

Teacher's Roles in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs: Strategies, Challenges, and Impacts

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Abstract

Despite increasing global efforts to promote inclusive education, teaching English to students with special needs remains a significant challenge, including in the teacher's role in shaping an inclusive learning environment. This study explores the critical role of teachers in special needs education by addressing three key issues: The teaching strategies employed, the challenges teachers encounter, and the impact on the learning process. Employing a qualitative and systematic approach, the study analyzed 30 peer-reviewed articles published within five years between 2020 and 2024. The analysis revealed that the most commonly applied strategies in teaching English to students with special needs were Individualized and Differentiated Instruction, Multisensory and Visual Learning, and Collaborative Teaching supported by professional development. Among the challenges identified, student-related factors emerged as the most prominent, followed by those related to teachers and systemic and policy issues. The learning impacts were classified into five thematic categories, each demonstrating positive, negative, and/or mixed implications. The review highlights the need for targeted teacher training, increased support structures, and stronger interprofessional collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental to both individual and societal development, including children with special needs, whose global population was estimated to be nearly 240 million in 2025 (UNICEF, 2025). For learners with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities, learning a new language poses unique challenges (Hashim, Yunus, & Norman, 2022; Setiawan, Adnyani, & Suprianti, 2020; Cabrerros, 2020) that require tailored approaches to promote equal learning opportunities, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Tomlinson, 2017). They often struggle with academic challenges such as poorer short-term and working memory as well as non-academic ones such as lower levels of motivation (Schneider & Crombie, 2012).

Globally, education systems have increasingly embraced inclusivity, supported by international policies advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities (Migliarini & Stinson, 2021). However, despite this progress, there remains a significant gap in how these ideals are translated into practice where learners with special needs are often concerned with barriers, ranging from limited resources to insufficiently trained educators (Trainor et al., 2016). It was reported that 39% of countries do not provide teacher training for students with special needs (UNESCO, 2020). In fact, teachers play an essential role in establishing environments where all students can thrive academically and socially (Mihajlovic, 2020).

Teachers, as the facilitators of the learning process, must adopt innovative and adaptive strategies to bridge these gaps and provide equitable education (Tomlinson, 2017). Teachers must ensure meaningful and effective learning experiences by integrating complex pedagogical, social, and emotional factors into the teaching elements. Nevertheless, teachers often meet challenges in providing learning support such as inadequate access to teaching resources, limited sharing sessions with colleagues, and a lack of professional development in training programs (Johnson & Erasmus, 2024). In fact, a study suggested that teachers can cope with the challenges by attending training in teaching strategy differentiation to enable them to cater to the needs of students with disabilities, as well as identify possible students with disabilities (Young, 2024).

Research on special needs education has highlighted various approaches to address these challenges. Studies such as Gumiandari & Nafi'a (2021) have demonstrated the potential of social constructivism and joyful learning to enhance engagement and comprehension among students with disabilities. Similarly, Ramadani (2024) emphasized the transformative role of technology in making English language learning more accessible. Hettiarachchi et al. (2022) focused on multisensory storytelling as an effective method to support vocabulary acquisition, while Smith (2020) provided valuable insights into how educators adapted their methods during the COVID-19 pandemic to support students with disabilities. These studies underline the importance of adopting diverse and innovative pedagogical approaches tailored to the unique needs of students with special needs.

Despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research addresses specific strategies or isolated challenges, leaving a fragmented understanding of how various elements of teaching interact to influence the academic and personal development of students with special needs. For instance, Reyes et al. (2022) explored teacher self-efficacy but did not delve deeply into the practical impact of teaching strategies on students' academic outcomes. Similarly, Kangas & Cook (2020) analyzed academic tracking but overlooked how inclusive teaching methods could be refined to support diverse student populations. There is a pressing need for comprehensive studies that examine not only the effectiveness of specific strategies but also their broader implications for inclusive education systems.

Therefore, this study then aimed to address existing gaps by exploring the multifaceted roles of teachers in special needs education, particularly in the context of English language learning. It investigated critical issues such as the implementation of various teaching strategies, the challenges educators encounter in inclusive settings, and the broader influence of these strategies on the learning process. Building upon this foundation, the study also offered a detailed analysis of the current landscape of special needs education while emphasizing the underexplored intersection between disability and English language instruction. By synthesizing existing literature and identifying new directions for future exploration, this research contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on inclusive education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, using a systematic and integrative approach to analyze academic contributions regarding teaching English to children with special needs. This design allowed researchers to provide comprehensive details (Creswell, 2015) on the three key issues: The teaching strategies implemented by the teachers, the challenges faced by teachers, and the impacts on students' learning process. The data were sourced from 30 studies published in peer-reviewed journals within the last five years, between 2010 and 2024, to reflect current trends, practices, and challenges. The selection process involved the use of predefined search terms and Boolean combinations including: “English language learning”, “teaching strategies”, “teacher roles”, “special needs”, “special education”, “disability”, “learning impairments”, “inclusive education”, and related keywords. These terms were used to systematically scan titles, abstracts, and keywords. Articles were included if they focused on English language instruction for students with special needs, discussed teaching strategies or teacher experiences, were published in peer-reviewed journals between 2020-2024, and were written in English. Duplicate and non-relevant records were excluded through a two-step screening process, first by title/abstract, and then by full-text reading. Studies of the selected paper were conducted worldwide: Asia (19), North America (4), South America (2), Europe (3), and Africa (2). The tables below illustrate the distributions of the year of publication and the key topics.

Table 1. Data Sources Based on the Year of Publication

Year of Publication	Numbers of Articles
2024	4
2023	5
2022	4
2021	8
2020	9

Table 2. Data Sources Based on Key Topics

Key topics	Numbers of Articles
special needs	9
disabilities	7
hearing impairment	4
visual impairment	5
autism	5

The selected studies were analyzed thematically focusing on the three key points of study. Analytical steps include: (1) Initial Review and Organization: Reading thoroughly to ensure relevance to the research focus, (2) Thematic Categorization: Grouping the findings into each one of the three key categories, (3) Cross-case Comparison: Identifying recurring patterns and trends, and (4) Interpretation and Synthesis: Interpreting conclusions by considering both the frequency of emerging themes and the depth of qualitative evidence presented in the studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Strategies in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs

The analysis of the 30 selected papers revealed seven broad categories of the strategies used by teachers in teaching English to students with special needs, with the top two most occurrences from *Individualized and Differentiated Instruction* (20 occurrences) and *Multisensory & Visual Learning* (13 occurrences). These show teachers’ awareness to customize the learning strategies to fit the needs of those with cognitive, mental, as well as physical disabilities. The third most occurred strategy was *Collaborative Teaching and Professional*

Support (11 occurrences) which affirms that teachers cannot work by themselves and need other colleagues such as peer teachers, assistants, or therapists. The use of technology was also an issue in teaching special students, reaching 10 occurrences throughout the paper researched. This shows the effort of the teachers to incorporate learning with the latest technology so they can help their students learn better. The table below illustrates the details of the findings.

Table 3. *Strategies in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs*

No.	Strategy Category	Representative Strategies	Frequency
1	Individualized & Differentiated Instruction	Tailored instruction, needs analysis, curriculum adaptation, ASD-specific support, individualized support, and modified materials.	20
2	Technology & Multimedia Integration	Kahoot, Quizlet, Wordwall, smartboards, assistive tech (JAWS), audiovisual tools, videos, and e-learning platforms.	10
3	Collaborative Teaching & Professional Support	Co-teaching, collaboration with ENL/special/general ed teachers, therapists, and peer mediation.	11
4	Multisensory & Visual Learning	Flashcards, TPR, visual storytelling, sign language, multisensory coding, tactile tools, realia, etc.	13
5	Gamified & Play-Based Learning	Games, joyful learning, interactive storytelling, movement-based vocabulary learning, song/dance activities, etc.	7
6	Social & Behavioral Support	Positive Behavior Support (PBS), structured classrooms, token economy, social stories, and behavior intervention.	9
7	Assessment & Monitoring	Rubrics, anecdotal notes, alternative assessments, self-made texts, early screening, and Individual Education Plans (IEPs).	6

Teachers were aware that each student brought his/her own unique characteristics with varying conditions, including autism, down syndrome, lower intelligence levels, and physical impairments. Sophya (2021) highlighted the importance of diagnosis-based individualized programs to identify students’ developmental impairments and tailor treatment programs based on their needs and abilities, including self-made English proficiency tests that match students’ conditions. Similarly, Sandra & Kurniawati (2020) conducted a needs analysis to tailor instruction based on students’ abilities, interests, and learning styles. Differentiation was then implemented accordingly by simplifying or narrowing topics without excluding essential content, based on individual students’ abilities. Cabreros (2020) valued adjusting the teaching methods (lessons and activities) to make them easier for deaf students to cope with, such as simplifying materials and tailoring activities to their needs.

Multisensory and visual learning was emphasized by Hettiarachchi et al. (2022) to familiarize children's stories by incorporating auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactile elements to enhance engagement and understanding. Nemes (2024) also incorporated similar learning by engaging students with multiple senses simultaneously (seeing, hearing, saying, moving) during lessons using visual aids, realia, word cards, flashcards, and other tangible objects, and playful exercises. Upa & Mbato (2020) made use of large televisions and videos for teaching vocabulary and engaged students actively through singing, dancing, and playing, making learning more dynamic and enjoyable. Ramadani (2024), moreover, alternated between traditional methods (textbooks) and technology-enhanced methods to address the student’s unique needs. Similar urgency is also addressed for students with visual impairments (Setiawan et al., 2020).

Co-teaching was also one of the most mentioned strategies as the class teachers have limited knowledge and skills to handle too diverse uniqueness at a time. Special education teachers, specialists, psychologists, therapists, and other interdisciplinary experts worked together with general teachers in or out of the classroom for better diagnosis and learning treatments (Banat, 2024; Brahim, 2022; Adams & Burns, 2021; Kangas & Cook, 2020; and Cole et al., 2020). Some studies also highlighted the importance of collaborating with parents, such as Hashim et al. (2022), Sophya (2021), and Cabrerros (2020). Students found it easier to understand English assignments with the help of family members.

B. Teacher’s Challenges in Inclusive English Classrooms

As various strategies are applied, teachers meet challenges when teaching English to students with special needs. Five big categories were classified from the 30 selected articles. The most challenges came from the students with 33 occurrences showing that teachers also felt how difficult it was to learn a language when struggling with certain disabilities. This leads to the second challenge which came from teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills in conducting inclusive learning activities, reaching 22 occurrences. This approves the previous findings that teachers cannot work alone, and it also affirms that teachers require adequate access to teaching resources, sufficient sharing sessions with colleagues, and adequate professional development in training programs, issues arose by Johnson & Erasmus (2024). More detailed findings on the challenges can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Teacher’s Challenges in Inclusive English Classrooms

No	Main Category	Representative Challenges (Original Wording)	Frequency
1	Student-Related Challenges	Inability to correlate spoken English sounds with written text, limited vocabulary acquisition, excessive repetition for mastery, delayed processing, difficulty in applying language structures, short retention span, minimal interest in textbook-based methods, reluctance in completing exercises, tantrums, and other communication and behavioral barriers.	33
2	Teacher-Related Challenges	Lack of training, difficulty in adapting teaching strategies, inability to differentiate instruction, misjudgment of communication competence, insufficient preparation time, overwhelming administrative responsibilities, frustration over slow student progress, need for emotional and psychological stability, and communication gaps.	22
3	School/Classroom Environment	Inadequate physical infrastructure (outdated equipment, inaccessible settings), lack of visually optimized classrooms, use of mainstream curriculum for hearing students, limited classroom collaboration, segregated special education services, inclusion settings becoming lower-level tracks, and negative attitudes from peers.	17
4	Parental and Home Challenges	Lack of patience, limited ability to support learning, emotional instability impacted learning,	7
5	Systemic and Policy Issues	Inadequate resources and support planning, curriculum and assessments biased or misaligned, fragmented services between ELL and special education, labeling and stigma around special students, deficit-based placement approaches, barriers in inclusive policy implementation, structural bias in placement to inclusion classrooms, ethical limitations in research, and lack of bilingual professionals.	21

Students with special needs struggle with mastering the materials while coping with their limitations. Deaf students struggle with "deep" or "hard" English words, making it difficult to pronounce certain words or understand lectures, questions, and spoken instructions (Cabreros, 2020). They also take time to process messages relayed through lip reading and/or sign language, leading to slower responses and comprehension (Toninel, Sahib, & Syam, 2023; Cabreros, 2020). Some students perceived their limitations as negative, hindering motivation and engagement in learning (Guanoluisa et al., 2022; Febtiningsih, Ardiya, & Wibowo, 2021). Some students demonstrated high dependence on others to learn or perform tasks (Setiawan et al., 2020) or on certain teaching methods (Watanapokakul & Sitajalabhorn, 2023), making them resistant to new teaching methods or shy, affecting their participation in class discussions and activities (Toninel et al., 2023). In the case of autistic children, Hashim et al., (2022) reported struggles in handling diverse sensory sensitivities and preferences (e.g., some attracted to bright colors, others disturbed by them), making standard teaching materials less effective for some. They also added children with autism have limited behaviors and repetitive routines that restrict social interaction and communicative opportunities, negatively affecting vocabulary acquisition and usage.

Since every student has different needs, teaching methods must be tailored to everyone, and it can be challenging for teachers to accommodate everyone's differences in a single class. Teachers lacked orientation or had bias on how to handle students with special needs, leading to ineffective teaching strategies (Cabreros, 2020) or faulty instructional decisions (Khasawneh, 2021b). Teachers also had limited knowledge and skills to identify the students' abilities, interests, and learning styles which hindered them from tailoring instruction that provided a supportive, low-distraction, and structured learning environment, reduced anxiety, and encouraged participation (Sandra & Kurniawati (2020). Furthermore, students with physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory issues tend to have greater limitations compared to their so-called normal peers. This can trigger disappointment, mood swings, and unstable emotional conditions (Upa & Mbato, 2020) which cause tantrums and behavioral issues that can disrupt the learning process (Sophia, 2021). Thus, teachers are demanded to be sensitive to these changes and become flexible in running the teaching-learning activities (Upa & Mbato, 2020) while struggling with their own emotional and psychological stability to keep themselves on guard and sane (Gumiandari & Nafi'a I, 2021).

On the other hand, curriculum and teaching approaches specially designed for special students were not fairly disseminated (Cabreros, 2020) while access to required learning materials and technologies for specific needs was hard to attain (Aisyah, Noni, & Aeni, 2024; Toninel et al., 2023; Khasawneh, 2021a). Moreover, adequate teacher training was still limited (Takriyanti et al., 2022; Guanoluisa et al., 2022). With all the challenges in teaching English to students with special needs emerges the need for support from or collaboration with other experts and family members (Khasawneh, 2021b).

C. The Impacts on Students' Learning Process

Further analysis of the impact of the strategies on the student's learning process can be classified into five categories which lead to positive, negative, or mixed conclusions. Some strategies affect students' cognitive and academic development positively, such as improved mastery of abstract concepts and enhanced memory, but still struggle in writing. Some studies reported improved communication and language skills, such as improved vocabulary by

repetition, but there is also a demand for a more specialized curriculum for certain disabilities (Febtiningsih et al., 2021; Cabrerros, 2020). See the table below for more details.

Table 5. The Impacts on Students' Learning Process

No	Category	Sub-Representative Finding	Frequency
1	Cognitive and Academic Development	Improved mastery of abstract concepts using technology and visuals, enhanced memory recall through visual aids and repetition, improved foundational skills in grammar and vocabulary, and tailored programs supported developmental learning progress. Delayed mastery for some students due to the need for extended repetition, difficulty mastering complex grammar and writing skills, difficulty understanding lectures and assignments, and low proficiency in vocabulary and reading comprehension.	11
2	Communication and Language Skills	Improved pronunciation and increased expressive vocabulary by repetition, enhanced narrative skills through storytelling, Difficulty for deaf students, restricted vocabulary growth due to rigid routines,	10
3	Social and Emotional Growth	Increased confidence, engagement, motivation, attentiveness, expression, learning behaviors and emotional skills,	6
4	Instructional Methods & Teacher Roles	Improved engagement, collaboration, and support for diverse learners. Repetition and visual dependence slowed the learning pace, and high customization demands caused teacher fatigue and inconsistency	5
5	Curriculum and Resource Design	Demand for specialized curriculum, flexible teaching, differentiation, and inclusive-based learning.	6

The analysis results indicate that teaching strategies have a significant impact on the academic progress of children with special needs. Studies consistently report that adaptive approaches such as differentiated instruction, multisensory learning, and visual support contribute to measurable gains in language development. For instance, Agustina et al. (2023) found that addressing individual learning challenges through differentiated instruction led to noticeable academic progress. Hettiarachchi et al. (2022) reported a 45% improvement in vocabulary acquisition through multisensory storytelling, while Zohoorian, Zeraatpishe, & Matin (2021) documented a 35% increase in vocabulary retention among autistic children using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). These strategies work by activating multiple sensory pathways and offering structured yet flexible methods for engaging students, particularly those with communication difficulties.

Technology has proven to be a transformative tool in special needs education. Ramadani (2024) found a 50% increase in reading comprehension scores when digital tools were integrated into English instruction, attributing the improvement to the personalized and interactive nature of technology. Similarly, Gumiandari & Nafi'a (2021) observed a 30% rise in student engagement when joyful learning methods based on social constructivist principles were applied. These findings are further supported by Upa & Mbato (2020), who emphasized that technology can promote inclusivity and active participation in classrooms. By tailoring lessons to individual learners, technology enables students to overcome conventional barriers, thereby improving motivation, engagement, and retention (Cárdenas & Inga, 2021).

Inclusive learning environments also positively influence academic and social outcomes for students with special needs. Lintangari & Emaliana (2020) concluded that with appropriate strategies, blind students can achieve results comparable to their sighted peers. Zahron, Adityarini, & Wijayanto (2023) and Watanapokakul & Sitajalabhorn (2023) found that inclusion promotes confidence and participation, while Philip & Kumburu (2023) demonstrated that specialized learning materials improved English comprehension in students with hearing impairments. Furthermore, Cole et al. (2020) reported that students in inclusive classrooms outperformed their peers in reading and math, showing the academic benefits of meaningful inclusion. These findings affirm that inclusive teaching practices when properly supported enable students with diverse needs to thrive.

Overall, the above results illustrate a broader trend: effective, tailored teaching strategies not only improve academic achievement but also foster holistic development. Students benefit cognitively, socially, and emotionally when instruction is personalized, inclusive, and supported by appropriate resources. Adequate teacher training and inclusive practices are crucial for promoting students' learning development. Ongoing efforts to develop inclusive systems that ensure all students, regardless of ability, reach their full academic potential are essential. A study by Zahron et al. (2023) supports this, showing that schools with inclusive practices saw a 30% improvement in both participation and academic performance among students with special needs compared to those in non-inclusive schools.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Students with physical, mental, and cognitive disabilities need adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative strategies in their English learning process. Among the most frequently employed strategies are *Individualized and Differentiated Instruction*, *Multisensory and Visual Learning*, and *Collaborative Teaching* involving peer educators and specialists. These approaches reflect educators' commitment to customizing instruction based on students' needs. Integrating technology and gamified learning has also proven effective in enhancing engagement, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition. The evidence consistently shows that when teaching methods are responsive to individual needs, students demonstrate measurable improvements in language development, confidence, and participation. Student-related issues, such as behavioral difficulties, limited language skills, and inconsistent progress, remain the most frequently reported barriers. Teacher-related challenges and structural obstacles further complicate inclusive practice, urging actions to resolve the matters. Teacher development such as integrating ongoing professional programs for teachers to prepare them to meet the growing needs of children with disabilities should be supported. This includes acquiring new concepts in teaching, new technologies, and approaches concerning different kinds of disabilities. Well-selected learning interventions can affect the academic, communicative, and social domains positively, highlighting the need for continuous, personalized learning support. Since the study covers a limited number of studies with three broad focuses, future research can discuss the long-term impact of these strategies, particularly across diverse disability types and multilingual settings, to investigate meaningful, equitable learning experiences that empower every student to reach their full academic and personal potential.

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