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Implementation of Differentiated Instruction on the Reading Proficiency of Second-Grade Students at Firdaus Elementary School

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Abstract
Disparities in reading proficiency during the early years of primary education frequently constitute a critical pedagogical bottleneck, exacerbating literacy gaps when addressed through uniform, whole-class instruction. This study aims to examine the efficacy of differentiated instruction in enhancing the reading skills of second-grade students at Firdaus Elementary School, who exhibit a distinct bifurcation between emergent readers (syllable-by-syllable decoders) and fluent readers. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with a single-case study design, the research involved one homeroom teacher and 35 second-grade students. Data were collected through participatory classroom observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews with the teacher, and document analysis of initial diagnostic reading assessments and differentiated student worksheets. The findings demonstrate that process differentiation, operationalized through phonics-based intensive intervention for emergent readers and analytical text-comprehension enrichment for fluent readers, substantially enhances intrinsic motivation, instructional time efficiency, and reading automaticity. Furthermore, this pedagogical approach mitigates individual learning barriers, alleviates academic anxiety, and fosters an inclusive classroom ecosystem. These findings suggest that primary school practitioners should systematically adopt readiness-based differentiated instruction to optimize foundational literacy acquisition in early elementary grades.

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Introduction

Foundational reading proficiency in the early years of primary education serves as a critical determinant of students' long-term academic trajectories and cognitive development. Second grade represents a pivotal transitional stage in which learners must shift from mechanical phonetic decoding to fluent reading and contextual text comprehension. Despite this developmental imperative, empirical classroom realities frequently exhibit substantial heterogeneity in literacy readiness within a single cohort, as documented in recent international systematic reviews on elementary reading instruction (Achmad et al., 2024). At Firdaus Elementary School, second-grade cohorts are sharply bifurcated between fluent readers capable of expressive narrative reading and emergent readers who remain constrained by laborious syllable-by-syllable decoding. Conventional, one-size-fits-all whole-class instruction exacerbates this literacy divide by leaving advanced readers cognitively under-stimulated while causing struggling decoders to fall further behind. Consequently, addressing such wide intra-classroom disparities necessitates a responsive pedagogical paradigm shift toward differentiated instruction tailored to individual readiness levels (Abidin, 2019).

Recent international scholarship has increasingly investigated the efficacy of differentiated instruction in mitigating early-grade reading disparities across diverse elementary school contexts. For instance, Achmad et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of elementary reading interventions and demonstrated that adapting instructional processes and learning materials to student readiness significantly accelerates word recognition and reading fluency. Their synthesis emphasized that replacing uniform whole-class delivery with flexible, readiness-based small-group scaffolding prevents struggling readers from experiencing persistent academic marginalization. Similarly, Potot et al. (2023) examined differentiated instructional strategies in elementary reading classrooms and found that tiered learning tasks substantially elevated students' literal and inferential comprehension outcomes. Specifically, their study revealed that assigning direct, teacher-guided scaffolding to lower-readiness learners while providing autonomous analytical tasks to advanced peers fostered equitable academic growth. Together, these two studies establish a robust empirical foundation confirming that readiness-aligned grouping outperforms standardized literacy pedagogy in mixed-ability primary classrooms.

Expanding upon tiered instructional models, Nurdin et al. (2025) investigated a differentiated learning framework grounded in systematic diagnostic identification and iterative instructional reflection among early-grade elementary students. Their findings indicated that continuous diagnostic mapping enables teachers to precisely isolate mechanical decoding deficits from higher-order semantic comprehension needs before deploying targeted interventions. Furthermore, Nurdin et al. (2025) reported that structured diagnostic differentiation not only improved early-grade reading accuracy but also enhanced classroom time efficiency and student engagement. However, much of the existing empirical literature primarily evaluates reading achievement through aggregate quantitative test scores or focuses predominantly on upper-elementary comprehension

rather than lower-elementary decoding transitions. Little attention has been paid to the micro-level classroom dynamics and affective mechanisms, such as academic anxiety reduction and peer-mediated social scaffolding, occurring simultaneously within dual-track second-grade literacy classrooms. Therefore, examining how teachers operationalize concurrent phonics remediation and comprehension enrichment in real-time primary settings remains an essential area of inquiry.

To bridge this empirical and pedagogical gap, the present study establishes its *state of the art* by examining the simultaneous execution of dual-track process differentiation, combining intensive syllable-blending phonics intervention for emergent readers with analytical narrative enrichment and rotating peer tutoring for fluent readers, within a single second-grade classroom ecosystem. Unlike prior studies that examine emergent decoding or advanced comprehension in isolation, this investigation captures the holistic interplay between cognitive scaffolding, classroom management efficiency, and students' affective filters during early literacy transitions. Grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory and Tomlinson's readiness-based differentiation framework, this qualitative case study explores the pedagogical realities at Firdaus Elementary School.

Specifically, the study aims to provide an in-depth empirical account of how diagnostic readiness mapping informs dual-track literacy instruction and reshapes learner engagement across opposing ends of the reading spectrum. To guide this investigation, three primary research questions are formulated: (1) How is diagnostic reading readiness mapped and translated into differentiated instructional planning for second-grade students at Firdaus Elementary School? (2) How are dual-track process differentiation strategies, specifically phonics-based intervention and analytical comprehension enrichment, implemented simultaneously within a single classroom timeframe? (3) What cognitive and affective impacts emerge among emergent and fluent readers following the implementation of differentiated reading instruction?

Method

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design employing a case study approach to explore the real-world implementation of differentiated reading instruction in a natural classroom setting. The investigation was conducted at Firdaus Elementary School, involving a primary sample of one second-grade homeroom teacher and 35 students. Participants were selected via purposive sampling based on the pronounced heterogeneity of reading abilities documented within the classroom. Primary data were gathered through three triangulated techniques: (1) participatory classroom observations to capture teacher-student interactions and learner engagement during guided reading sessions; (2) in-depth interviews with the homeroom teacher to examine instructional planning challenges, scaffolding strategies, and students' affective responses; and (3) document analysis of student portfolios, encompassing initial diagnostic reading assessment records and differentiated student worksheets (*Lembar Kerja Peserta Didik* or LKPD). The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, comprising

data condensation, narrative and matrix data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data trustworthiness was ensured through methodological and source triangulation.

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the initial diagnostic reading assessment conducted collaboratively by the researchers and the second-grade homeroom teacher at Firdaus Elementary School, a marked distribution in literacy readiness was identified across the cohort ($N = 35$). Specifically, 18 students (51.4%) were categorized under the "Emergent Reading / Syllable-Decoding" tier, whereas 17 students (48.6%) were classified under the "Fluent Reading" tier. In response to this empirical baseline, the teacher designed a differentiated instructional module that structured classroom activities into two distinct intervention streams within an identical instructional timeframe. To systematically synthesize the pedagogical execution and empirical outcomes observed across both learner profiles, Table 1 presents the operational matrix of the differentiated reading intervention.

Table 1. Matrix of Differentiated Reading Instruction Implementation and Empirical Outcomes ($N = 35$)

Dimension	**Group A: Emergent Readers (n=18; 51.4%)**	**Group B: Fluent Readers (n=17; 48.6%)**
Diagnostic Baseline	Mechanical decoding stage; reliant on letter-by-letter or syllable-by-syllable spelling; limited word recognition speed.	Automatic word recognition; capable of reading extended narratives with appropriate phrasing and intonation.
Differentiation Focus	Process & Content Scaffolding: Phonemic awareness, phonics reinforcement, and automatic sight-word recognition.	Process & Product Enrichment: Independent higher-order reading comprehension and analytical text deconstruction.
Instructional Media & Tasks	High-frequency word flashcards and syllable-blending drills (bypassing isolated letter-by-letter spelling).	Analytical worksheets (*LKPD*) requiring identification of intrinsic narrative elements (characters, setting, moral message).
Teacher Role & Social Structure	Intensive, direct teacher-led scaffolding in a small-group setting to accelerate orthographic structure assembly.	Autonomous individual tasks supplemented by rotating peer-tutoring roles in paired reading activities.
Observed Cognitive & Affective Outcomes	Accelerated syllable-blending fluency; substantial reduction in academic anxiety and fear of public reading failure.	Elimination of classroom boredom; heightened critical thinking, sustained engagement, and prosocial peer leadership.

As detailed in Table 1, periodic classroom observations confirmed that readiness-based grouping substantially mitigated disengagement among high-achieving learners while alleviating performance anxiety among emergent readers. By calibrating task complexity to align with each group's immediate developmental threshold, students demonstrated heightened sustained attention and active participation throughout the literacy block.

Discussion

The empirical findings of this study substantiate contemporary literacy paradigms asserting that the efficacy of early reading instruction is governed not by the uniform delivery of standardized texts, but by the teacher's pedagogical responsiveness to students' cognitive-developmental readiness. In the context of Firdaus Elementary School, diagnostic stratification into emergent and fluent cohorts operationalized Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the construct of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). When emergent readers ($n = 18$) are subjected to whole-class comprehension tasks beyond their decoding capacity, instruction falls outside their ZPD, resulting in cognitive overload and learned helplessness. Conversely, by isolating phonics and syllable-blending interventions within a small, teacher-scaffolded group, the instructor provided targeted mediation that bridged the gap between students' actual decoding levels and their potential reading fluency. Simultaneously, assigning analytical narrative deconstruction to fluent readers ($n = 17$) ensured that their cognitive engagement remained continuously challenged within their respective ZPD.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology and reading acquisition models, the targeted intervention for Group A aligns closely with LaBerge and Samuels' *Automaticity Theory* and Stanovich's compensatory-interactive model of reading. Beginning readers possess a finite pool of attentional resources; when excessive working memory is consumed by conscious, letter-by-letter phonological decoding, minimal cognitive capacity remains available for semantic processing. The use of high-frequency word flashcards and syllable-chunking exercises directly targeted orthographic pattern recognition, thereby accelerating lexical access and freeing cognitive bandwidth. By transitioning students away from fragmented letter spelling toward holistic syllable blending, the differentiated process laid the essential neurocognitive groundwork required for future reading comprehension.

Furthermore, the enrichment mechanism designed for fluent readers reflects Carol Ann Tomlinson's principles of qualitative rather than quantitative differentiation. Rather than assigning merely a greater volume of identical reading exercises—a common pitfall in mixed-ability classrooms—the teacher elevated the cognitive demand along Bloom's revised taxonomy by introducing analytical worksheets (*LKPD*) focused on intrinsic literary elements. Moreover, integrating fluent readers as rotating peer tutors in

paired reading sessions introduced a collaborative dimension rooted in social constructivism. This peer-mediated learning structure not only reinforced the tutors' own metacognitive grasp of text structures through explanation and modeling, but also cultivated an inclusive, mutually supportive classroom micro-culture that dismantled social stigmatization between struggling and proficient readers.

Beyond cognitive and mechanical gains, the findings underscore the profound interplay between instructional design and the affective filter in early literacy acquisition. Traditional whole-class oral reading practices frequently expose emergent readers to public comparison, triggering heightened academic anxiety that inhibits phonological processing and working memory retrieval. The small-group intervention model observed in this study functioned as a psychological safety net, lowering students' affective filters and fostering intrinsic motivation. As emergent readers experienced incremental mastery through appropriately calibrated tasks, their academic self-efficacy improved markedly, while fluent readers exhibited sustained intrinsic engagement due to the autonomy and intellectual rigor of their enrichment assignments (Gultom, 2025).

Collectively, these results offer a compelling empirical rebuttal to rigid, uniform curricular pacing in early elementary education. The successful synchronization of dual instructional tracks within a single classroom timeframe demonstrates that differentiated instruction enhances both pedagogical equity and instructional time efficiency. However, while this qualitative case study illuminates the micro-processes of classroom differentiation, its single-site scope and non-experimental design constrain statistical generalizability. Future research should therefore employ quasi-experimental or randomized controlled designs across larger, multi-school cohorts to quantify longitudinal effect sizes on standardized reading fluency and comprehension metrics.

Conclusion

The implementation of differentiated instruction proves to be an effective, equitable, and inclusive pedagogical strategy for addressing reading proficiency disparities among second-grade students at Firdaus Elementary School. Through systematic diagnostic readiness mapping and flexible intervention grouping, emergent readers received intensive, anxiety-free phonics scaffolding, while fluent readers advanced their critical thinking skills through independent analytical comprehension and peer-tutoring roles. This dual-track approach optimizes classroom management efficiency and maximizes individual literacy trajectories. Consequently, early-grade teachers are urged to abandon uniform, whole-class instruction in favor of periodic diagnostic reading assessments to inform responsive lesson design. School principals should facilitate continuous professional development focused on designing differentiated instructional media, and future researchers are encouraged to investigate this framework using large-scale quantitative experimental designs.

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Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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