

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This study explores the pedagogical practices and support systems surrounding English language teaching for students with special needs in Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB), with a focus on two experienced teachers in Gorontalo City. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, capturing insights from teachers instructing students with diverse disabilities, including visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, and developmental impairments. The findings indicate that teachers adapt lesson plans, design their own modules, and employ multimodal resources such as flashcards, posters, videos, and educational applications. Instruction is personalized based on initial assessments to align with each student's abilities. However, challenges persist, notably the lack of specialized training in English teaching for students with disabilities, inconsistent parental involvement, and limited collaboration with external educational stakeholders. While institutional support—such as policy provisions and instructional materials—is evident, external partnerships remain underdeveloped. The study underscores the need for systemic interventions, including targeted professional development, strengthened home-school collaboration, and inter-agency cooperation to ensure inclusive and effective English language education for learners with special needs.

Keywords: English language teaching, special needs education, inclusive education, teacher strategies, instructional support, SLB Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the movement toward inclusive education has gained growing attention in Indonesia's educational landscape, including in the domain of foreign language instruction. Among the subjects mandated by the national curriculum, English holds a crucial position due to its global significance and relevance in higher education, employment, and digital communication. However, teaching English to students with special needs presents unique and often underexplored challenges. Unlike general schools, students with special needs are catered to a wide range of student conditions such as hearing impairments, visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, and physical disabilities. This diversity demands highly adaptive pedagogical approaches and personalized learning strategies. While policy frameworks support inclusive learning goals, there is limited clarity on how English language teaching (ELT) is actually being implemented in special needs classrooms across Indonesia.

The need to understand English instruction in School for Students with special needs settings becomes increasingly urgent when considering the gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. Many English teachers working in School for Students with special needs are trained as general educators or language instructors, but not necessarily in special education. As a result, they are often required to improvise, drawing on personal experience, peer collaboration, or limited training to design appropriate teaching methods. Furthermore, constraints such as the lack of adapted learning materials, inadequate institutional support, and high teacher-student ratios can hinder effective teaching. These issues raise critical questions about the actual practices and experiences of teachers tasked with delivering English instruction to learners with diverse and complex needs. Without a clear understanding of these everyday realities, efforts to improve inclusive ELT policies and practices may remain superficial.

Although inclusive education has received increasing scholarly attention in Indonesia, the specific topic of English language teaching in the School for Students with special needs remains notably under-researched. Previous studies have often focused on inclusive practices in general education (e.g., Judijanto & Al-Amin, 2024) or examined the challenges faced by students with disabilities in core subjects like Bahasa Indonesia and Mathematics. Research exploring language instruction, especially English, is comparatively limited. Some studies have acknowledged the challenges faced by teachers (e.g., lack of training or resources) (Malkawi, et al, 2023), while others touch briefly on classroom strategies. However, few have combined a focus on teacher strategies, the barriers they face, and the institutional support they receive—particularly from the teachers' own perspectives. This study seeks to address that gap by documenting and analyzing how English is actually taught to special needs students in SLBs, using a qualitative lens focused on teachers' lived experiences.

This study aims to investigate how English is taught to students with special needs in SLB through the lens of teachers' lived experiences. Specifically, it explores how teachers develop and implement instructional materials, adapt media and evaluation techniques, and adjust learning goals to match students' unique cognitive, physical, and emotional needs. It also examines the extent of teacher training and access to professional development, as well as how institutional and parental support influence classroom practices and student progress. Drawing on the voices of two experienced English teachers from the School for Students with Special Needs (SLB) in Gorontalo city, the study seeks to build a contextualized understanding of inclusive English education within Indonesia's special education system. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. How do School for Students with special needs English teachers design and adapt learning materials, media, and assessments to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities?
2. To what extent do School for Students with Special Needs teachers have access to training, resources, and professional development opportunities related to teaching English to students with special needs?
3. What types of institutional support—policies, funding, facilities, and inter-agency collaboration—are provided to support English instruction in School for Students with special needs, and how do these impact teaching effectiveness?
4. How do parents engage with and support their children's English language learning at home, and what challenges do teachers face in fostering this involvement?

Through these questions, the research aims to provide practical insights for teacher education, inclusive curriculum development, and policymaking that better address the needs of English teachers and learners in School for Students with special needs contexts.

This research holds both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the relatively small body of literature on ELT in special education settings, particularly in the Indonesian context. Practically, the findings can inform teacher training modules, resource development, and institutional planning aimed at supporting inclusive language teaching. It may also serve as a reference point for future comparative studies in other regions or countries. While this study is limited in scope to two English teachers at School for Students with special needs in Gorontalo City and focuses solely on teacher perspectives—excluding direct classroom observations or student voices—it provides an important starting point for understanding how English is taught to learners with special needs and what systemic changes may be necessary to support this crucial aspect of inclusive education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching English to students with special needs involves navigating a complex intersection of educational theories, pedagogical strategies, and institutional factors. Understanding how teachers effectively support learners with diverse disabilities requires a multifaceted theoretical foundation that addresses inclusive education principles, adaptable teaching frameworks, and the professional competencies and supports that shape classroom practice. This section reviews key theories and models relevant to the study, providing a conceptual lens through which to analyze the strategies, challenges, and support systems involved in English language teaching within special education contexts. The following subsections explore the core themes of inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning, and teacher competence alongside institutional support.

Inclusive Education and Special Needs Pedagogy

Inclusive education has increasingly become the global standard in educational practice, emphasizing the right of all learners, regardless of ability, to access quality education within mainstream or specialized settings (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This approach stresses that barriers to learning arise not only from students' impairments but also from inflexible curricula and teaching methods. In the context of School for Students with special needs in Indonesia, where students with varying disabilities study together, inclusive education demands tailored instructional strategies that consider individual learning needs while promoting participation and social inclusion.

Recent studies (Ainscow, 2020; Loreman, 2017) highlight the importance of adaptive pedagogy in special needs settings, advocating for differentiated instruction and scaffolded learning experiences that align with students' capabilities and interests. For English language teaching, this means educators must modify content, teaching pace, and assessment forms to fit the unique profiles of students with sensory, cognitive, or physical disabilities. Such adaptations support learners not only in mastering language skills but also in building confidence and autonomy, which are critical for long-term educational success.

Moreover, inclusive education calls for a collaborative approach involving teachers, families, and support staff to create a holistic support system for students with disabilities (Sailor et al., 2018). This collaboration ensures that teaching strategies are consistent across environments and that students receive encouragement and reinforcement both at school and home. Understanding these dynamics provides a foundational lens through which to analyze how English teachers in SLB navigate their instructional responsibilities and challenges.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Language Instruction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a research-backed framework for developing flexible educational environments that can accommodate the diverse needs

of all learners (Rose, Meyer, and Gordon, 2013). UDL emphasizes providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to ensure accessibility and motivation for students with disabilities. In English language teaching within School for Students with special needs contexts, UDL principles can guide the selection of varied teaching materials and media—such as visual aids, tactile resources, and digital applications—that help overcome specific barriers faced by students with visual, hearing, or cognitive impairments.

Empirical research over the past decade has demonstrated the effectiveness of UDL in improving language outcomes for special needs learners (Rao et al., 2014; Dalton et al., 2012). For instance, the use of multimodal materials allows students with different learning preferences or sensory challenges to access content meaningfully. Furthermore, UDL encourages ongoing assessment and feedback that are responsive to students' evolving abilities, supporting personalized learning trajectories. Teachers' capacity to implement UDL depends heavily on their training, available resources, and institutional backing, factors that this study seeks to explore.

Beyond instructional design, UDL promotes fostering learner engagement through culturally relevant and interest-driven activities (Rose & Dalton, 2009). This is particularly significant in language learning where motivation and affective factors play a crucial role. By embedding UDL principles, English teachers can create more inclusive classrooms that reduce frustration and increase participation among students with special needs, thereby enhancing overall learning effectiveness.

Teacher Competence and Institutional Support in Special Education

Teacher competence in special needs education encompasses knowledge of disabilities, specialized pedagogical skills, and the ability to adapt materials and assessments effectively (Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Research emphasizes that continuous professional development tailored to the unique challenges of teaching English to students with disabilities is essential for improving instructional quality (McLeskey et al., 2020). In School for Students with special needs settings, teachers face complex demands, such as addressing a broad spectrum of disabilities within one classroom, which requires not only expertise but also creativity and resilience.

Institutional support significantly influences teacher performance and morale. Supportive school leadership, availability of teaching aids, and access to professional development opportunities are critical factors identified in recent literature (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin & Sin, 2017). Conversely, lack of resources and insufficient training often leave teachers feeling isolated and overwhelmed, which can negatively affect student outcomes. Understanding how School for Students with special needs institutions facilitate or hinder teachers' work can inform strategies to strengthen the system.

Furthermore, collaboration with external agencies, including government bodies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), plays a vital role in enhancing

institutional support for special education (Sharma et al., 2008). These partnerships can provide additional training, funding, and resources needed for effective English teaching. Examining the interplay between teacher competence and institutional support is crucial for identifying gaps and opportunities to improve educational provision for students with special needs in School for Students with special needs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to gain deep insights into the experiences of English teachers working in School for Students with special needs (SLB) in Gorontalo City, Indonesia. Two respondents were purposively selected based on their extensive experience teaching English to students with a range of disabilities, including visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, and autism spectrum disorders. One respondent was a junior high school teacher, while the other taught at the elementary school (SD) level, providing diverse perspectives across educational stages. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to explore predetermined themes—such as teaching strategies, challenges, and institutional support—while also providing flexibility to probe respondents' unique perspectives and emergent issues.

Data collection involved face-to-face interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comfort and clarity for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. The interview guide was developed based on literature and research objectives, covering areas such as adaptation of teaching materials, assessment methods, training experiences, school policies, and parental involvement. Transcriptions of the interviews were then analyzed thematically using a coding process that identified key patterns and variations related to the research questions. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were rigorously observed to protect participant rights and ensure the validity of findings. This approach provided rich, contextualized data to illuminate how English teachers navigate their complex roles in School for Students with special needs settings and how institutional and external supports shape their practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the key findings derived from interviews with two experienced English teachers at the School for Students with Special Needs (SLB) in Gorontalo city. Both respondents hold degrees in English Education, with one having a master's degree and the other a bachelor's degree. They have substantial teaching experience, ranging from 12 years specifically in SLB to 17 years teaching English overall. The students they teach represent diverse special needs categories, including visual

impairments (blindness), hearing impairments (deafness), intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders.

The findings are organized according to major themes that emerged from the research questions: teaching materials and instructional resources, teacher competencies and professional development, institutional support and policies, and parental involvement in learning support. Each theme begins with an overview, followed by relevant data from the respondents, and a comprehensive analysis that links the data to theoretical perspectives on inclusive education and special needs pedagogy.

Teaching Materials and Instructional Resources

Teaching materials and instructional resources are fundamental components that shape the quality and effectiveness of English learning for students with special needs. Both respondents emphasized the importance of tailored lesson plans to meet the diverse abilities and learning needs of their students. Respondent 1 explained, *“I have lesson plans and modules adapted to the types of disabilities, but there are no specific English textbooks for SLB students at our school. Therefore, I design my own modules to suit the students’ abilities.”* Meanwhile, Respondent 2 stated, *“We have textbooks specifically designed for special needs students, which I use along with posters, flashcards, and puzzles to help students grasp the material.”*

Both teachers reported employing a variety of teaching media to facilitate understanding, including flashcards, interactive applications like Wordwall, videos, and visual posters. Respondent 1 said, *“Media such as flashcards, Wordwall apps, and videos are very effective to support students’ understanding,”* while Respondent 2 added, *“I use picture posters, flashcards, and puzzles, which suit students’ sensory and cognitive abilities.”* Furthermore, both respondents adjusted assessments to align with students’ individual capabilities by conducting initial assessments to determine baseline knowledge and adapting learning goals accordingly. Respondent 1 mentioned, *“Before setting learning goals, I conduct an initial assessment to know each student’s prior knowledge,”* and Respondent 2 confirmed, *“I do assessments to adjust the learning outcomes to what the student can achieve.”*

The customization of teaching materials and assessment methods reflects a learner-centered approach consistent with principles of differentiated instruction, where teaching is adapted to students’ unique learning profiles and needs. This approach is crucial in special education settings to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes. The use of multimodal media addresses diverse sensory preferences and cognitive challenges, enhancing accessibility and comprehension for students with various disabilities. The respondents’ efforts to design or select appropriate materials and evaluation tools illustrate the importance of flexibility and creativity in meeting the complex demands of inclusive teaching.

Teacher Competencies and Professional Development

Teacher competency and continuous professional development are critical to delivering effective English instruction for special needs students. Both respondents revealed that they had never participated in workshops or training specifically targeting English teaching for children with special needs. Respondent 1 said, *“I have not attended any workshop on teaching English to special needs students because such training has never been organized.”* Similarly, Respondent 2 noted, *“There have been no training sessions specifically for English teaching to special needs students, only general special education trainings.”*

Despite their lack of specific training, the respondents demonstrated awareness of the need to develop specialized skills and instructional strategies. Respondent 1, with a master’s degree, and Respondent 2, with a bachelor’s degree, both expressed a desire for more focused professional development opportunities to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness. This lack of specialized training suggests a systemic gap that may limit teachers’ ability to implement evidence-based instructional methods tailored to the diverse needs of the SLB students.

This finding aligns with research highlighting that professional development tailored to special education and language instruction is essential for improving teacher efficacy and student learning outcomes. Without targeted training, teachers may rely heavily on general special education knowledge, which may not fully address the linguistic challenges faced by students learning English as an additional language with disabilities. Continuous capacity building through workshops, mentoring, and access to specialized resources is critical for empowering teachers to adapt best practices and innovate in their classrooms.

Institutional Support and Policies

Institutional support and clear policies are necessary to sustain effective teaching practices in special education settings. Both respondents confirmed that their schools have policies supporting English education for special needs students. Respondent 1 shared, *“Our school has policies regarding English instruction for special needs students, and the principal supports us by providing learning media,”* while Respondent 2 echoed, *“The school policy supports the development of English learning, and the administration provides facilities and media.”*

Funding for instructional resources was also available, indicating that the schools prioritize material support for inclusive education. However, collaboration with external agencies such as the local education office or NGOs was reported as lacking. Respondent 1 explained, *“There is no cooperation with external organizations because there are no programs focusing on English for special needs students,”* and Respondent 2 added, *“No external partnerships exist since English is not seen as a priority for special needs students by education authorities.”*

This situation highlights a strong internal institutional foundation but also exposes limitations in external networking and resource sharing. Effective institutional support is not only about internal policies and funding but also involves building partnerships with external stakeholders to access wider expertise, training opportunities, and innovative resources. Such collaboration could enrich teaching practices and provide teachers with additional professional and material support. Institutional commitment within the school must be complemented by systemic support from educational authorities to create a comprehensive framework for inclusive English education.

Parental Involvement in Learning Support

Parental involvement plays a vital role in reinforcing learning outside the classroom, especially for students with special needs who often require ongoing support at home. Both respondents observed variability in parental engagement. Respondent 1 reported, *“Some parents are very supportive and help students review English lessons at home via WhatsApp group communication, but others focus more on literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills.”* Respondent 2 added, *“Some parents actively support learning at home, but others pay less attention, seeing English as an additional subject rather than a priority.”*

Communication between teachers and parents was generally limited, mostly occurring only when parents visited the school. Respondent 1 noted, *“Communication with parents is limited because subject teachers rarely have direct contact unless parents are at school,”* and Respondent 2 observed, *“Communication is lacking due to some parents’ low awareness of the importance of English learning.”* Both respondents confirmed that parents have access to learning materials and strategies to assist children, but challenges remain in motivating consistent parental involvement.

These findings reflect the broader challenges in fostering effective home-school collaboration in special education contexts. Parental attitudes and priorities can significantly influence students’ motivation and progress, and a lack of communication may impede the development of shared goals for learning. Strengthening partnerships through regular, meaningful communication and parental education about the benefits of English learning could improve engagement. Such involvement supports holistic development and helps create a more inclusive learning environment extending beyond the classroom.

Discussion

The findings reveal that tailored instructional materials and flexible use of media are essential components in teaching English to students with special needs in SLB. This aligns with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which advocate for multiple means of representation and engagement to address diverse learner needs (Al-Azawei, Serenelli, & Lundqvist, 2016). The teachers’ efforts to develop their own

modules or adapt existing resources underscore the ongoing challenges in accessing specialized English textbooks for special needs students, a situation also reported in previous studies highlighting resource gaps in inclusive education (Suryani & Fitriani, 2019).

The absence of specialized training for teaching English to special needs students suggests a significant professional development gap. As Florian and Spratt (2013) emphasize, effective inclusive teaching requires continuous capacity building that equips educators with both general and subject-specific strategies. The lack of targeted workshops reflects a systemic oversight, which may hinder the ability of teachers to implement best practices in English instruction for *SLB* learners, echoing the concerns raised by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) about inadequate teacher preparation in special education contexts.

Institutional support within the schools appears robust in terms of policy and resource allocation, which is consistent with the recommendations by O'Connor and Fernandez (2018) that leadership commitment significantly influences inclusive education quality. However, the lack of external collaboration with education departments or NGOs limits opportunities for broader resource sharing and expertise development. This highlights a common challenge in developing countries where external support systems for special education are underdeveloped (Mittler, 2012).

Parental involvement emerged as a mixed factor; while some parents are highly supportive of English learning at home, others prioritize basic skills over English proficiency, reflecting cultural and contextual values regarding education for children with disabilities. This observation resonates with Hunt, Farron-Davis, and Goetz (1997), who argue that parental attitudes and engagement critically impact learning outcomes in inclusive settings. Moreover, communication barriers between teachers and parents can diminish collaborative efforts, emphasizing the need for schools to foster stronger home-school partnerships to support learning continuity (Epstein, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex challenges and promising practices involved in teaching English to students with special needs in *SLB* Gorontalo city. Teachers are already using varied instructional materials and multimedia tools that align with inclusive teaching models and Universal Design for Learning principles, showing real dedication to meeting diverse learner needs. However, without targeted professional development, their ability to apply these best practices is limited. While schools provide some internal support, the lack of partnerships with external organizations like education authorities or NGOs restricts opportunities for growth and innovation. Parental involvement, though present in some cases, is uneven and often influenced by limited awareness or other priorities. These factors reveal the need for a more

coordinated, community-centered approach that combines training, collaboration, and family engagement to truly enhance inclusive English education.

To move forward, a comprehensive strategy is essential. Educational authorities should create and require specialized training programs for teachers that focus on evidence-based methods tailored to various disabilities, supported by ongoing professional development and partnerships with universities and NGOs. Schools must also actively seek external collaborations to bring in fresh ideas, expertise, and funding. Building strong, consistent communication with parents through workshops, information sessions, and digital platforms can empower families to better support their children's learning at home. Finally, policymakers need to recognize English education as a key part of the overall development for students with special needs and ensure it is embedded in inclusive education policies. By working together across these areas, all stakeholders can help create a more supportive, fair, and empowering environment for these learners.

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