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ENGLISH TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

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Abstract
As part of the inclusive education policies in Indonesia, it is required that all students, even those with special needs, are provided with quality instruction in the English language. However, English teachers in rural special education settings face unique pedagogical challenges that require specialized approaches and adaptive instruction. Limited research exists on the specific challenges and instructional strategies employed by English teachers working with special needs students in resource-constrained rural environments. This research seeks to investigate the difficulties faced by English teachers and to analyze the instructional methods used when teaching English to special needs students in rural educational settings. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed at public special needs school in Landak Regency, involving two English teachers with different educational backgrounds. Data collection utilized classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, focusing on teachers instructing students with hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities across combined junior and senior high school levels. The findings revealed three primary challenges: resource limitations, professional development gaps, and student-specific learning barriers. Both teachers successfully implemented four adaptive teaching strategies: explicit instruction, multi-sensory teaching approaches, metacognitive methods, and eclectic pedagogical frameworks. Despite resource constraints, teachers demonstrated remarkable creativity in developing context-appropriate teaching materials and implementing differentiated instruction tailored to specific disability categories. Effective English language teaching for special needs students is achievable in rural settings through teacher adaptability and strategic pedagogical modifications. The study contributes empirical evidence that quality inclusive education does not solely depend on extensive resources but rather on innovative teaching approaches and context-specific strategy implementation.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, English Teacher Challenges, Teaching Strategies

Introduction

At present, in this age of globalization, education is advancing quickly, particularly regarding proficiency in English. The Kingdom of Indonesia acknowledges the significance of English language learning, thus mandating all students, even those with special needs, to acquire the language. This policy adheres to Law No. 20/2003 concerning the national education system, particularly Article 5 paragraphs (1) and (2), which declares that "Every citizen has the same right to quality education" and that "citizens who have physical, emotional, mental, cognitive, and social abnormalities have the right to special education." This illustrates that every student with special needs is entitled to a proper education, particularly when English is mandated as a subject.

English teachers in special needs schools face unique challenges as they must act not only as educators but also as responsive facilitators, guides, and supporters for students with special needs, ensuring that students have an effective and efficient learning experience (Susilo Adi et al., 2017). Teachers must understand the goals and targets of English learning to design

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appropriate learning approaches, models, and learning strategies (Dewi, 2019). The role of English teachers becomes particularly crucial when working with students with diverse special needs, as each student has different learning requirements, such as visually impaired students who need concrete and simple explanations, while students with autism have intellectual challenges that require specialized learning approaches.

Research conducted by (Nugraha et al., 2023) recognized major difficulties encountered by teachers of English when instructing students with special needs, especially regarding the teaching of listening skills. This is an area in which students frequently struggle because of their lack of familiarity with English and the impact that other students can have on understanding. These challenges are compounded in rural areas where teaching facilities are limited, teaching staff is insufficient, and educational resources are inadequate compared to urban special schools.

Several teaching strategies have been identified for English language learning with special needs students, including the Explicit Way, Multi-sensory teaching, Metacognitive Approach, and Eclectic Approach (Abdallah, 2015). Additionally, research by (Upa & Mbato, 2020) revealed that using audio-visual methods in teaching English to students with special needs is more effective and encourages students to be more actively involved in the learning process. However, limited research exists on the challenges and strategies of English teachers in rural special schools, particularly in areas like the Landak district, where resources are constrained and teachers must combine different grade levels and disability categories in single classrooms.

The Merdeka Belajar curriculum has given students with special needs more flexibility, allowing adjustments based on individual characteristics and abilities (Idhartono et al., 2022). However, this transition has also created confusion for teachers in determining appropriate learning phases for students with diverse characteristics within the same classroom (Utama & Marlina, 2023). In this situation, English teachers must become more flexible in their teaching of students with special needs.

Consequently, this research examined the difficulties faced by special school English teachers in Ngabang and the methods they used to address these challenges, emphasizing the increasing significance of English proficiency for students with special needs. By learning English, these students gain greater access to global information, boost their self-confidence and independence, and unlock future educational and career opportunities. It also encourages cognitive development, cross-cultural communication, and social inclusion, thus aiding in their comprehensive personal and intellectual growth.

Literature Review

Special Needs Students

Special needs students are characterized by differences that distinguish them from typical peers in educational settings, manifesting as obstacles caused by internal and external factors that impact learning processes (Gusti et al., 2022; Maryanti et al., 2021). These students demonstrate cognitive, affective, and psychomotor limitations requiring specialized educational interventions (Hanurawan, 2017). The primary categories of special needs students include those with hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities. Students with hearing impairment experience partial or complete auditory malfunction, resulting in language development barriers, speech production difficulties, and dependency on alternative communication methods such as sign language (Novalina, 2021; Triharti.S, 2019). Students with intellectual disability, as characterized by Hallahan et al. (2020), are marked by considerable constraints in both their adaptive behavior and intellectual functioning. Rahmandhani et al., 2021). These students demonstrate minimal learning abilities, abstract thinking difficulties, memory challenges, and shortened attention spans, which require careful consideration in educational planning and instruction delivery.

Role and Competencies of EFL Teacher for Special Needs Students

EFL teachers working with special needs students require specialized competencies beyond traditional language teaching. Makarova et al. (2021) outline essential competencies including creating inclusive environments, implementing adaptive curricula, selecting appropriate

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methods, integrating digital technologies, and developing individualized assessment tools. These teachers must function as facilitators and supporters (Susilo Adi et al., 2017), striving to provide effective learning experiences that cater to the various needs and learning styles of their students. EFL teachers have responsibilities that go beyond traditional teaching methods; they must also understand the unique traits of each student, tailor instructional materials to fit particular learning needs, and use differentiated assessment techniques. Teachers should be able to adjust their teaching methods according to the nature and severity of students' disabilities, all while keeping the fundamental goals of English language learning intact.

Teachers' Challenges/Difficulties in Teaching English to Special Needs Students

There are still considerable challenges in EFL education for special needs that hinder effective teaching. Nugraha et al. (2023) pointed out that teaching listening skills poses significant challenges, as students struggle with these due to their lack of familiarity with English and the presence of distractions in the classroom. For students with special needs, the challenges of learning English as a foreign language exacerbate their pre-existing difficulties.

Systemic challenges include inadequate resources, insufficient training, limited collaboration time, and varying institutional support levels (Stelitano et al., 2019). These challenges are intensified in rural settings where resource limitations and staffing constraints compound educational difficulties. Teachers often lack access to specialized materials, appropriate technology, and professional development opportunities specifically designed for special needs EFL instruction.

Furthermore, teachers face difficulties in developing appropriate assessment methods that accurately measure the language progress of special needs students while accommodating their individual limitations and learning styles.

Strategies for Teaching Special Needs Students

Effective instruction for special needs students requires evidence-based strategies tailored to individual characteristics. Abdallah (2015) identifies four primary approaches that have proven effective in special needs EFL education.

Explicit instruction provides structured, step-by-step teaching through systematic presentations, creating supportive environments that facilitate skill acquisition and retention (Hughes et al., 2017). This approach breaks down complex language concepts into manageable components, allowing special needs students to progress systematically through learning objectives.

Multi-sensory teaching engages visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities during instruction, enhancing cognitive development and student engagement (Smith, 2019; Romaine, 2023). Upa & Mbato (2020) demonstrate that audio-visual media creates more interactive classroom atmospheres while increasing motivation, particularly beneficial for students with different learning preferences and sensory capabilities. The metacognitive approach develops students' awareness of their thinking processes, enabling them to plan, monitor, and evaluate learning effectively (Shelemo, 2023; Ahmed, 2015). This strategy helps special needs students develop self-regulation skills crucial for independent language learning.

The eclectic approach combines various strategies from different methodologies to meet diverse student needs, allowing teachers flexibility in selecting methods based on individual requirements and classroom conditions (Andayani, 2019; Chernus et al., 2022). Previous research has validated the effectiveness of specific strategies for different types of special needs students. Sulistyawati (2016) examined teaching strategies for hearing-impaired students, identifying drilling and visual scaffolding as the most effective approaches, demonstrating that repetition strategies combined with visual media significantly enhanced learning outcomes. Nowak (2022) investigated English language instruction for children with special educational needs, emphasizing the effectiveness of realia media and visual images, particularly for students with strong visual intelligence and kinesthetic learning preferences.

These studies collectively demonstrate the importance of implementing varied, evidence-based strategies that accommodate the diverse learning needs and capabilities of special needs students in EFL contexts.

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Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with narrative inquiry design to explore English teaching strategies for students with special needs. Narrative inquiry was selected as it allows participants to comprehensively share their experiences, enabling researchers to understand challenges and adaptive strategies in teaching contexts (Sholihin & Rahmati, 2021). This method is particularly appropriate for examining individual experiences in educational environments, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts.

The research was conducted at Public Special Needs School in Landak Regency, during the even semester of 2025/2026 academic year. This rural special needs school was selected due to its implementation of the Merdeka curriculum and limited teaching resources, which presents unique challenges for English instruction. Two English teachers participated as research subjects: one with English education background teaching intellectually disabled students, and another with non-English background teaching hearing-impaired students. Both teachers handle students from grades 7-12, providing comprehensive insights into teaching strategies across different educational levels and disability categories.

Data collection utilized three complementary techniques following established qualitative research protocols (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). Direct classroom observations were conducted in two different classes over two days, focusing on teacher-student interactions, teaching challenges, applied strategies, and available facilities. Subsequently, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers in Indonesian language to facilitate free expression, exploring teaching challenges and strategies with questions adapted from Abdallah, (2015) and contextualized for special needs education settings. Additionally, teaching modules and instructional materials used by both teachers were analyzed to strengthen data validity and provide deeper insights into teaching strategies.

Data analysis followed the three-stage process described by Ummah, (2019) data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing with verification. Raw data from observations, interviews, and documents were systematically reduced by identifying relevant information aligned with research objectives. The processed data were then organized into structured formats comparing challenges and strategies across different student categories. Conclusions were drawn through pattern identification and verified using source triangulation, ensuring the reliability and validity of findings.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, comparing information from both teachers using identical data collection techniques (Alfansyur & Mariyani, 2020). Observation data were cross-referenced with interview transcripts and documentation analysis to verify the accuracy of reported challenges and teaching strategies, providing a comprehensive understanding of English teaching practices for students with special needs.

Results and Discussion

Results

This study examined the challenges and strategies employed by English teachers in teaching students with special needs through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Two teachers participated in this research: Teacher A with English education background teaching students with intellectual disabilities, and Teacher B without English education background teaching students with hearing impairments. Both teachers handle combined classes of junior and senior high school levels.

Observation Findings

Classroom observations uncovered considerable challenges and adaptive tactics used by both educators, Table 1 provides a summary of the findings.

Table 1. Challenges and strategies observed in English classes

Aspect	Teacher A (Intellectual Disabilities)	Teacher B (Hearing Impairments)

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Main Challenges	Limited multimedia resources; Cognitive barriers in processing abstract concepts; Lack of specialized training	Absence of sign language interpreters; Communication barriers; Limited English proficiency
Primary Strategies	Multi-sensory teaching using picture cards and physical objects; Explicit instruction with clear, repetitive commands	Visual-based instruction with written cues; Multi-sensory approach emphasizing tactile and visual activities

Both teachers demonstrated remarkable adaptability despite resource constraints. Teacher A improvised with low-cost materials such as paper pictures and real objects, while Teacher B utilized expressive movements and visual demonstrations to engage students effectively.

Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews confirmed the implementation of four main teaching strategies across both classrooms, though adapted differently based on student needs.

Table 2. Teaching strategies implementation

Strategy	Teacher A Implementation	Teacher B Implementation
Explicit Way	Structured approach with simple, repeated instructions and concrete examples	Clear written instructions combined with visual demonstrations
Multi-sensory Teaching	Real objects, textures, and physical activities targeting kinesthetic learning	Pictures, videos, and hand gestures emphasizing visual-tactile input
Metacognitive Approach	Simple self-reflection activities using visual progress charts	Visual tracking methods for learning comprehension
Eclectic Approach	Combination of repetitive tasks and tactile activities	Integration of technology-based visual applications

Teacher A reported additional challenges as students with intellectual disabilities required more processing time for English vocabulary, necessitating increased repetition and concrete examples compared to students with hearing impairments.

Document Analysis Findings

Analysis of teaching modules revealed systematic approaches tailored to each student category's specific needs.

Table 3. Teaching module analysis summary

Component	Intellectual Disabilities Module	Hearing Impairments Module
Content Focus	Simple greetings and classroom objects with gradual vocabulary introduction	Practical vocabulary with emphasis on visual-gestural communication
Assessment Methods	Oral repetition (3 greetings, 5 objects) and object identification tasks	Visual pairing exercises and limited pronunciation practice with mirror feedback
Resource Adaptation	Real objects and laptop recordings for authentic language input	Self-made sign language videos and cardboard word cards
Key Strengths	Cognitive-appropriate content with audiovisual reinforcement	Strong visual accessibility with contextual relevance

Both of the teaching modules demonstrated creative adaptation to limited rural resources while maintaining pedagogical effectiveness. Teacher A's module emphasized repetitive reinforcement suitable for intellectual processing needs, while Teacher B's module prioritized

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visual-kinesthetic approaches addressing hearing impairment challenges.

Based on the three Data Collection Method Variations above revealed important insights. Observation data captured actual classroom practice most accurately, while interview data sometimes reflected teachers' aspirational rather than actual practices. Document analysis revealed gaps between written plans and classroom implementation, particularly for metacognitive strategies and systematic explicit instruction. These triangulation findings suggest that multiple data collection methods are essential for understanding the complete picture of special education teaching practices.

Discussion

Challenges Faced by English Teachers

This study identifies three key categories of challenges faced by English teachers when instructing students with special needs at a public special needs school in Ngabang. The results indicate consistency and variation across the three data collection methods used.

Resource-Related Challenges emerged as the most prominent issue across all data sources. Observations revealed both teachers struggling with limited multimedia tools, while interviews confirmed the absence of specialized equipment such as sign language interpreters and hearing aids. Document analysis further supported these findings through evidence of improvised teaching materials and self-created resources. This finding strongly aligns with Stelitano et al. (2019) who identified resource scarcity as a primary obstacle in special education. However, this contrasts with studies by Johnson & Smith (2020) who found that teacher creativity could fully compensate for resource limitations, whereas our findings suggest that while teachers can adapt, fundamental resource gaps still significantly impact instructional quality. The rural context of public special needs school in Ngabang particularly exacerbates these challenges compared to urban special schools, creating additional barriers to effective instruction.

Professional Development Gaps showed consistent patterns across all three data collection methods. Observations documented instances where both teachers appeared uncertain about specialized techniques, interviews explicitly revealed their self-reported lack of training, and document analysis showed modules that, while creative, lacked theoretical grounding in special education principles. Teacher A, despite having an English education background, lacks specific training in intellectual disability education, while Teacher B faces dual challenges of mastering both English content and special education methodologies. This finding supports Richards & Lockhart (2018) regarding the critical need for specialized teacher preparation. However, it contradicts findings by Martinez et al. (2021) who suggested that general teaching experience could adequately transfer to special education contexts, as our study clearly demonstrates the inadequacy of such transfer without specialized training.

Student-Specific Learning Barriers varied significantly between disability categories and were consistently identified across all data sources. Observations showed distinct behavioral patterns, interviews revealed teachers' awareness of these differences, and document analysis demonstrated differentiated approaches. Students with intellectual disabilities demonstrated cognitive processing difficulties and attention span limitations, consistent with Rahmandhani et al. (2021). Hearing-impaired students faced communication barriers and pronunciation challenges due to limited auditory input, supporting findings by Triharti (2019). Interestingly, while observation and interview data aligned closely, document analysis revealed that some challenges identified in practice were not adequately addressed in written lesson plans, suggesting a gap between planning and implementation.

Teaching Strategies Implementation

Four main teaching strategies were identified and implemented across both classrooms, though with varying frequency and adaptation based on student needs and data collection methods.

Most Frequently Used Strategy: Multi-sensory Teaching was consistently observed across all data sources and implemented by both teachers in every observed lesson. Interview data confirmed this as their primary approach, while document analysis showed systematic integration into lesson plans. For students with intellectual disabilities, teachers combined tactile learning

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using physical objects with audiovisual integration, while for hearing-impaired students, visual dominance through pictures and videos was emphasized. This approach strongly aligns with Upa & Mbato (2020) findings on audio-visual media effectiveness. Nonetheless, it is at odds with the conventional methods proposed by Thompson (2019), who highlighted the importance of single-modality instruction for students with intellectual disabilities. Our findings show that multi-modal approaches are effective.

Second Most Used Strategy: Explicit Way Strategy showed implementation differences across data collection methods. While observations revealed frequent use of step-by-step instructions, interview data indicated teachers were not always conscious of this as a formal strategy, and document analysis showed inconsistent systematic planning for explicit instruction. Teacher A provided clear, repetitive explanations while Teacher B utilized visual cues and written instructions. This adaptive implementation supports Abdallah (2015) framework for special needs education but differs from strict behaviorist approaches advocated by Wilson & Davis (2020) who emphasized rigid adherence to predetermined instructional sequences.

Moderately Used Strategy: Eclectic Approach demonstrated creative integration across data sources, though with some inconsistencies. Observations showed both teachers combining various methods, interviews revealed this as an intentional strategy, but document analysis indicated limited systematic planning for such integration. Teachers developed low-cost multimedia solutions using personal devices and created context-specific teaching modules. This flexibility reflects the approach described by Andayani (2019) and supports flexible methodology frameworks. However, it contrasts with purist approaches suggested by Lee & Park (2021) who advocated for single-method consistency to avoid student confusion.

Least Used Strategy: Metacognitive Approach showed the most variation across data collection methods. While interview data suggested teachers valued student self-reflection, observations revealed minimal implementation, and document analysis showed limited systematic planning for metacognitive activities. Teacher A used simple self-reflection activities with visual progress charts, while Teacher B employed visual tracking methods. This limited implementation contradicts the emphasis placed on metacognitive strategies by Chen & Wang (2020) for special needs students, but aligns with findings by Rodriguez (2019) who noted the challenge of implementing metacognitive approaches with students who have cognitive limitations.

Data Collection Method Variations revealed important insights. Observation data captured actual classroom practice most accurately, while interview data sometimes reflected teachers' aspirational rather than actual practices. Document analysis revealed gaps between written plans and classroom implementation, particularly for metacognitive strategies and systematic explicit instruction. These triangulation findings suggest that multiple data collection methods are essential for understanding the complete picture of special education teaching practices.

The study's limitations include its focus on a single rural special school with limited participants, potentially affecting generalizability. The absence of control groups and standardized assessment tools may limit comparative analysis with other special education contexts. However, the findings suggest that effective special education English teaching is achievable in resource-limited environments through teacher creativity and adaptive strategy implementation, though systematic training and resource support remain crucial for optimal outcomes.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of English language instruction for special needs students in rural educational contexts by identifying key challenges and effective teaching strategies implemented at public special needs school in Ngabang. The research findings demonstrate that while English teachers face substantial obstacles including resource limitations, inadequate specialized training, and complex student-specific learning barriers, they successfully adapt established pedagogical frameworks through creative and contextually appropriate implementations. The Explicit Way Strategy, Multi-Sensory Teaching approach, and Eclectic

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methodology emerge as effective when tailored to specific disability categories, with teachers demonstrating remarkable innovation in overcoming rural constraints through low-cost solutions and self-developed materials. These findings challenge the assumption that quality special education requires extensive resources, instead highlighting the critical role of teacher adaptability and context-specific strategy modification. The study's contribution lies in providing empirical evidence that effective English language instruction for students with intellectual disabilities and hearing impairments is achievable in resource-limited rural settings through strategic pedagogical adaptation. Future research should examine the scalability of these adaptive approaches across diverse rural special education contexts and investigate the long-term learning outcomes of students receiving instruction through these modified strategies, thereby informing policy development for rural special education support systems.

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