

Problematics in the Implementation of *Binnendifferenzierung* in German Writing Classes: Insights from Teachers and Learners.

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ABSTRACT

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German is taught as a foreign language (DaF) in Indonesia, where learners are expected to master all four language skills, including writing. However, the considerable variation in learners' linguistic abilities creates a strong pedagogical need for differentiated instruction. Although *Binnendifferenzierung* offers a promising approach to addressing learner diversity, its implementation in the Indonesian DaF context continues to encounter various challenges. This article examines the key problems that arise when differentiation strategies are applied in the writing course *Thematisches Schreiben*. The findings show that implementing *Binnendifferenzierung* poses challenges for both teachers and students. Teachers struggled with the extensive preparation required for designing varied tasks, while students faced difficulties selecting appropriate tasks and exhibited weaknesses in vocabulary, idea development, paragraph organization, and grammatical accuracy. Overall, the study indicates that the effectiveness of *Binnendifferenzierung* is constrained by substantial instructional demands and learners' limited linguistic readiness.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching German as a foreign language (DaF) in Surabaya, Indonesia, has shown that writing constitutes one of the most demanding competencies for beginner learners. Preliminary observations in the writing class (*Thematisches Schreiben*) reveal that many students struggle to produce texts that meet expected academic standards. These difficulties stem not only from the cognitive complexity of writing but also from the pronounced heterogeneity of the learners. Approximately 70% of students in the German Language Education Program at UNESA, Surabaya without prior exposure to German at the secondary-school level, resulting in minimal knowledge in German. This heterogeneity manifests in limited vocabulary knowledge, weak grammatical control, uneven writing proficiency, and varied reading comprehension abilities, all of which hinder subsequent learning processes (cf. Krumm, 2010; Helbig, 2011).

Large classes present additional difficulties because all students are given the same topics and tasks, irrespective of their language skills. This standardized method often negatively affects students with lower language abilities, while it may not sufficiently challenge those with higher proficiency. These differences in language exposure emphasize the necessity of flexible teaching methods and support current suggestions for personalized learning in foreign-language instruction (Tomlinson, 2014; Müller & Schmidt, 2017).

Differentiated instruction has emerged as a pedagogical necessity in response to these difficulties. *Binnendifferenzierung*, an internal differentiation strategy that permits

variation in tasks, themes, materials, and instructional formats in accordance with individual learner needs, is one pertinent method (Hallet & Königs, 2013). *Binnendifferenzierung* can be applied not only in a writing course, but also in a reading course (Julaikah, 2018). Moreover, it is believed that this method will support the proportionate development of writing competence and better accommodate diverse learner profiles.

However, there are a number of restrictions and new difficulties with using this method in Indonesian German as a Foreign Language (DaF) classroom. As a result, this article explores the idea of differentiation and the particular challenges faced in teaching German-language writing in Indonesia, concentrating on the viewpoints of both teachers and students with regard to the implementation of *Binnendifferenzierung*. The practical difficulties of implementing differentiated instruction in German language classrooms with a range of learner proficiency levels are empirically explained by this study.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the difficulties in teaching writing in the *Thematisches Schreiben* course as well as the difficulties resulting from the application of *Binnendifferenzierung*. This method was selected because it enables a comprehensive understanding of learning phenomena in foreign language contexts by facilitating an in-depth analysis of non-numerical data obtained from written field notes and classroom observations (Djoyosuroto, 2003).

This article is based on research done from February to November 2024 as part of Universitas Negeri Surabaya's (UNESA) German Language Education Study Program. The participants were students from the 2023C cohort who were enrolled in *Thematisches Schreiben*, one of the writing modules in a structured sequence that also includes *Deutsch (German Language)*, *Thematisches Schreiben (Thematic Writing)*, *Erweitertes Schreiben (Advanced Writing)*, and *Schreiben für Anfänger (Writing for Beginners)*.

Data were gathered by methodically observing lessons created with *Binnendifferenzierung*. The implementation of differentiated writing instruction and the difficulties faced by teachers and students were the main topics of data collection. As research tools, four task variations (Aufgabe A, B, and C) representing various linguistic and cognitive levels were used. Analysis of students' vocabulary use, idea development, paragraph construction, and grammatical accuracy in German was made possible by these tiered tasks (Tomlinson, 2014; Hall, 2002). As a result, the Aufgabe served as both a teaching tool and a means of gathering data for this investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Writing in German Language Instruction at the A2 Level

Writing ability is a key component of the German Language Education Program at UNESA. The program's curriculum is designed to foster a progressive and organized improvement in students' writing skills. The program's curriculum mandates that undergraduate German students achieve writing competency at the A1, A2, and B1 levels. This development is facilitated through several courses that emphasize writing, such as *Schreiben für Anfänger (Writing for Beginners)*, *Thematisches Schreiben (Thematic*

Writing), *Erweitertes Schreiben* (Advanced Writing), *Schriftlicher Ausdruck* (Written Expression), *Deutsch*, and *Kreatives Schreiben* (Creative Writing). Each course is designed to cultivate specific linguistic and textual competencies aligned with international standards for German as a foreign language.

Thematisches Schreiben, offered in the second semester, 2 credit hours, is dedicated to training students in producing written texts at the A2 level in accordance with global benchmarks. This course is a continuation of the 4-credit class *Schreiben für Anfänger*, which targeted A1 writing skills and prepared students for courses like *Erweitertes Schreiben* (Advanced Writing) and *Deutsch*, both offering further development of B1-1 level writing competence. These two courses together, *Erweitertes Schreiben* and *Deutsch*, aim to provide students with productive German language skills, specifically writing at the B1-2 level. The B1-2 proficiency level is described by the *Gemeinsamer Europäischer Referenzrahmen für Sprachen, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*, which describes what a learner is able to do at this level: produce written texts related to everyday topics, themes relevant to the workplace, and different forms of personal or semi-formal communication like letters and short messages.

In the process of writing instructions, starting from A1 to B1, students' learning results will be measured according to unified evaluation standards. Emphasis is given to the following three aspects in assessment norms: expressive ability means clarity and accuracy of expression for the required content; formal correctness includes correct usage of grammatical and orthographic conventions; and cohesion and coherence provide logical and structural arrangement of the text. These criteria tally with the internationally recognized frameworks of German language testing and are necessary for the precise measurement of the progress in learners' acquired skills.

According to the A2 level, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) outlines certain expectations regarding writing competence. It presumes that at the end of this period, students will be able to write simple, connected texts on familiar topics, drawn from everyday life, including descriptions of their personal background, routines, living conditions, and basic occupational contexts. Regarding this, students also need to be able to produce short messages, notes, emails, and basic descriptions using simple cohesive devices such as basic connectors-and, but, because-and temporal markers-then, afterwards. The competencies described above form the necessary foundations for successful continuation at the B1 level, where candidates should argue in more detail in a narrative, explanatory, and argumentative way.

The systematic development of writing competence within the UNESA German Language Course follows contemporary pedagogical principles concerning German as a foreign language. Scholarship points out: "writing proficiency also consists of linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, and genre-specific elements" (Fix, 2008; Brinker, 2010). Thus, teaching at the A2 level covers not only grammatical precision and the expansion of vocabulary but also acquaints the learner with text types, communicative purposes, and the acquisition of adequate textual organization. The command of those elements constitutes the basis upon which the advanced ability to write will be elaborated at the higher levels of competence.

***Binnendifferenzierung* in DaF Writing Instruction**

Binnendifferenzierung or internal differentiation has been an essential teaching principle in teaching the German language. Theoretical background describes *Binnendifferenzierung* as an adjustment of learning processes based on varying cognitive, linguistic, and motivational characteristics within a heterogeneous class. The roots of *Binnendifferenzierung* lie within the works of Hall and enduring concepts dating back to the 1970s.

According to Schwerdtfeger: "Internal differentiation: 'the possibility of designing the learning process differently for different learners. It implies that instead of applying uniform methods to all pupils, educators have to deal with specific intelligence, interest, learning motivation, and pre-existing knowledge'" (Schwerdtfeger, 1991, p. 11).

The views of Sofia 2006:14 draw on *Lernen an Stationen* (learning stations) as action-oriented differentiation where the learners take on an active role in constructing new knowledge by applying different learning strategies. This model presents a case whereby differentiation exceeds the areas of content to learning processes and learner autonomy. Another important approach to differentiated instruction is social differentiation. According to Frey (2003:8), "the advantage of group work is that people help one another solve concrete problems," which signifies the potential of group-based learning compared to individual work.

Core Modalities of *Binnendifferenzierung* (Based on German Didactic Theory);

- **Task Differentiation**
Adjusting the cognitive and linguistic complexity of tasks according to learner proficiency.
- **Material Differentiation**
Providing graded materials, vocabulary support, and texts tailored to proficiency levels (Tesch, 2015).
- **Process Differentiation**
Varying the degree of scaffolding through writing frames for beginners and open-ended tasks for advanced learners (Hallet & Königs, 2013).
- **Social Differentiation**
Organizing flexible groupings, including individual, pair, or group work, depending on instructional goals (Bönsch, 2011).

In the DaF writing lesson, this is the approach that allows parallel, structured learning paths so that all students attain common curricular goals in accordance with diversity in readiness. Accordingly, the process involves lexical support, sentence starters, and highly structured guidance for beginners while advanced learners are given more challenging writing tasks. Through differentiated peer feedback, the opportunity is made possible for learners to work at an appropriate cognitive level, stressing accuracy for novices and cohesion or rhetorical organization for the advanced writers. Generally speaking, *Binnendifferenzierung* enhances learner participation, preventing cognitive overload and thus ensuring equal opportunities in such heterogeneous classrooms.

Implementation of *Binnendifferenzierung*

The initial phase of data collection in this study involved the concrete implementation of writing instruction through *Differenzierung nach Aufgaben* (task differentiation), carried out across three stages. The stages were as follows:

Station 1 – Task Differentiation

In *Station 1, Aufgabe A*, students were provided with internal differentiation was operationalized by preparing a set of writing instruments designed to vary the nature of tasks while maintaining uniformity in the core A2-level writing material used in the *Thematisches Schreiben* course. Although all learners received the same thematic content, the exercises differed in format. The differentiated task types included: (a) vocabulary expansion and consolidation activities, (b) guided writing supported by key words or prompting phrases, (c) writing based on cartoon-image stimuli, and (d) free-topic writing. This structure enabled the provision of parallel yet varied writing pathways aligned with learners' needs while preserving consistency with A2 writing standards.

Station 2 – Guided Thematic Writing

In *Station 2, Aufgabe B*, students were provided with instructional materials designed to develop their writing skills on the theme *Freizeit oder Tätigkeiten*. To support their written production, a set of key words and relevant vocabulary associated with the topic was supplied in advance. The task required students to compose a short, simple paragraph describing the activities they are engaged in this year. The guiding prompt presented in the instrument was: *Was machen Sie dieses Jahr? Schreiben Sie einen kurzen Text.*

Station 3 – Visual-Based Writing

In *Station 3, Aufgabe C*, students received materials aimed at further developing their writing skills on the theme *Freizeit oder Tätigkeiten*. They were presented with a cartoon sequence depicting various leisure activities carried out by a character named Greta. Students were first required to identify four activities illustrated in the images, and subsequently compose a simple descriptive text explaining what Greta is doing. The task engaged learners in transforming visual information into written language, thereby supporting the development of basic descriptive writing skills consistent with A2 proficiency expectations.

Problematics in the Implementation of *Binnendifferenzierung*

Binnendifferenzierung implementation within writing pedagogy (*Thematisches Schreiben*) encompasses a multitude of steps within a pedagogical process. Findings from research have aided in understanding that there are multiple difficulties associated with implementation, and these difficulties range from factors related to teachers and learners. It can be argued that these factors relate to attributes associated with *Binnendifferenzierung* itself, as it requires planning and malleability on the part of pedagogues and learners who are prepared for learning divergent learning paths (Tomlinson, 2014; Hall, 2002). Within this section, understanding challenges associated with implementation within pedagogues and learning paths associated with learners will be explored.

Challenges in the Preparation Stage

During the preparation stage, teachers are faced with great challenges, especially with regards to the amount of time needed to prepare different task instruments. While applying *Binnendifferenzierung*, there is a great need for varying task types based on the learners' abilities and interests. As a result, teachers invest a lot of time and effort in preparing differentiated learning tasks, assessment tools, and learning materials. Not only does varying learning present a challenge in creativity but also requires highly accurate technical considerations for successful implementation and teaching and learning processes.

Challenges in the Implementation Stage

During the intervention stage, the main issue resides within task selection as a process among the learners. Learners have been given autonomy and freedom to select assignments based on their interests and levels. However, this autonomy contributes to learners getting confused. Some learners had challenges selecting the best task, while others chose based on what other learners wanted. It is clear that social issues have impacts on learners' decision-making processes as cited by Tomlinson and Moon, 2013. The short tutoring period, which is limited to four hours per week, acts as yet another constraint within optimizing *Binnendifferenzierung*, given that the skill of writing needs intense practice.

Challenges in the Evaluation Stage

Findings of the questionnaire completed by the students showed that learners still experience overwhelming problems in developing writing competence, which include: limited vocabulary mastery as shown by insufficient lexical choices; generation of ideas and putting them into paper remains a problem; grammatical competence is weak; usage of an article in Nomen is not well comprehended; poor development of main ideas in constructing a coherent paragraph; constrained vocabulary has caused learners to be unsure about constructing grammatical sentences; coherent organization of paragraphs remains a problem, with many learners displaying fragmented writing; and suffers from forgetfulness regarding vocabulary, use of articles, and grammatical constructs when engaging in writing. Clearly, all of these findings indicate that linguistic competence needs more reinforcement to support or enable successful implementation of *Binnendifferenzierung*.

Overall, the questionnaire responses from sixty-nine learners indicate that the challenges in applying *Binnendifferenzierung* extend beyond technical aspects of planning and implementation. They are also deeply connected to learners' linguistic readiness and their ability to engage with differentiated tasks. These findings suggest that differentiation strategies must be designed more adaptively to accommodate the diverse linguistic abilities and learning needs of individual students.

Learners' Challenges in Implementing *Binnendifferenzierung*

Analysis of the data gathered from sixty-nine participants shows some common issues associated with *Binnendifferenzierung* as implemented within the course theme

“*Thematisches Schreiben*.” It appears that a significant number of participants find writing challenging, as thirty-eight participants said that thematic writing is a challenge, while thirty-one do not. However, more participants who have problems frequently relating to issues associated with written text production are sixty-one, as just eight participants said they don’t have problems. The most common issue associated with participants seems to be a lack of vocabulary as identified by sixty-two participants. Moreover, aside from finding it hard to identify main ideas associated with writing, which only twenty-one participants complained about, more participants have problems developing these ideas into well-structured paragraphs, given that thirty-seven participants complained about it.

The findings regarding the differentiated writing tasks (*Binnendifferenzierung* Aufgabe 1 and Aufgabe 2) also show a mixed pattern. For example, Aufgabe 1 vocabulary building and writing tasks were judged too difficult by thirty students and not at all too difficult by thirty-nine students. Similarly, thirty-five students regarded Aufgabe 2 as problematic, whereas thirty-four did not. This gives a balance, suggesting that differentiated task format accommodations supported some learners while challenging others, possibly due to differences in linguistic readiness or cognitive strategies. However, despite these apparent difficulties, a full sixty-three students reported the variation of tasks provided through *Binnendifferenzierung* helped them to select materials according to their abilities. Also, sixty-two learners agreed that freedom of choice concerning types of tasks eased the production of written texts, while fifty-nine students used the possibility of self-chosen partnership to support their writing performances. These findings underpin the pedagogical value of autonomy and task flexibility within differentiated instruction, which aligns with these principles of emphasizing learner agency, motivation, and self-regulated learning.

Learners’ Challenges in Implementing *Binnendifferenzierung*

Aside from these formulated questionnaire responses, open-ended responses provide a clearer understanding about the nature and extent of challenges students experience as they engage with writing. Several salient points emerged from these responses. First, there appeared a general lack of vocabulary competence among students, making it more difficult for them to expand words into meaningful paragraphs. Second, some students took time and struggled as they attempted to conceptualize and develop ideas, as well as express these ideas cohesively as written text. Third, some learners struggled with new vocabulary introduced in classes, with some forgetting some vocabulary and finding it more difficult to combine words into grammatically acceptable sentences. Fourth, some students struggled as they attempted to develop main ideas into complete paragraphs, with some A1 level proficient learners finding it very difficult due to a lack of necessary words and grammatical structure necessary for completion. Fifth, organizing grammatically acceptable sentences into meaningful and effectively-structured paragraphs took a considerable amount of time among these participants. Finally, grammatical accuracy, most particularly articles and grammatical structure rules for German, continuously affect these learners' writing skills. These salient points suggest

cumulative understanding about the role of linguistic readiness as it contributes toward making *Binnendifferenzierung* meaningful among these participants.

Taken together, the questionnaire results illustrate that, although *Binnendifferenzierung* provides valuable flexibility and supports learner autonomy, its success is closely tied to students' linguistic competence, especially vocabulary mastery, grammatical understanding, and text organization skills. The challenges identified highlight the need for more targeted linguistic scaffolding within differentiated writing tasks, ensuring that learners at lower proficiency levels receive adequate support to fully benefit from the pedagogical advantages of *Binnendifferenzierung*.

The examination of the questionnaire data carried out by sixty-nine participants highlights several prominent problems related to *Binnendifferenzierung* within the framework of the *Thematisches Schreiben* project. Baselines indicate that a serious number of participants rate thematic writing as highly cognitive, as thirty-eight participants have pointed out the comparative difficulties of writing within thematic settings, as opposed to thirty-one participants. However, more participants have pointed out the presence of serious problems throughout text production, as sixty-one participants have done so, as opposed to only eight participants. A more serious problem arises as it relates to insufficient vocabulary knowledge, as sixty-two participants have pointed out, indicating that it is an essential problem, as it relates to implementation. Also, it would appear that more participants pose less challenge within main idea recognition, as twenty-one participants have done so. Additionally, more participants have pointed out challenges within main idea implementation as it relates to paragraphs, as thirty-seven have done so.

As regards differentiated writing activities (*Binnendifferenzierung*), there emerges a complex picture. Thirty participants pointed out they struggled with the vocabulary-building and writing task related to Aufgabe 1, while thirty-nine participants did not experience problems. A qualitative pattern emerges again with regard to Aufgabe 2, as thirty-five participants complained about difficulties and thirty-four participants pointed out they have had no problems. This symmetry shows that, on the one hand, differentiated task implementation meets core standards within *Binnendifferenzierung*, but, on the other, depends on participants' linguistic maturities and metacognition. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that a remarkable majority (sixty-three participants) supported that offering various task options made it easier for them to identify materials with a focus on their own needs. Moreover, sixty-two participants were of the idea that they could improve their productivity with regard to writing due to task autonomy, and fifty-nine pointed out that it made a difference for them that they were able to choose their own working partner while writing.

Aside from these structured items on the questionnaire, additional insights were offered by the qualitative responses given. Several instances were cited as recurrent. First, there was ample mention made about lacking vocabulary knowledge as a core issue that limited opportunities for expanding on existing lexical entries and developing these into meaningful paragraphs. Second, there were reports about problems with conceptual and lexical articulation as concepts were formulated and put into meaningful text. Third, it was cited about ongoing problems with retention on introduced vocabulary as they were

soon overlooked and hard-pressed into grammatically acceptable form. Fourth, problems existed among learning participants, especially categorized at A1 level proficiency, as there existed core problems with developing main ideas about complete paragraphs because they were short on necessary linguistic components to warrant word-length and grammatical complexity. Fifth, there existed problems with organizing and developing structured sentences into meaningful and meaningfully-coherent paragraphs, taking considerable learning time for learning participants. Finally, there were cited core grammatical problems with article and German grammatical form usage. It will be seen again that there exist core implications for *Binnendifferenzierung* and learning participants regarding linguistic readiness as an overriding determinant about *Binnendifferenzierung* implementation success.

So, based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, it can be seen that while *Binnendifferenzierung* has some flexible pedagogical value and supports autonomy on the learning side, fundamentally it depends on learners' language skills. It can be aptly summarized here that due to some challenges pointed out by the current research, there truly arises an imperative need for some better support for linguistic skills so that learners at a lower level can have equal benefits of *Binnendifferenzierung*. Because without it, it might result in an increase in learner disparities instead.

CONCLUSION

Additionally, it shows that there are pedagogical, language, and contextual factors that influence *Binnendifferenzierung* implemented in Indonesian DaF writing classes. Although internal differentiation provides an excellent theoretical foundation for addressing variability, it poses a challenge as it requires a considerable amount of workload on the side of teaching staff due to task preparation, limited class time, and varying levels of readiness among learners. Learners' problems associated with vocabulary mastery, grammatical correctness, idea production, and paragraph completion validate that differentiated writing assignments would be ineffective without proper support. Moreover, learners' hesitation about task suitability emphasizes that there should be better guidance

Overall, it becomes clear that there is a great discrepancy between the theoretical promise of differentiation and its practice as it occurs in Indonesian DaF classes. *Binnendifferenzierung* as an optimal implementation strategy needs careful and supportive intervention on a system level with a focus on professional staff development, differentiated learning materials, and Learner Autonomy. The considerations made here can be seen as a contribution to debates on adaptive foreign languages learning, as they highlight once again the importance of developing a differentiated learning model that suits local learning contexts.

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