

Innovative strategies for teaching English in special school: Teachers' experiences and voices

Nurul Faiza¹, Yuli Astutik^{2*}

^{1,2}English Language Education, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo, Indonesia

*) Corresponding Author, email: yuliasutik@umsida.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Teaching English to students with special needs is certainly not an easy way. So, teachers need to use teaching methods that best suit their students' conditions. Therefore, this research aims to explore how teachers design English teaching methods and their implementation. Apart from that, this research also describes the challenges faced by English teachers in special schools (SLB). This research was conducted at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo Regency. The participants in this research were English teachers at junior high schools. This qualitative research uses interview and observation data collection techniques. The results of this research show that teachers use various methods adapted to students' ability levels, including severe, mild, and special classes, according to their needs. The methods applied reflect awareness of the importance of individualization to support special needs students in learning English. Challenges faced by teachers, such as grouping students based on ability, handling students' moods, and preparing appropriate learning materials, were also issues found in this research. The results of this research imply that teachers must understand that each student has special needs.

Keywords: English language teaching; English teachers; students with special needs; special schools (SLB)

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, addressing the diverse needs of students is a very important endeavor, especially in the context of special needs schools, or what is known as Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB). Sekolah Luar Biasa is often used in the context of the Indonesian education system, referring to a unique category of educational institutions specifically designed and dedicated to providing educational services to students who have certain special needs (Jauhari et al., 2020). Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB), a school for students with special needs, faces learning difficulties in the learning activities. Learning difficulties refer to challenges that hinder students' ability to acquire and process knowledge. These schools provide education to students with various conditions. First are physical disabilities such as visual impairments, hearing impairments, and cerebral palsy. These conditions limit bodily function and can affect physical activities. Second is a developmental disorder such as down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

These conditions impact students' ability to learn and communicate. Third is intellectual disabilities that involve limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, such as low IQ levels. Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) faces various challenges (Akbar et al., 2024), such as social stigma about special needs schools, varied needs of students, and curriculum adaptations to maintain educational equality. While previous research has explored general challenges and teaching strategies in SLBs, there remains a notable gap in this study specifically addressing the teacher of English as a subject within these settings. Current literature predominantly focuses on broader educational practices in special needs schools, with limited attention given to the unique dynamics of teaching English to students with disabilities. In addition, special schools should ensure that every student can reach their full potential despite the challenges they may face (Rosadi, 2023).

Teachers in special schools certainly need to have the provision, skills, and knowledge to apply teaching methods that best suit the unique characteristics, abilities, and needs of their students. One of them is in teaching English lessons as one of the subjects in the school curriculum. The dynamics of teaching English in SLB certainly present specialized challenges that are not found in public schools in a detailed understanding. Effective methods, barriers encountered, and educators' and students' perspectives on learning effectiveness can contribute significantly to the development of inclusive and effective teaching methods and resources (Sari et al., 2024). From the background described above, researchers formulate the following research questions:

1. How does the teacher design and implement teaching methods in teaching English to students with special needs at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo?
2. What challenges do the teachers face in teaching English to students with special needs at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching English in special schools has shown that English language learning is most successful in improving the communication skills of students in special education. Research on teaching English in special schools has demonstrated that English language learning can significantly enhance the communication skills of students with special needs (Nurfitri et al., 2023), emphasizing the importance of curriculum adaptation and the implementation of techniques that accommodate the diverse learning styles of students with special needs, reflecting how teachers employ effective teaching methods. Similarly, a study by Kurniawan et al. (2024) highlights that the teaching methods adopted by English teachers in special schools can provide students with more in-depth and diverse learning experiences, indicating that well-designed instructional approaches can facilitate better comprehension and engagement. Furthermore, findings from Kurniasandi et al. (2023) suggest that the success of English language instruction in special schools is closely linked to the selection of appropriate teaching methods and the challenges teachers encounter in the process. A thorough understanding of both effective instructional strategies and the barriers faced in teaching English to students with special needs can enable education administrators to design more inclusive approaches, thereby supporting the development of more effective teaching methodologies and resources. Therefore, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how English teachers adapt their instructional methods to meet the unique needs of students in special schools, ultimately contributing to the development of curricula and teaching materials that better align with students' characteristics and enhance their learning outcomes.

Therefore, investigating the teaching methods employed by educators in special needs schools for English instruction is essential to fostering an inclusive, effective, and supportive learning environment that meets the varied needs of students with diverse abilities and disabilities. This research seeks to explore teachers' unique experiences in the realm of English language learning in special needs schools. Specifically, it will concentrate on exploring the teaching methods used and the challenges teachers face in the learning process. By focusing on secondary-level special school, the results of this study are expected to make a constructive contribution to the development of inclusive education in Indonesia, particularly in the context of English language learning in special needs

schools. The findings will not only enrich educators' understanding of the challenges and successes in this educational setting but also potentially foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment for students with special needs.

METHOD

Exploring how the teacher designs and implements teaching methods in teaching English to students with special needs and revealing the challenges, this study employed a qualitative method. In addition, the qualitative method used various focus approaches, including interpretation and naturalistic approaches to the research topic (Hasan et al., 2022). This research was conducted at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo Regency, East Java-Indonesia, especially at the junior high school level. The research was conducted from October to December 2023. The participants in this study were English teachers who taught in grades VII, VIII, and IX. The researchers did not reveal the detailed identities of the participants, both teachers and students, to maintain privacy and as a code of ethics for qualitative research. In addition, maintaining their identity was necessary to make the participants feel more comfortable and open when sharing experiences or information that might be personal or emotional. This research was conducted after obtaining consent from the participants and the principal of SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo.

Data collection technique

To enhance data credibility and provide a comprehensive understanding of the teaching methods and challenges, multiple data sources were used, including semi-structured interviews and classroom observation.

Semi-structured interview:

Interviews were conducted with the English teacher to address the research questions. A semi-structured format allowed for flexibility. This enabled the researchers to explore teachers' experiences in depth while ensuring that the questions remained aligned with the research objectives. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to ensure accuracy and completeness. Sample questions for the interview included: 1) How do you design teaching methods for students with special needs? 2) What challenges do you face while teaching English to students with special needs? Moreover, 3) How about the curriculum adapted to teaching English for students with special needs?

Classroom observation:

Observations were used to address research questions 1 and 2 about the real-world application of teaching methods and challenges. Researchers employed overt observation, which means that both teacher and students were aware of the researchers' presence during English learning. This transparency was intended to foster an open and honest environment. Observations focused on how teachers implemented their methods, how students responded, and the challenges that arose during the lessons.

Data analysis

The data analysis process followed several stages to ensure a comprehensive and methodological investigation:

Transcription and documentation

The interview result was transcribed from audio to text. After getting the interview results, researchers conducted classroom observation to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the transcription to maintain the integrity of the data.

Thematic analysis

The transcribed interviews, observational notes, and lesson recordings were analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to the research questions. The analysis focused on teaching methods used by teachers (e.g., writing, reading, object matching, vocabulary repetition), factors influencing the selection of teaching methods (e.g., students' ability, curriculum requirements), and challenges faced by teachers (e.g., grouping students, managing moods, preparing materials).

Interpretation and validation

Researchers interpreted the findings by organizing them into a coherent narrative that addressed the research question. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, researchers referred to the primary data (interview results and classroom interview) and engaged in discussion with research supervisors and team members. This process helped validate the findings and ensured that they accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical research practices, including:

Informed consent

Detailed consent forms were provided to all participants, including teachers, students, and the school principal, explaining the purpose of the study, data usage, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time. Verbal consent was also obtained before each interview and observation to reinforce participants' autonomy and willingness to contribute.

Confidentiality

The identities of all participants were kept confidential to protect their privacy. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names in all reports and publications.

FINDINGS

Design and implementation of English teaching methods for special needs students at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo

The teaching methods used by teachers vary, adjusting to the needs and abilities of students (Irawan et al., 2024). Azizah (2022) describes five mandatory methods that teachers must use when teaching students with special needs, namely communication, task analysis, direct instruction, prompts and cooperative learning. All educators are required to prepare the best method, which must be adjusted to the ability of students to achieve good learning outcomes. Educators are the main strategy holders in the character building of the nation's generation (Harahap & Prastowo, 2021). There are differences in the methods used by English language teachers in SLB and non-SLB schools. In non-SLB, the methods prepared by educators only include approaches and classroom learning activities because the curriculum fully follows the direction of the government, while in SLB, the methods prepared include the curriculum used, approaches, and ways of teaching. The diversity of strategies used by teachers can be seen from the results of interviews, such as the following transcript excerpt:

Curriculum adaptation and teaching strategy

Transcript 1

"I modify between the independent curriculum and K-13, a lot of which I adopt from the internet and then adjust to the conditions of the students. I also prepare 2 methods for teaching, for light and heavy classes. If in the mild class, I use the writing, reading method because in the mild category, students can read and write. For the severe category, I apply more object matching methods because they cannot read, write, and many cannot understand things well, as well as with the special class, I only use the method of pointing at objects".

The statement of the English teacher at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita in Sidoarjo district in transcript 1 illustrates a planned and diverse approach in adapting the curriculum and teaching methods according to the needs of the learners. Teachers have made modifications between the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) and the Independent Curriculum by taking many references from the internet and adjusting them to the conditions of their learners. English teachers in SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo can modify 2 different curricula because the 2013 Curriculum and the Independent Curriculum are not very different, where the assessment results become the teacher's guide for developing learning activities (Indriani et al., 2023). It is also proof that teachers have analyzed in advance to find out the character and ability of students to receive subject matter (Khusna & Harsiwi, 2023). Utilizing media in the form of online resources makes it easier for teachers to get ideas and additional learning resources that are more effective for students (Khasanah et al., 2024). Transcript 1 above also shows that teachers not only take material from the internet but also adjust it to the needs and abilities of their special students. In the transcript, it is also known that the teacher applies two different methods between the severe class (not able to follow directions) and the mild class (able to follow directions), as well as special methods for certain special classes (having very specific educational needs and often related to rare or complex disability conditions). The difference in application based on the level of student condition is illustrated in the following table:

Table 1

English language teaching methods for students with special needs at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita

Level of students' condition at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo			
Methods	Severe	Mild	Special
Writing English vocabulary		√	
Read simple English sentences		√	
Matching objects through English instruction	√		
Ponting out objects through English instruction	√		√

Table 1 above illustrates the English teaching methods used by teachers in the classroom, namely: 1) Teaching methods for the mild class use writing and reading methods because learners in this category are already able to read and write. 2) Teaching methods for the severe class: more matching and pointing objects because learners in this category are not yet able to read and write and have difficulty understanding the material verbally. Then 3) Teaching methods for special classes only use the method of pointing at objects because learners in special classes have special educational needs that require a more specialized approach.

Teaching method

Transcript 2

"Learning in SLB also uses the method of repetition or repetition of material continuously because students in SLB are not required to be good at academics but good at self-help and skills, so it is very common to repeat the same material within a month or more or even in one semester only to learn one material".

Transcript 2 of the interview reveals that learning in SLB is based on the use of the repetition method or continuous repetition of material. That is, this method involves repeating the same material repeatedly to ensure a deep understanding by learners. This is because learners in SLB are not encouraged to reach the level of intelligence in high academics. Instead, the main focus of learning is on developing independence and skills because learning can prioritize not only fun but also the main function of learning itself for students (Sufirmansyah & Prameswati, 2020). In addition, because the learning approach focuses on the repetition of material, there is often repetition of the same material over a long period. This can include repetition in one month, more than one month, or even for a

semester just to learn one material. This learning approach shows that the educational goals at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo are more oriented towards developing independence and skills rather than conventional academic achievement. Thus, the above explanation reflects the efforts of English teachers at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo in designing diverse teaching approaches that suit the individual needs of their learners.

Challenges faced by teachers in teaching English lessons to students at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo

In non-SLB schools, the challenges faced by teachers are still limited to active and passive students during teaching and learning activities. In contrast to students in special schools, the challenges faced by teachers are very diverse, as in the interview results in the following transcript fragment:

Students learning mood

Transcript 3

"I have to deal with students who are mild (able to follow directions) and severe (not able to follow directions). I also have to deal with the mood of the students. If they don't want to learn, especially special students, I have to understand and let them enjoy their time and not force them to learn. Besides that my challenge is also in preparing materials, especially during exams. I must prepare a variety of questions according to the ability of the students".

The interview with the teacher in transcript 3 illustrates the challenges faced in teaching in a diverse environment. First, teachers must deal with different groups of learners, which, of course, require different methods to accommodate the individual needs of students in the English learning process. The second is handling students' moods. Teachers who participated in this study realized the importance of paying attention to the mood of their learners. If learners are not motivated to learn, teachers choose not to force them but allow the students to enjoy their time. This approach demonstrates a deep understanding of the importance of learners' emotional well-being in the learning process. The third is the challenge of preparing learning materials. The preparation of learning materials is a challenge, especially when facing exams where teachers must prepare a variety of exam questions that suit the diverse abilities of learners. This shows the teachers' effort to ensure that the learning and evaluation materials prepared are suitable for the individual needs of the learners. This is also in accordance with [Ramadani et al. \(2021\)](#) that teachers are required always to improve their abilities and knowledge for the development of the learning process. An example of the efforts made by teachers at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo is following professional development in order to increase knowledge so that they can face the challenges that exist ([Astnan, 2020](#)).

Thus, the results of this study reflect English teachers at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita's awareness of the needs of diverse learners and efforts to overcome the challenges that arise in teaching in an inclusive educational environment. Researchers also made direct observations in the classroom to see the real conditions in the field about the application of teachers teaching English and to crosscheck information from interviews conducted with teachers. The following is an example of teacher activity with grade 8 (severe category) students at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo.

Teaching strategy

Transcript 4

Teacher: "What is it, what is this thing?" (showing a book) Students: "Buku" (simultaneously)

Teacher: "Well, yes, what was the English book yesterday, children"

Student: "A book is a book" (one student answers; the others are silent or busy with themselves).

Teacher: "Right, that's great, Bagus."

Transcript 4 above is a teacher and student activity when discussing material about "things in the classroom", and the material, according to the teacher, has been repeated for one month with a

variety of problem models such as counting and recognizing the color of objects in the classroom. At the time of observation, the situation was seen when the teacher taught objects in the classroom by asking students to say the word 'book' by showing objects in the form of books, and the teacher said the word 'book' as a stimulus. The word 'great' spoken by the teacher is something that can increase the enthusiasm for learning of students because the increasing ability of students can be determined by good instruction and feedback from the teacher (Kok et al., 2021). This is one of the challenges faced by teachers in SLB when facing severe classes. Learners cannot pronounce in English, so they are given a stimulus through a word in Indonesian and then invited to remember the meaning of the word in English.

The next activity is to write the objects from the pictures that have been pasted on the notebook (see Figure 1). This is one of the challenges of teachers in SLB when in severe classes where teachers are required to use image media or realia media to facilitate learning activities. Not only that, but teachers also have to deal with students who do not understand at all what is being discussed when there are questions, students are just silent, busy with toys, or around the class. In severe classes, teachers also have to deal with students who cannot write and read independently; they have to be read out and then written down, and then they copy the existing writing.

Figure 1

English learning activities of 8th-grade students, mild class, at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo



It is different when teachers must deal with the mild category. Most mild class students are very calm and cooperative with the teacher's directions. They have also been able to read and write without having to have pictures as media, only directions from the teacher. However, the challenge remains as in the following transcript fragment:

Different students' conditions

Transcript 5

Teacher: "Can you read?" (while carrying a textbook)

Students: "I can" (students answer simultaneously)

Teacher: "Come on, who wants to read number 1?"

Student: "Me... me, me."

Transcript 5 above shows when the teacher teaches English in a mild class. Students are very enthusiastic to be the first to be willing to read the sentences written by the teacher on the blackboard. The results of this observation are in line with the results of interviews with teachers about the mild class at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo.

Figure 2

English learning activities of 9th-grade students, mild class, at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo



Transcript 6:

“When I’m in a mild class, I don’t face many challenges. Maybe it’s just their mood that I have to understand. Because most of them can read and write. In the mild class, students are able to read and write words and sentences without pictures, able to complete the word or sentence without us having to write it down. We only need to give direction to write and read something.”

Transcript 6 above shows the challenges that English teachers face when teaching in mild classes. It is not as heavy as when teaching severe classes, but there are still challenges that teachers must face.

This research highlights the importance of using diverse teaching methods in special schools, particularly in English language learning. In SLB-AC Dharma Wanita in Sidoarjo, East Java, it was found that English teachers tried to adapt their teaching methods to the needs and abilities of learners. With a variety of methods, teachers can more effectively accommodate differences in students’ learning abilities and conditions. The results of this study are in accordance with several studies that learning methods for children with special needs should be tailored to the individual abilities of students (Nuraini, 2023).

Unlike the previous study, which did not classify the level of students’ ability to teach lessons using certain methods, this study provides a detailed classification of those abilities. In this study, students at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo can be divided into several categories, including severe class, mild class, and special class. Students in the severe class usually have a higher level of educational needs compared to the other classes. They may have more severe or multifaceted disabilities. Generally, they need extra attention and support to understand the subject matter. Teaching applied methods in the severe class may be more tailored to their limited abilities, such as the use of visual methods. Students in the mild class have a lower level of educational needs than those in the severe class, but they still require additional support. Students in the mild class have better academic abilities or less severe disabilities. Teaching methods in the mild class can be more diverse, possibly including a combination of visual, auditive, and kinesthetic approaches. Typically, students in mild classes can follow the Independent Curriculum with some adjustments or support. Finally, students in special classes usually have very specific educational needs, and these are often related to rare or complex disabling conditions. Teaching in special classes is more focused on providing highly individualized support according to the unique needs of each student. Teaching methods may be highly customized to the student’s condition and abilities, with an emphasis on experiential learning or social interaction. These differences reflect the diverse educational and support needs of students with disabilities in special schools and the adjustments required in the provision of effective and inclusive education for them.

The research also revealed differences in teaching approaches between SLB and non-SLB. In SLB, teachers not only focus on classroom approaches and learning activities but also consider a more structured and customized curriculum, approach, and way of teaching. This indicates greater flexibility in designing teaching methods in SLB, in contrast to the curriculum that follows government directives in non-SLB schools. The results show that effective teaching methods are those that are tailored to the students' conditions and abilities. English teachers at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo used different approaches for severe, mild, and special classes, according to the students' ability levels and needs. The findings of several studies support this finding that teaching English to students with special needs requires effective strategies (Sadriani et al., 2023; Anggraheni et al., 2020; Muryanti et al., 2020). The study emphasizes a strong awareness of the importance of individualized instructional approaches in facilitating effective learning.

This research also highlights several challenges faced by teachers in teaching English in SLB. These challenges include grouping students based on ability levels (severe, mild, special), handling students' moods, and preparing learning materials that suit students' needs. The emphasis on the repetition of material as part of the teaching method is also a challenge for teachers in SLB. This finding is supported by Fazira (2023), who states that all teachers must have difficulties and problems. It is a challenge to teach English, a foreign language, to students with special needs.

The direct observations in the SLB-AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo classroom provided a concrete picture of the application of the teaching methods presented in the teacher interviews. The observations provided a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English in SLB and how teachers overcome these challenges in practice. Thus, this study not only provides an overview of the application of teaching methods in SLB but also provides more specific insights into the challenges faced by teachers and their efforts to overcome these challenges. This is important in the development of more effective and inclusive learning strategies in special education settings such as SLB. From the results of this study, it is also known that it is important to provide debriefing and training to teachers both pedagogically and psychologically. Teachers in SLB need to be able to manage the classroom well, including managing student behavior that may vary. Psychological training helps teachers understand the psychological factors that influence student behavior and gives them the skills to manage the classroom with a positive and inclusive approach. To realize better inclusive education, it should be fully supported and facilitated by the government and all levels of society (Shamo, 2020). To get full support it can be done by socializing and educating students' families to support their children in their work so that all levels of society can see and appreciate the abilities of children with special needs (Fadila & Saragih, 2023), in line with the explanation from Azila and Resdati (2024) that families must be involved in every child's learning development to improve the life skills of children with special needs so that good inclusive education can be realized.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of the study emphasizes the importance of diverse teaching methods in supporting the learning needs of students at SLB-AC Dharma Wanita, which are aligned with research question 1 on how teachers design and implement the English teaching strategy. Teachers use approaches tailored to the categories of students, namely severe, mild, and specific, to find their individual needs. Aguss (2022) stated that the importance of categorizing learning needs to create an inclusive and effective learning environment. This research also discovers significant differences between teaching approaches in special schools (SLB) and regular schools (non-SLB). Instead of relying on classroom activities, teachers at special schools adapted the curriculum and modified it between the Independent Curriculum and the 2013 Curriculum (K-13) to find the learning needs of students.

In addition, teachers faced various challenges, such as grouping students based on their ability levels, managing students learning moods, and preparing diverse learning materials aligned with the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English to students with special needs. The primary goal of learning in special schools is to help students improve their independence and skills rather than just their academic performance (Rahmah et al., 2022). Direct observations demonstrated the actual

implementation of teaching methods, such as the use of visual media for students in the severe category and simple instructions for students in the mild category.

Last, this research also emphasizes the necessity of providing teachers through pedagogical and psychological training to help them to manage inclusive classrooms more effectively. Enhancing the quality of inclusive education and recognizing the potential of students with special needs also require community and family support. Therefore, these results offer helpful direction for creating inclusive and effective teaching strategies in special education.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study shows the efforts of English teachers at SLB- AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo in designing diverse teaching approaches that suit the individual needs of their learners. It was found that teachers use a variety of methods tailored to the student's ability levels, including severe, mild, and special classes, according to their needs. The methods used by teachers reflect an awareness of the importance of individualization in learning approaches to support effective learning for children with special needs who have different needs. The research also revealed several challenges faced by teachers, such as grouping students based on ability levels, handling students' moods, and preparing learning materials that are appropriate for them. Based on the findings, practical recommendations are proposed. For teachers, it is essential to receive ongoing training in pedagogical and psychological strategies to manage diverse classrooms and diverse needs better. Teachers should collaborate with colleagues to share best practices and develop innovative teaching materials. For policymakers, it is essential to allocate resources for teacher training programs, develop flexible curricula that accommodate diverse learning needs, and promote family involvement in supporting inclusive education. These steps can help to create a more effective and inclusive learning environment for students with special needs.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The authors of the manuscript affirm that they have no conflicting interests.

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