanding how teachers differentiate instruction is essential. The researcher conducted this study to address two main issues based on the description above. The purpose of this research is to explore the differentiated instructional strategies employed by teachers to accommodate both gifted and non-gifted students’ characteristics. The focus on identifying the forms of differentiation applied and the underlying considerations behind those strategies.

There are several reasons that motivate the researcher to conduct this study. First, the researcher is interested in how teachers manage instructional balance in inclusive classrooms. Second, there is a need to understand the practical application of differentiated instruction in real classroom settings, especially in international schools like Dyatmika. Finally, the researcher hopes that the findings of this study contribute to the improvement of instructional practices and support for diverse learners in the future.

### **1.3 Limitations of The Study**

For the research to be more effective, efficient, and focused, as well as to allow for deeper analysis, it is necessary to establish clear limitations. To ensure that the research remains effective, efficient, and focused while allowing for deeper analysis, it is necessary to establish clear limitations. This

study is limited to the investigation of differentiated instructional strategies implemented by teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School. The focus is specifically on how these strategies are used to address the characteristics and learning needs of both gifted and non-gifted students within the classroom context. This research does not examine other related aspects such as curriculum design, school policies, or parental involvement in students' learning.

Furthermore, the study is confined to Grade 2 English lessons at Dyatmika Elementary School. This level was selected because Grade 2 represents an early stage of formal schooling in which students display a wide range of abilities, making differentiation particularly important. At this level, differences between gifted and non-gifted learners are often more observable in areas such as language development, comprehension, and learning pace. Therefore, focusing on Grade 2 provides a relevant context for examining how teachers adapt instruction to meet diverse student needs in a heterogeneous classroom.

In addition, the scope of data collection is limited to selected classroom observations and teacher interviews conducted solely at Dyatmika Elementary School. Due to time constraints during the research period, the duration and frequency of observations and interviews were restricted, which may limit the breadth and depth of the data collected. Nevertheless, the chosen methods and data sources are considered sufficient to provide meaningful insights into teachers' practices and perspectives regarding differentiated instruction in the selected context.

#### 1.4 Research Question

From the problem identified, it could be proposed the research questions as follow:

1. How do Grade 2 English teacher of Dyatmika Elementary School perceive the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted students in learning English?
2. How do Grade 2 English teacher of Dyatmika Elementary School implement differentiated instruction strategies to accommodate gifted and non-gifted students' characteristics in learning English?
3. What are the challenges experienced by Grade 2 English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School in implementing differentiated instruction strategies for gifted and non-gifted children?

#### 1.5 Purpose of The Study

Based on the research questions above, the objectives of the study could be obtained as below.

1. To analyze how Grade 2 English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School perceive the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted students in learning English.
2. To analyze how Grade 2 English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School implement differentiated instruction strategies to accommodate the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted students in learning English.
3. To describe the challenges experienced by Grade 2 English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School in implementing differentiated instruction strategies for gifted and non-gifted students.

## **1.6 Significance of The Study**

This research is based on the importance of understanding inclusive education where all learners have the same opportunity to develop their learning potential optimally. Learning that always assumes all children are homogeneous (have the same abilities and interests) runs the risk of being unfair to all learners because they have fundamental individual differences such as gender, social background, culture, economy, and other differences that play a role in learning success such as: motivation, giftedness, interest, learning speed, learning stamina, and so on. So this research has urgency because it provides an overview of the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted children in learning English as a foreign language and how teachers' efforts in facilitating the learning of students with these differences through differentiated learning. The urgency includes the following theoretical and practical benefits:

### **1.6.1 Theoretical Significance**

This study contributes theoretically to Tomlinson's differentiated instruction framework by deepening the understanding of how the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted learners are perceived and addressed in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) primary school context. By examining how teachers interpret individual differences related to cognitive readiness, interest and learning profile. This study extends existing differentiation theory beyond general classroom diversity to include a more explicit focus on giftedness within mixed-ability EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, this research strengthens the theoretical link between teachers' perceptions and the practical application of differentiated instruction across the

elements of content, process, product and learning environment. It highlights how teachers' understanding of gifted and non-gifted students influences instructional decisions and shapes the extent to which differentiation is implemented equitably. The study reinforces the theoretical premise that effective differentiation is grounded not only in instructional design but also in teachers' conceptual understanding of learner diversity. Consequently, this research enriches the theoretical discourse on differentiated instruction by positioning teachers' perceptions as a critical mediating factor in ensuring equality and equity in EFL learning contexts.

### **1.6.2 Practical Significance**

#### 1) For teacher

This research is expected to assist teachers in improving the quality of teaching English as a foreign language, particularly in inclusive classroom settings. By understanding the characteristics of gifted and non-gifted students, teachers can design and implement more effective differentiated instruction strategies that accommodate students' diverse learning needs, readiness levels, and interests. This study provides practical insights into how teachers can adapt teaching materials, instructional methods, and assessment techniques to ensure that all students are actively engaged in the learning process. It also helps teachers develop greater awareness of the importance of flexibility in teaching and encourages them to be more responsive to individual differences among students. The findings of this research are expected to support teachers in overcoming challenges encountered in implementing

differentiated instruction. By reflecting on the strategies and experiences presented in this study, teachers can enhance their professional competence, creativity, and confidence in managing inclusive classrooms. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to more effective, equitable, and student-centered English language teaching practices.

2) For further researchers

This research is expected to serve as a preliminary reference for future researchers who are interested in exploring individual differences in learning English as a foreign language, particularly the differences between gifted and non-gifted learners. It provides foundational insights into how these differences influence learning processes, classroom interactions, and instructional needs. This study can be used as a basis for developing more comprehensive research on differentiated instruction, especially in inclusive classroom contexts. Future researchers may expand this study by involving a larger number of participants, different educational levels, or varied school settings to obtain broader and more generalizable findings.

3) For Institutions of Teacher Education

This research can provide valuable insights for teacher education institutions in designing more responsive curricula and training programs that prepare future English teachers to implement differentiated instruction. Understanding learner diversity, particularly among gifted

and non-gifted students can help emphasize inclusive and adaptive pedagogical approaches in their teacher preparation programs.

## **1.7 Definition of Key Terms**

### **1.7.1 Conceptual Definition**

- a. Differentiated instruction is defined as a teaching approach in which teachers modify content, process, products, and learning environment to accommodate students' diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2005).
- b. Gifted students are learners who demonstrate advanced abilities, higher levels of understanding, and faster learning pace compared to their peers, often requiring more challenging and enriched learning experiences. In contrast, non-gifted students are learners who develop according to average age-level expectations and typically require structured guidance, repetition, and support in the learning process (Renzuli, 1978, 2005)
- c. Instructional strategies refer to the methods, techniques, and approaches used by teachers to deliver learning effectively and achieve instructional objectives (Richards & Rodgers, 2001)

### **1.7.2 Operational Definition**

- a. Differentiated instructional strategies refer to the specific teaching practices used by Grade 2 English teachers at Dyatmika Elementary School, including the modification of learning

materials, activities, grouping, and levels of support to address students' diverse needs.

b. Gifted students are identified as those who show higher performance in English learning, such as quicker comprehension, active participation, and the ability to complete tasks independently. Meanwhile, non-gifted students are identified as those who require more guidance, repetition, and teacher support in understanding English lessons.

c. The term implementation refers to how teachers apply differentiated instruction in classroom practices, which is observed through classroom activities and explored through teacher interviews. These operational definitions guide the data collection and analysis in examining how differentiated instruction is carried out in the classroom.

