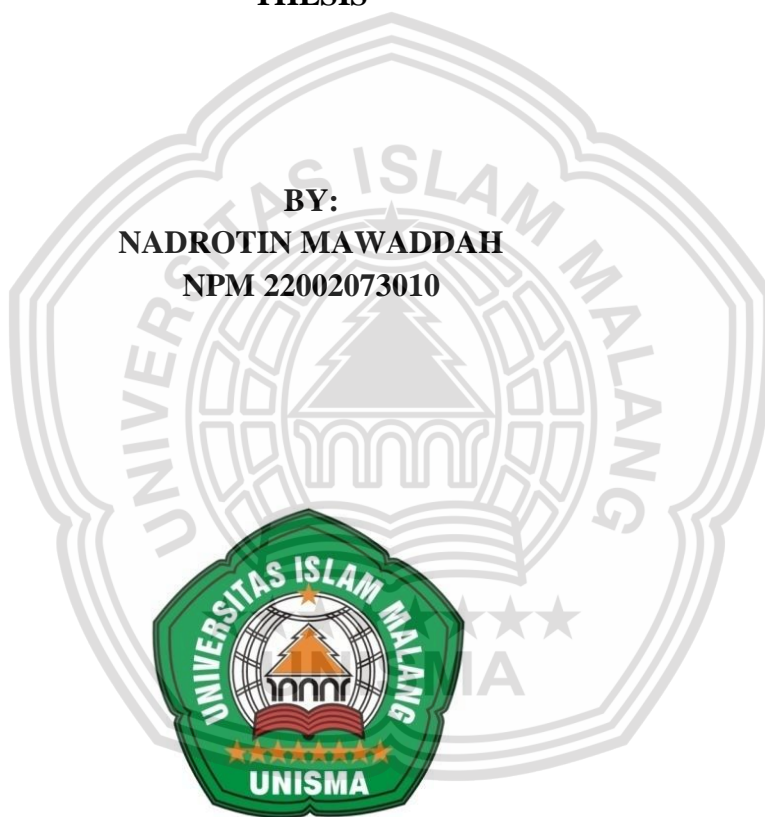




**TIERED ASSIGNMENT TO IMPROVE READING
COMPREHENSION OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS
IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASS**

THESIS

**BY:
NADROTIN MAWADDAH
NPM 22002073010**



**UNIVERSITY OF ISLAM MALANG
POSTGRADUATE PROGRAM
ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM
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ABSTRACT

Mawaddah, Nadrotin, 2022. *Tiered Assignment to Improve Reading Comprehension of Undergraduate Students in Mixed-Ability Class.* Thesis, English Education Departement, Post Graduate Program. University of Islam Malang: Advisor (1) Dr. Dra. Mutmainnah Mustofa, M.Pd.

Keywords: *Tiered Assignment, Reading Comprehension, Mixed-Ability Class.*

Teaching a mixed-ability class at undergraduate level is challenging since lecturers have to give equal opportunities to all students to develop their knowledge and skills. A preliminary study was conducted in an ESP class of Information System undergraduate program at Ibrahimy University Situbondo. The 23 students' reading ability levels vary from the low readers who are still struggling on vocabulary to the advanced readers who are ready for academic reading. The lowest student's score was 24/100, and the highest was 92/100. Only 39% or 9 students achieved the standard (the minimum grade 60). The lecturer used the same method and a reading text for all students in the previous teaching process, so it failed to accommodate all levels of the students.

Based on the preliminary and previous studies, the best solution for this class problem is Differentiated Instruction (DI) approach, which then focused more on a method called tiered assignment. It is a method of teaching diverse students with the same skill or concept but grouping students into tiers and giving them assignments with different levels of complexity based on their readiness. According to the benefits of this method on reading comprehension in higher education reported in previous studies, this current study aimed to improve undergraduate students' reading comprehension in mixed-ability class using tiered assignment.

The design of this study was classroom action research. A set of lesson plan was prepared for the action. The observing stage or data collection was conducted using three instruments; test, questionnaire, and observation checklist. The criteria of success were at least 80% of students achieve the minimum grade 60 and the students' feedback toward this lesson is positive. The reading scores were analyzed using percentage formula to calculate the proportion of students who achieved the standard.

Two cycles were conducted. The results showed that 91% of students could achieve the minimum standard and gave positive feedback toward the learning process. It implies that tiered assignment can improve reading comprehension in this class with a set of modified scenarios. The key strategies that make this action research successful lie on; 1) combining the differentiation of pre-reading material, teacher assistance, and reading assignments; 2) designing the materials and assignments for each tier in the same portion and duration; and 3) applying classroom management in which the teacher provided full assistance on the basic tier while keeping track of students progress in the other tiers.

ABSTRAK

Mawaddah, Nadrotin, 2022. *Tugas Berjenjang untuk Meningkatkan Pemahaman Membaca Mahasiswa S1 di Kelas Berkemampuan Campuran.*

Tesis, Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Program Pasca Sarjana.
Universitas Islam Malang: Pembimbing (1) Dr. Dra. Mutmainnah
Mustofa, M.Pd.

Kata Kunci: *Tugas Berjenjang, Pemahaman Membaca, Kelas Kemampuan Campuran.*

Mengajar kelas kemampuan campuran di S1 sangat menantang karena dosen harus memberikan kesempatan yang sama kepada semua mahasiswa untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan dan keterampilan mereka. Studi pendahuluan dilakukan di kelas ESP program sarjana Sistem Informasi di Universitas Ibrahimy Situbondo. Tingkat kemampuan membaca ke-23 siswa tersebut bervariasi dari pembaca yang masih berkatut pada kurangnya kosa kata hingga pembaca tingkat lanjut yang siap untuk bacaan akademis. Nilai siswa terendah 24/100, dan yang tertinggi 92/100. Hanya 39% atau 9 siswa yang mencapai standar (minimal 60). Dosen menggunakan metode dan teks bacaan yang sama untuk semua mahasiswa pada proses pengajaran sebelumnya, sehingga gagal mengakomodasi semua level mahasiswa.

Berdasarkan studi pendahuluan dan penelitian terdahulu, solusi terbaik untuk masalah kelas ini adalah pendekatan Diferensiasi Instruksi (DI), yang kemudian lebih difokuskan pada metode yang disebut tugas berjenjang. Ini adalah metode mengajarkan keterampilan atau konsep yang sama kepada siswa yang beragam kemampuannya, tetapi mengelompokkan siswa ke dalam *tiers* (kelompok keampuan) dan memberi mereka tugas dengan tingkat kesulitan berbeda sesuai level kesiapan mereka. Berdasarkan penelitian terdahulu yang memaparkan manfaat metode ini pada pemahaman bacaan di perguruan tinggi, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meningkatkan pemahaman membaca mahasiswa sarjana di kelas kemampuan campuran menggunakan metode tugas berjenjang.

Desain penelitian ini adalah penelitian tindakan kelas. Satu set rencana pelajaran disiapkan untuk tindakan tersebut. Tahap observasi yaitu pengumpulan data dilakukan menggunakan tiga instrumen; tes, angket, dan *observation checklist*. kriteria keberhasilan dalam penelitian ini adalah minimal 80% siswa mencapai nilai minimal 60 dan tanggapan siswa terhadap pelajaran ini positif.

Penelitian berhasil dilakukan dalam 2 siklus dan hasilnya 91% siswa dapat mencapai standar minimal dan siswa memberikan umpan balik yang positif terhadap proses pembelajaran. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa tugas berjenjang dapat meningkatkan pemahaman membaca di kelas ini dengan serangkaian skenario yang dimodifikasi. Strategi utama keberhasilan penelitian tindakan ini terletak pada: 1) menggabungkan diferensiasi materi *pre-reading*, pendampingan guru, dan tugas *reading*, 2) materi dan tugas pada setiap *tiers* harus dirancang dan dipersiapkan dengan baik dengan porsi dan durasi yang sama, dan 3) menerapkan manajemen



kelas dimana guru memberikan bantuan penuh pada *tier 1* sambil terus mamantau kemajuan siswa di *tier* lainnya.



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

No class in the world has students with the same level of ability. Therefore, teaching a diverse class is a fundamental competency that teachers must possess. However, the problem happens when the heterogeneity in a class is too diverse, or the distance between the lowest and highest students' abilities is too big. This condition is arduous since teachers have to give all students equal opportunities to develop their abilities, by paying more attention to struggling learners, while continuously strengthening the power of advanced students (Tomlinson, 2017). Therefore, MAC teachers must be competent in class management and have many strategies in hand (Al-Subaiei, 2017). Because of this challenge, MAC remains a potential topic that education experts are deeply researching. They attempt to study many alternative strategies to ease teachers' jobs.

ESP lecturers at undergraduate classes are ones struggling with the problem of Mixed-ability class, especially in teaching reading comprehension. It is because to teach students academic reading, a student should have adequate ability level in reading comprehension. According to Barrett (1972, as cited by Fridge, 2014), reading comprehension is divided into five levels; literal, reorganization, inferential, evaluation, and appreciation. McAndrews (2020) added lexical comprehension as the most basic level of reading comprehension before literal

comprehension. Ideally, students enrolled in university have masters lexical, literal and inferential comprehension and are ready to upgrade their abilities to the next levels of reading comprehension for specific academic purposes. Apparently, not all of them achieved the standard. They come with different ability levels of reading comprehension.

The condition primarily happens in almost all universities with non-native students in some countries of Africa (Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014), Arab (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017), and Asia (Hijikata et al., 2013). In Indonesia, Wahyuni (2021) has researched the diversity of reading comprehension levels of Indonesian university students based on a standard called the Reading Evaluation and Decoding System (READS). This study revealed that only 25.5% meet the standard, the remaining 46.7% of students are under the standard, and 27.8% are at the lowest level, called "academic warning". The subject of the research were some students from several universities in Indonesia. Unfortunately, there is no additional information about the quality of the universities and whether there is entrance test comprising reading test as the requirement to enroll at the universities. Thereby, to solve the MAC problem, it is necessary to observe the diversity of students reading ability levels in English classes of each university.

To explore more about the detailed problem of MAC happened at university, this current study attempted to explore the students' ability in a particular university, starting from the smallest part of learning system, which is English class. A preliminary study was conducted in an undergraduate ESP class at Information System study program of Ibrahimy University Situbondo. The results of the

preliminary study showed that the reading skills of the 23 female students were very diverse. Moreover, the distance between the lowest and the highest level is too far. The data was obtained from the students' grades at the previous learning process. The lowest students' reading score was 24/100, and the highest was 92/100. The teacher also revealed that only 39% or 9 students achieved the standard (the minimum passing grade 60).

The researcher attempted to evaluate the previous learning process, in which the lesson was reading comprehension. The teacher used the same method and a reading text for all students in the class. It was also found that some students complained that the texts and questions were too difficult. Their main problem was lacking vocabulary, and they failed to construct the meaning of the text. Meanwhile, students who were more proficient in reading could easily do the task and have no problems with the text complexity and the questions. Based on the results of this interview, it can be concluded that the methods and materials tended to favor students with high reading levels and neglected the lower ones.

This class condition is contrary to the opinion of psychology and SLA experts; Vygotsky's theory about Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), as well as Krashen's input hypothesis that teachers need to teach students 1 level above the current level to make them able to develop (Hunkler, 2016). Krashen's theory usually symbolizes "i+1", "i" is the current ability, and "+1" means 1 level above. Namaziandost et al. (2019) strongly agree with this theory. He revealed that students are more motivated to read texts that are above their ability than those that are easy and unchallenging. Otherwise, the text should not be too far beyond

students' current ability to avoid them being overwhelmed (Brown, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers sometimes disregard this theory, so it is suspected that it affects the failure of the previous learning process.

Based on the preliminary study, it needs to find a solution in an appropriate method for teaching reading in the MAC class. From previous studies, the researcher found differentiated instruction, an approach that attempts to accommodate students' differences in a class to provide equal opportunities to attain learning objectives (Suwastini et al., 2021). DI does not mean teaching students individually but rather modifying and varying content, process, and assessment according to students' diversity in readiness, interest, and learning style (Tomlinson, 2017). In this class case, the main problem is readiness diversity.

Based on some literature, DI itself is an approach comprising several methods. Therefore, it has to determine which method to employ in this study. For readiness, the most appropriate method is tiered assignment. It is a strategy of teaching students with the same concept or skill but assigned a task in different levels of complexity based on their own readiness (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011), while still maintaining that the class targets are accomplished (Tanjung & Ashadi, 2019). Thus, students with low reading skill will not be burdened with materials or assignments, and the high will not be bored with reading assignments that are not challenging. Surely, the assignments are not designed for every single student. Classically, the students are taught the same skill, reading comprehension, but they are divided into three tiers and get assignments according to their reading ability levels.

Several studies have investigated the benefits of TA. Moss et al. (2011) found that learning using the TA can deepen students' knowledge without burdening them. TA can also improve students' learning motivation and confidence (Chen, 2007; Lahrichi, 2019; Moss et al., 2011). Lahrichi (2019) also found that TA was very good at fostering learning autonomy and students' sense of ownership and responsibility in their own learning process. Hung and Chao (2021) also researched TA and concluded that TA was excellent when associated with cooperative learning because TA is a similar idea to ability grouping or grouping students based on their abilities. Based on these two studies, the benefits of implementing TA are associated with improving learning motivation, confidence, autonomy, responsibility, and cooperative competence.

Since the main problem in this research subject is in terms of reading comprehension, there were several studies on the application of TA in reading comprehension classes. First, Maghfirah and Fitrawati (2018) researched TA on reading comprehension at a secondary school and found that TA could improve students' reading ability. Second, White and Vibulphol (2020) experimented with the effectiveness of TA in improving reading comprehension in a secondary school, and the results were significantly effective. Third, the finding was reinforced by (Aitbayeva, 2018), who believes that the subjects who benefit the most from this method are the struggling readers because they really needed the differentiated assignment adjusted based on their ability level. They also felt delighted getting more support and assistance from the teacher. These studies prove that TA is a proper method to improve reading comprehension in mixed-ability classes.

The problem in this action research happened in an undergraduate class in a non-English program. It is categorized in English for Special Purpose (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP). There are several previous studies in this context. One of them is research by Chen (2007) about TA application at Taiwan's universities. He concluded that TA is appropriate for improving students' English language skills in non-native speaker countries with different cultures, such as some countries in Asia. In addition, Hung and Chao (2021) studied this topic in higher education, especially in a military institution. Finally, Tanjung et al. (2017) researched this method in an ESP class in the government and political education program. Even though these studies were not specific to the reading comprehension skill, they are sufficient to confirm that TA is an effective method for improving English language skills in higher education, especially in undergraduate classes.

Based on the preliminary and previous studies, tiered assignment can be a great solution to the problem in this class because considering many advantages of this method, especially in improving reading comprehension in mixed ability classes. Furthermore, several studies have also revealed that this method is appropriate for undergraduate ESP classes. Accordingly, this current research is designed as classroom action research to study tiered assignment in improving reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class.

1.2 Research Problems

According to the background, this research focuses on these following research problems:

1. Can tiered assignment improve reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class?
2. How is tiered assignment implemented to improve reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are:

1. To investigate whether tiered assignment can improve reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class.
2. To explore how to implement tiered assignment in improving reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class.

1.4 Scope and Limitation

This study investigates tiered assignment in improving reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class. It is in the area of reading comprehension studies, but it focuses on reading for undergraduate students. The subjects are the students of information system study program at Ibrahimy University Situbonodo, so the lesson is English for specific purpose. The main problem is that the students have a big diversity in readiness, also called a Mixed-Ability class. Therefore, Tiered assignment as a part of differentiated instructions is the action determined for this classroom action research.

Because of the design, this study is limited in the subject of research which is only one class. Therefore, there is no population and sampling, so the

generalization can not be applied to all undergraduate classes. However, EFL or ESP classes in universities with similar problems can propose the finding of this classroom action research for a solution to improve the students' achievement.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is divided into theoretical and practical significance as follows:

1. Theoretical Significance

This study contributes theoretically to the theory of reading and differentiated instruction. The finding of this research provides a variety of strategies for teaching reading to adult learners, especially university students. Regarding differentiated instruction, previous studies mainly discussed conceptual framework and its effectiveness. There are fewer studies on how to implement DI in the class. In addition, DI is also discussed in general terms, even though DI is an approach that houses several methods. Therefore, the findings of this study contribute to presenting a way to apply one of the DI methods, tiered assignment. Because the target class is a class that differs in terms of readiness or ability levels, this research is ultimately also beneficial in developing a theory about mixed-ability teaching.

2. Practical Significance

Practically, the finding of this research is beneficial for English teachers, especially English lecturers of universities in Indonesia who have the same problem

in their classes. Furthermore, as mentioned in the background, most ESP undergraduate classes in Indonesia are mixed-ability classes. Therefore, this finding provides an alternative strategy to teach appropriately in such a class; all students will have equal opportunities to upgrade their ability levels.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

1. Tiered Assignment

Tiered assignment refers to a method of teaching diverse students with the same skill or concept. However, they learn at different levels of complexity based on their readiness while maintaining that the lesson targets are accomplished.

2. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability to analyze text, comprehend its meaning, and integrate it with prior knowledge. Practically in this study, students read essay texts and answer comprehension questions based on the texts.

3. Mixed-Ability Class

Mixed-Ability Class is a class of students with diverse ability levels in terms of readiness, learning styles, or interest. This study focuses on the diversity of students' readiness.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

6.1 Conclusions

The results of this action research concluded that tiered assignments can increase reading comprehension of undergraduate students in mixed-ability class with a set of scenarios; pre-reading, reading, and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activity was giving the students essential knowledge needed before reading. Reading activity means assigning the students to worksheets of reading comprehension. These two stages were carried out differently in each tier according to their ability levels. Finally, in post-reading, a reading test was given to the students to examine the result of the action.

Behind the scenario, there were three key strategies that made this action research successful in teaching and learning. *First*, differentiating pre-reading material, teacher assistance, and reading assignments. *Second*, designing the materials and assignments of each tier in the same portion and duration. *Third*, implementing classroom management, especially in providing full assistance on the basic tier while keeping track of students in the other tiers.

6.2 Suggestions

1) For Further Research

For the next research, the researcher suggests doing research of tiered assignment on different skills but still at the undergraduate non-English department

level. It is because there is a lot of research on tiered assignments at the secondary level but at the university level is limited. Further researchers should consider that the higher the level of education, the bigger differences in student abilities. In addition, the researcher also suggests trying other methods in the area of Differentiated Instructions to enrich alternative strategies in teaching EFL or ESP MACs.

2) For ESP Lecturers

The researcher suggests lecturers or teachers with the same problem as this research try tiered assignments in their classes. It is also suggested that ESP lecturers pay attention to the other aspects of differentiation in their classes, such as interests and learning styles, since there is no more "all size fits all" concept in today's learning theories. The goal is to provide equal opportunities for all students to develop their abilities.

3) For Institution

Despite so many methods in MAC, teaching in such a class is not easy. The differentiation causes a pile of teachers' workloads. Instead, some teachers might be overwhelmed, give up, and return to their conventional method. Therefore, the institution's role is needed in this case to support the teaching and learning process. Several programs are suggested; 1) classifying students into separated classes not based on the study programs but based on their English ability level, 2) increasing the portion of learning English in the curriculum. 3) making a pre-college matriculation program, especially in English language skills for undergraduate applicants.

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