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Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs: How to cope with them?

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A B S T R A C T

Special skills are needed for the teachers to teach the students. This study was carried out as an initial investigation regarding the challenges of two teachers teaching a class of students with special needs. An intensive interview with two teachers who teach students with special needs was used to conduct this case study. There are two main focuses in this study, investigating teachers' experiences and barriers in terms of language and communication with students. This study concluded that in terms of teaching English; speaking, listening, and reading skills are most prioritized to be taught but are also the most difficult to teach in an inclusive classroom. Teachers need to prepare interesting and innovative media to attract students' attention in learning considering the unpredictable focus of students with special needs. Visual media such as videos and pictures are the most effective media in learning English. Calling the student's full name, making eye contact, and body language is the best way to communicate and teach them, and research and development should be conducted to design effective media and learning strategies. This study suggests that in the future there will be many researchers conducting research and development research who design effective media for teaching English to students with special needs.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is an activity of exchanging knowledge between teachers and students (Hughes & Greenhough, 2006; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Linzalone *et al.,* 2020). Teaching is a moral profession, and becoming a teacher requires a desire to improve their students' success in teaching and learning activities (Gunawan & Gunawan, 2019). Additionally, teaching is the process of being attentive to the needs, experiences, and feelings of others and stepping in to help them learn specific topics and go beyond. As a result, teaching is a challenging endeavor, especially when it comes to teaching English to students with special needs.

Special education or special needs education is the practice of educating students with special needs in a way that addresses their differences and needs (Meynert, 2014; Florian, 2019; Boyle *et al.,* 2012; Koster *et al.,* 2010). Special education is the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching procedures, adapted equipment and materials, accessible settings, and other interventions designed to assist learners with special needs in achieving a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success in school and community than would be available if the student only received a typical classroom education (Zigmond *et al.,* 2009). Students with special needs themselves are children who experience developmental delays, and have certain medical conditions, psychiatric conditions, and/or congenital conditions (Larson *et al.,* 2001; Abells *et al.,* 2016). They need special attention and handling to reach their potential. Children with special needs are not less intelligent, talented, or incapable. However, they have special challenges that are not faced by most other 'normal' children. This condition occurs when a child has limitations or extraordinary abilities that affect the process of growth and development. This means students need proper assistance. Special needs are an umbrella term for a wide range of diagnoses, ranging from conditions that resolve quickly to conditions that can be a lifelong challenge. Both relatively mild conditions to severe conditions exist. Blind visually impaired students are students with special needs who experience partial or total blindness (Lieberman *et al.,* 2019). Deaf students are those who have hearing loss, either partially or completely, affecting their language and speech abilities (Jambor & Elliott, 2005). Students with special needs in the autism spectrum disorder category have their uniqueness. There is a very wide range of autistic students. As presented by Grzadzinski *et al.* (2013) regarding how to identify Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) subtypes, see **Figure 1**.
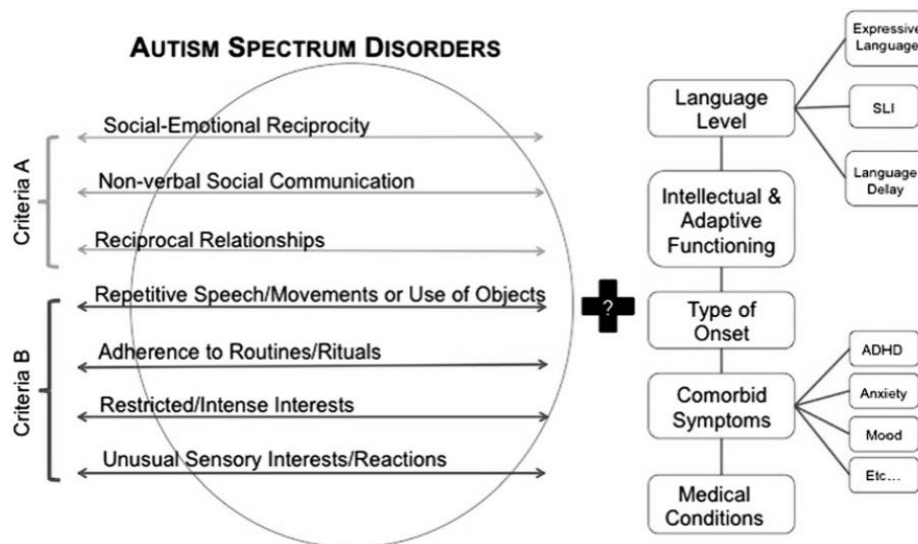

Figure 1. Autism spectrum disorders range, taken (Grzadzinski *et al.,* 2013).

Additionally, students with disabilities are a classification of children with special needs who experience movement disorders due to paralysis, deformities, body functions, or limb abnormalities (Putri & Putro, 2021). The last is students who have abnormalities or problems in controlling emotions and social control, even carrying out deviant behavior, namely, attention and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Frick & Nigg, 2012). Children with ADHD experience impaired self-control, difficulty focusing or paying attention, and hyperactive and impulsive behavior (Pardini & Fite, 2010). Therefore, a teacher who teaches students with special needs will face unusual teaching challenges compared to teachers who teach in 'conventional' classes. Not all teachers can teach students with special needs. To teach classes of students with special needs, teachers must have qualified skills. There are at least four competencies that must be possessed by teachers, namely pedagogic, social, personal, and professional competencies (Apriliyanti, 2020; Stiegelbauer, 1992).

In pedagogic competence, teachers are required to master the characteristics of students with special needs from their physical, moral, social, cultural, emotional, and intellectual aspects (Taylor, 2010; Apriliyanti, 2020). In the social competencies, teachers must be inclusive, act objectively, and not act discriminatory towards students who have special needs because of the sex of the child, religion, race, physical condition, family background, and socioeconomic status (Sharma *et al.*, 2017). And the last is the professional competence possessed by a teacher, in which the teacher must develop learning materials that are handled creatively and innovatively (Suryani *et al.*, 2021).

It is recommended that teachers be able to utilize information and communication technology to communicate and develop themselves in learning for students with special needs (Bhuana & Apriliyanti, 2021). Notwithstanding, in Indonesia itself, there are still limited teachers who are competent in inclusive education, and there are no clear professionalism standards that govern this circumstance (Estriyanto *et al.*, 2017; Sharma *et al.*, 2013).

Teaching and learning languages, especially foreign languages, are something that is not easy to do for students with special needs. Teaching students with special needs in an inclusive classroom poses unique challenges. Moreover, previous research has found that teaching language in an inclusive classroom is difficult, with unique challenges that necessitate specialized treatment (Norwich & Lewis, 2007; Cooc, 2019; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Khasawneh, 2021).

Although there are many learning strategies that special education teachers can use, such as sheltered content instruction a sense of efficacy in teaching ELLs (Miranda *et al.*, 2019), effective interventions for ELLs (Vaughn *et al.*, 2005), and using visual aids, for instance, pictures (Adi *et al.*, 2017; Zohoorian *et al.*, 2021; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Browder *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, as previously stated, this is a special education that is designed with the uniqueness and diversity of the students' conditions in mind, and the teacher is in charge of it. For this reason, the author feels that this is an intriguing topic to investigate. This paper is the result of an initial investigation into the barriers and challenges faced by inclusive teachers in their learning and communication processes with the students who are being taught the English language. Moreover, this paper will discuss the teachers' solutions to these challenges. Furthermore, this paper seeks alternative solutions for teachers who are experiencing similar issues as the research key informants.

2. METHODS

A case study is used in this study. To investigate the case, two interviews were conducted. Two inclusive education teachers served as key informants in this study. To protect the identities of key informants, their names will be mentioned under pseudonyms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and discussion will be described in three parts in this section: the first is about the teacher's experience teaching students with special needs, and the second is about the teacher's barriers during the language teaching process. Because each key informant has a unique experience, the interpretation will be elaborated on one by one.

3.1. Teachers' Experiences

This section will describe teachers' experiences teaching English and dealing with language barriers when communicating with inclusive students.

3.1.1. *Ms. D's experience*

Ms. D is the principal of one of the special schools in Bandung. During her service at the school, she found various characteristics and abilities of his students. The majority of students at the school are children with *Tuna Grahita* (mental retardation) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In the teaching process, the students felt enthusiastic when learning vocational skills such as baking cakes, washing motorbikes, and other life skills.

As for the learning material, there is no specific subject in learning English. Because the learning material has been integrated with the thematic grade 6 SDLB (special elementary school). When asked about how the language learning process, especially English, was for inclusive students during the Covid 19 pandemic, Ms. D answered: *"pembelajaran yang dilakukan yaitu dengan home visit ke rumah siswa dengan rutin selama 2 kali dalam seminggu. anak diberikan penugasan oleh guru, serta orang tua murid diberikan penjelasan mengenai tugas yang perlu dikerjakan oleh anak. pada saat transisi covid berakhir, siswa di datangkan kembali ke sekolah dengan tatap muka terbatas. pada saat itu pembelajaran yang diberikan kepada siswa dengan pemberian media pembelajaran untuk menghafal kosa kata bahasa inggris dan dengan memberikan video pembelajaran untuk menunjang anak dalam memahami materi"* [INT-A001-003]

Translation: ["Home visits to students' homes are made twice a week to facilitate learning. The students are given assignments by the teacher, and parents have explained the tasks that need to be done by the students. When the COVID transition ends, students are brought back to school with limited face-to-face meetings. At that time, learning was given to students by providing learning media to memorize English vocabulary and by providing learning videos to support children in understanding the material."]

Based on the information provided above, it was confirmed that Ms. D's English learning method was a home visit. Furthermore, the media used is in the form of learning videos to help students understand English vocabulary.

Additionally, when asked about Ms. D's experience communicating with his students, she answered: *"Proses komunikasi yang saya lakukan dengan murid melalui komunikasi dengan menggunakan komunikasi visual dan gestur supaya anak autis mengerti apa yang kita ungkapkan."* [INT-A001-005]

Translation: [The communication process that I do with students through communication using visual communication and gestures so that autistic children understand what we express]

Based on the interview data, MS. D's communication process with students is by using visual aids and gestures so that ASD students can perceive better. This is in line with the research results from (Adi *et al.*, 2017; Zohoorian *et al.*, 2021; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Browder

et al., 2009; Tlustošová, 2006) of which revealed that visual aids are an effective medium to teach English.

3.1.2. *Ms. S's experience*

Ms. S works as a special education teacher in Surabaya. is a teacher at a special school in Surabaya. Unlike Ms. D. at school Ms. S, is more varied in teaching language education, such as blindness *(Tuna Netra)*, mental retardation *(Tuna Grahita)*, deaf (*Tuna Rungu)*, physical impairment, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

In terms of teaching, none of the teachers teach specific courses, but teachers who are entrusted as guardian teachers teach all subjects in the class. And the materials are similar to Ms. D's in that the subjects are merged thematically. And the learning process is carried out in class, where the teacher can only focus on educating one student due to the student's limited ability to focus.

When asked about the English lesson learning process, Ms. S responded: *"biasanya saya menggunakan Picture and Picture dalam mengajari siswa Bahasa Inggris dan mereka happy jika dengan gambar-gambar."* [INT-B001-005]

Translation: ["Usually, I use Picture and Picture in teaching English and they are happy with it."]

Based on the answer from Ms. S above, it was found that the use of 'picture and picture' learning models is a medium that is currently effective in teaching students with special needs. Additionally, out of all categories of students with special needs, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who have emotions tend to be stable, or in other words, their emotions are easier to regulate, they tend to learn English quickly, even if they absorb material faster than normal students of their age. On the other hand, ASD students who have uncontrolled emotions, and are prone to tantrums, will find it very difficult to learn English or other material when compared to other students with special needs. This is in line with the results of research conducted by several researchers such as (Bakare, 2011; Grzadzinski *et al.,* 2013) which revealed that in ASD there is a wide spectrum of autistic children who are geniuses and autistic children whose emotions are very difficult to control, resulting in low IQ.

Regarding the communication process with students with special needs, Ms.S implemented several strategies. The first is by mentioning the student's full name multiple times until he/she realizes that the teacher wants to communicate with him/her. After that, the teacher should look into his eyes by making eye contact in a directed manner. Because eye contact is the most important aspect of communication for students with special needs. Also, the teacher should give them time to respond because they need time to process the information and gather their focus. At this stage, the teacher or other person may not break eye contact with them. Teachers are expected to patiently wait for answers from them. According to Ms. S, these strategies are effective enough to be able to communicate with students. Even though sometimes they did not fully respond, this is a good first step if students want to hear what the teacher is talking about with them. Even if their eyes are not focused on the teacher's eyes during the communication process, the teacher or the other person attempting to communicate continues to look into his eyes.

Based on the experiences of the two teachers, it was found that learning media in the form of visual media, such as videos or pictures, were the most effective media in teaching English to students with special needs. Meanwhile, in the process of communicating, calling the student's full name while making intense eye contact, and body language is the best way to communicate in the teaching process. In addition, in the learning process, ASD students with

a certain spectrum who are more emotionally stable tend to learn English and other material swiftly even when compared to normal students of their age.

3.2. Teachers' Barrier in Teaching the English Language to Special Needs Students

In the language teaching process, both Ms. D and Ms. S agreed that teaching the four English skills is not easy to teach. When asked which order was the most difficult, in learning English both agreed that speaking skills were the most difficult to teach. Apart from speaking skills, listening skills are in second place, and reading is in third place. Meanwhile, writing ability is not the focus of learning English. Notwithstanding, despite the use of media in communicating, various obstacles are currently being experienced by Ms. D and Ms. S.

3.2.1. *Ms. D's barrier*

When the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, it was the most difficult time for our education (Bhuana & Apriliyanti, 2021), especially for teachers who teach students with special needs. There are many obstacles that teachers faced when educating special needs students, especially autistic students. During the pandemic, they are sometimes constrained by vehicles to conduct a home visit. Moreover, sometimes students or teachers who were on duty at home visits were not fit so that in one week, sometimes they only have 1 meeting. In this circumstance, Students often forgot the lessons that have been taught before.

And when asked about her impression of language teaching, Ms. D revealed that it was very difficult to teach students with special needs in learning foreign languages. Moreover, students are used to interacting with their colleagues. Students are used to using Indonesian and Sundanese, so it is rather difficult to introduce a new language to them.

Additionally, the obstacle faced during the teaching and learning process with students is that sometimes it is difficult for students to focus. Thus, students cannot observe and follow the lesson properly. One solution is to invite students to play and rest for a while so that children can focus and be able to follow learning properly again. Ms. D hopes that in the future there will be creative innovations in making affordable teaching media for students with special needs that can be used in learning English.

3.2.2. *Ms. S's barrier*

The obstacles faced by Ms. S in the learning process, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic, namely the need for a new introduction to children related to learning at home. The concept ingrained in students that learning must be done at school makes it difficult for parents. As a result, it is challenging for students to study at home. The second concept is that parents are not teachers for them. They assumed that the teacher was at school not at home. Another problem is that the atmosphere at home can be a factor that interferes with students' concentration and focus.

In the language learning process, speaking, listening, and reading skills are most prioritized to be taught as well as the most difficult skills to teach. Because the focus of students with special needs is not the same as other normal students. Media that is very interesting and innovative is needed to maintain the focus of children with special needs in learning. Not only that but also in schools with special needs, even though there are guardian teachers in the class, the guardian teachers will be assisted by several teacher assistants who handle two or three students for one teacher. Because teaching students with special needs is not the same as other normal students which can be carried out classically, in schools with special needs this requires extra energy, patience, and stable emotions. Therefore, according to Ms. S, not all teachers can become teachers for children with special needs. Special skills are needed to

handle it. She only hopes that in the future there will be learning training for children with special needs, especially in language learning.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the investigation, five findings were found related to the process of learning English in the class of students with special needs. The first, Speaking, listening, and reading skills are the skills that are most prioritized to be taught but are also the most difficult skills to teach. Teachers need to prepare interesting and innovative media to attract students' attention to learning. Second, visual media such as videos and pictures are the most effective media in learning English. Third, in the learning process, the teacher must maintain intense eye contact to ensure students will focus on learning. Calling full names and direct eye contact can help the teacher in communicating and learning English. Fourth, autistic students with a certain spectrum of controlled emotions are the fastest students in learning English, even smarter than children of their age. Fifth, the obstacles faced by teachers in learning and teaching English are that students tend to be easily distracted in the teaching process. Hence, teachers need innovative media that can help teachers in learning and teaching English. Apart from that, the teachers hope that in the future, there will be more specialized training for teachers teaching students with special needs as well as innovative research related to interesting and innovative teaching materials for teaching English in classes with special needs.

In this study, the author realized that there were still many shortcomings in the research process, such as the short data collection time. In the future, it would be better if the research process did not only go through intense interviews but also through longitudinal observations related to this, it would be able to find out which content of the English material was considered the most difficult and what solutions could be offered. In addition, this study suggests that in the future there will be many researchers conducting research and development research who design the most effective media for teaching English to students with special needs accompanied by learning workshops for teachers regarding fun learning strategies for students with special needs.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The author confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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