

Teachers' Strategies, Challenges, and Solutions in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs: A Case Study at an SMP Luar Biasa in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

Teaching English to students with special needs requires appropriate instructional strategies that address diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. However, empirical studies focusing on English teaching practices in Indonesian special junior high schools remain limited. This study aims to explore the strategies employed by English teachers, the challenges they encounter, and the solutions they apply in teaching English to students with special needs at a special junior high school in Yogyakarta (SMPLB). A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving five English teachers teaching seventh to ninth grades. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings from interview revealed seven instructional strategies applied by the teachers with different levels of intensity, consecutively: contextual teaching, active learning, verbal communication, hypnosis-based strategies, expository teaching, cooperative learning, and the use of learning media such as interactive videos. Teachers also faced multiple challenges, including students' cognitive and emotional conditions, limited instructional time, diverse learner characteristics, lack of learning media, and the non-mandatory status of English. To address these challenges, teachers implemented collaborative discussions, flexible teaching approaches, and sought professional development support. This study contributes practical insights into effective English teaching strategies for students with special needs and highlights the importance of sustained teacher training and institutional support in special education contexts.

Keywords: *teaching strategies; English language teaching; students with special needs; special education; qualitative study.*

Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in national development and social equity. In Indonesia, the right to education for all citizens, including students with special needs, is constitutionally guaranteed. In line with inclusive and special education policies, students with special needs are entitled to receive appropriate educational services that accommodate their individual characteristics and learning abilities (Dewi, 2019). Within this context, English language education has gained increasing attention due to its role as a global means of communication and access to information.

English is not only viewed as a school subject but also as a tool that enables learners to participate in broader social and cultural interactions. For students with special needs, learning English may support functional communication, self-development, and social inclusion (Dermawan, 2013). Several special schools in Indonesia have introduced

English as a supporting subject to help students engage in everyday life and develop basic communication skills (Hidayati, 2013; Darajat & Putra, 2018). Nevertheless, teaching English to students with special needs presents substantial pedagogical challenges, particularly due to differences in cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, communication skills, and learning pace. Therefore, effective instructional strategies are therefore essential in teaching English to students with special needs.

Teaching strategies refer to deliberate actions and approaches employed by teachers to achieve learning objectives and facilitate student understanding. Furthermore, during the teaching and learning process, children with special needs require a unique strategy according to their individual need and creative ways to provide effective stimulation so that children more easily understand the purpose of the learning process (Kauffman et al, 2018). Richards & Rodgers (2001) explained that the learning strategy can be interpreted as any activity chosen that can provide facilities or assistance to students towards the achievement of certain learning goals. In special education settings, instructional strategies must be flexible, adaptive, and responsive to individual learner needs. Teachers are required not only to master subject content but also to design learning experiences that are accessible, meaningful, and motivating for students with diverse abilities.

Previous studies have discussed various strategies for teaching English to students with special needs, such as the use of multimodal instruction, contextual learning, cooperative activities, and adaptive assessments (Nugroho & Marez, 2016). Some research have also highlighted the importance of teacher creativity and professional competence in supporting student learning outcomes. (Darajat & Putra, 2018). However, many existing studies focus on inclusive schools or general special education contexts, while empirical research that specifically examines English teaching practices in special junior high schools (SMP Luar Biasa) remains limited. Moreover, the researchers in this study attempted to investigate the teachers' creativity to select and implement learning strategies in relation to support impactful education.

To address this gap, the present study investigates English teachers' strategies in teaching students with special needs at a special junior high school in Yogyakarta. In addition, it examines the challenges encountered during the teaching and learning process and the solutions implemented by teachers to overcome these challenges. By focusing on a special school context, this study provides contextualized insights into English language teaching practices for students with special needs. The findings are expected to contribute to the existing literature on special education and English language teaching, as well as to offer practical implications for teachers, schools, and policymakers in improving instructional quality for students with special needs.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

What instructional strategies are used by English teachers in teaching students with special needs?

What challenges do English teachers face in teaching English to students with special needs?

What solutions are implemented to address these challenges?

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore English teachers' instructional strategies, challenges, and solutions in teaching students with special needs. Qualitative inquiry was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and pedagogical practices within a special education context. The participants were five English teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5) two males and three females) teaching seventh to ninth grades at a special junior high school (Sekolah Menengah

Pertama Luar Biasa-SMPLB) in Yogyakarta during the 2022/2023 academic year. The participants were selected purposively based on their teaching experience and direct involvement in English instruction for students with special needs.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing the researchers to obtain rich and flexible responses while maintaining focus on the research objectives. The interviews explored teachers' instructional strategies, challenges encountered in the teaching process, and solutions implemented to address those challenges. To ensure data credibility, member checking was conducted by confirming the interview results with the participants.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data condensation, relevant information was selected and organized. The condensed data were then presented thematically to identify patterns and categories. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting the findings in relation to existing theories and previous studies. These procedures enhanced the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Strategies in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs

Based on the interview results, the teachers implemented several instructional strategies in teaching English to students with special needs. Among the strategies suggested by Richards & Rodgers (2001), three were dominantly applied in this study: active learning, contextual teaching, and hypnosis-based strategy.

a. Active Learning Strategy

Active learning was identified as the most frequently used and effective strategy. This approach accommodates students' physical and mental involvement in learning activities. Considering that students with mild intellectual disabilities may have limited reading and writing skills, and students with moderate intellectual disabilities may only be able to practice orally, active engagement helps them participate meaningfully in the lesson.

T1 explained:

"I use active learning strategies (physical and mental), for example introducing objects around us in English. I mention the objects and students look for the objects." (T1)

Similarly, T2 stated:

"I use active learning because it can accommodate the needs of the students in learning. And all students become more active." (T2)

These responses indicate that active learning enables students to interact directly with their environment, making the learning process more concrete and accessible. This finding supports the view that students with special needs require experiential and participatory learning activities to enhance comprehension (Kauffman et al., 2018).

b. Contextual Teaching Strategy

The second strategy identified was contextual teaching. This approach connects learning materials to students' daily lives, making English more meaningful and easier to remember.

T1 stated:

"This strategy connects to children's daily lives, so it is easier between learning or material to everyday life, so children don't forget easily." (T1)

This aligns with Johnson (2002), who argues that learning becomes more effective when academic content is related to learners' real-life contexts. In special education settings, contextual learning reduces abstraction and helps students construct meaning from familiar experiences.

c. Hypnosis-Based Strategy

The third strategy reported by teachers was hypnosis-based teaching. This strategy aims to create a relaxed and calm learning atmosphere so students can focus better on instructions.

T4 explained:

"Hoping that my students will learn in a relaxed and calm state so they can focus and concentrate more on my lesson and respond to my instruction well." (T4)

This approach is consistent with Drigas et al. (2021), who emphasize that relaxed psychological conditions may improve concentration and receptiveness among students with special needs. Creating a supportive emotional climate is essential in special education classrooms.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers adapt their instructional strategies to accommodate students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics.

2. Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs

The findings revealed several major challenges faced by teachers.

a. Diverse Student Characteristics

One of the most significant challenges is the heterogeneity of students' abilities within a single classroom. Teachers reported wide variations in cognitive levels, communication skills, and behavioral traits.

T5 explained:

"Varied, each student has a different character. Incidentally, I tutored three students: one student with mild intellectual disability could read and write, one student with mild intellectual disability had reading and writing difficulties, and one student with moderate intellectual disability was only able to practice." (T5)

T4 added:

"Each student has different characteristics. Some can verbalize, others are still in early stages. Even within the same category, their abilities are different." (T4)

This heterogeneity makes it difficult to apply uniform instructional methods. The finding is in line with Kauffman et al. (2017), who state that students with disabilities present diverse physical, intellectual, and sensory conditions requiring individualized approaches.

b. Students' Mental and Developmental Conditions

Teachers emphasized that English instruction often overlaps with self-development training. T3 stated:

"My focus for mentally retarded children is more on self-development such as toilet training. They don't know which things are dangerous or not. My obstacle is that training independence is not yet optimal, and it must be continuous between school and parents at home." (T3)

This illustrates that teachers must balance language instruction with functional life skills development.

c. Low Motivation and Limited Focus

Some students easily become bored or prefer working rather than studying.

T1 mentioned:

"The students often get bored easily in class and are no longer interested in the learning process. Some of them prefer to work because many students study while working." (T1)

d. Limited Teaching Staff and Time

T2 explained:

"The number of teachers is very limited. One homeroom teacher handles almost all subjects, except arts and sports." (T2)

English is taught only once a week for approximately 70 minutes, which is insufficient for diverse learner needs.

e. Inadequate Facilities and Learning Media

T4 described the classroom condition:

"Usually in SMPLB, the room is 4×6 meters, but my classroom is only 3×3 meters for six students. It is too tight and cramped." (T4)

T5 added:

"The lack of learning media makes English a difficult lesson. English is only taught for about 70 minutes once a week, and even then the learning is sometimes not optimal." (T5)

f. Curriculum Constraints and Status of English

Teachers also faced difficulty adapting standardized curricula to diverse student needs.

T4 stated:

"The curriculum keeps changing. The independent curriculum generalizes students' abilities, even though each child has different needs. It becomes difficult to simplify the material while still following the curriculum." (T4)

Additionally, English is viewed merely as a school subject rather than a communicative tool.

"Students learn English only as a subject, not as a means of communication. At home, they only use Javanese and Indonesian." (T4)

These findings confirm Dewi (2019), who explains that English in many Indonesian contexts functions more as an academic requirement than as practical communication.

3. Teachers' Solutions to Overcome the Challenges

To address these challenges, teachers implemented several solutions at different levels.

a. Professional Development and Training

Teachers emphasized the importance of training programs.

T4 stated:

"More training for educators and opportunities to learn new ways of teaching are really needed." (T4)

Professional development enhances teachers' pedagogical competence in handling students with special needs.

b. Collaborative Discussion

Teachers conducted informal discussions to share experiences and strategies. This collaboration helps them find alternative solutions for classroom problems.

c. Flexible and Adaptive Teaching

Teachers applied flexible lesson planning, continuous encouragement, and positive reinforcement strategies. For example, T5 explained that she motivates students by giving praise and applause during class activities.

d. Parental Involvement

Teachers highlighted the importance of collaboration between school and parents to ensure consistent support for students' independence and learning progress.

Overall, the solutions reflect teachers' efforts to adapt within institutional limitations. Sustainable teacher training, government support, curriculum flexibility, and parental involvement are essential to improve English instruction in special education contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that English teachers at a special junior high school in Yogyakarta employ diverse instructional strategies to address the complex needs of

students with special needs. The strategies include contextual teaching, active learning, verbal communication, hypnosis-based techniques, expository teaching, cooperative learning, and the use of learning media. Each strategy serves specific pedagogical purposes, such as improving students' engagement, comprehension, and communication skills.

The findings also reveal that teachers face substantial challenges, including students' cognitive and emotional conditions, limited instructional time, diverse learner characteristics, insufficient learning media, and curriculum constraints. To overcome these challenges, teachers rely on collaborative discussions, flexible teaching approaches, professional development, and parental involvement.

This study contributes to the literature on English language teaching in special education by providing contextualized insights from a special junior high school setting. The findings suggest that sustained teacher training, institutional support, and curriculum flexibility are essential to improving English instruction for students with special needs. Future research may explore classroom observations or student perspectives to enrich understanding of effective practices in special education context.

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