

Inclusive students' challenges in learning English (A case study in SD Negeri Balirejo, Yogyakarta)

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Abstract

The fact that the world is now borderless has increased the demand for English in society. This demand does not only apply to adults but in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, early childhood, elementary school students and inclusive students or students with SEN (Special Education Needs) are now also required to be able to speak English. Many researchers have discussed the various difficulties in learning English faced by adults or children, but few have discussed the difficulties experienced by SEN students, even though they have the same demands and rights as everyone else to learn English. This study aims to provide an overview regarding the challenges experienced by SEN students in learning English. Qualitative research was done by direct interviews with inclusive students and English teachers at SD N Balirejo which is one of the inclusive schools in Yogyakarta. This study demonstrates that the use of vocabulary, pronunciation and speaking in English are some of the difficulties experienced by SEN students. In addition, students with SEN face difficulties in social interaction that makes English learning process more challenging. Therefore, an appropriate environment, methods and strategies as well as the role of teachers are needed to support English learning for inclusive students.

Keywords: *English language teaching, inclusive students, students' challenges, TEYL, SD N Balirejo*

INTRODUCTION

The urgency of learning English in Indonesia is undebatable. It is known by the fact that the world has become borderless and connected very easily ([Al-khresheh, 2024](#); [Choi & Poudel, 2024](#); [Imran et al., 2024](#)). In addition, Indonesians, as members of the society of the world, need English as the key to access. Many researchers believe that people can be more confident as global citizens when they have the ability to communicate in English ([Gottlieb, 2005](#); [Ong et al., 2022](#); [Phyo et al., 2024](#)). More opportunities can be achieved by mastering the language. Knowing this fact, it can be considered urgent to start teaching English in elementary level. However, as a foreign language in Indonesia, English has its own challenges for Indonesian learners, especially for children.

Learning English in the early years is considered effective by some experts to acquire the language. Previous studies have proved that people are in their best stage to learn new languages in the age of 6-12 years old ([Bland, 2018](#); [Cahyati & Madya, 2019](#); [Farahsani et al., 2020](#); [Fiktorius, 2020](#)). Elementary schools have a very important role in this case. Several years ago, it was very unfortunate that this country removed English from the elementary education in the Curriculum 2013. However, since the existence of the *Merdeka* Curriculum, elementary schools are expected to improve the quality of English language teaching to improve the quality of their students ([Maryani et al., 2024](#)). In fact, starting in the academic year of 2027/2028, the Government of Indonesia has decided that English is a compulsory subject in all elementary schools. [Cahyati and Madya \(2019\)](#) also emphasize that all school's stakeholder must support the English learning process in the school.

Teaching children is not similar to teaching adults. This case is also applied in teaching English. Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) needs special treatment. Teachers need to make sure that children or students in the elementary level are able to use the language in a daily basis, especially all four skills (speaking, writing, reading, listening). The focus of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the elementary level should be practical and can be used in a daily basis ([Mattsson & Norrby, 2013](#)). The practical teaching process regarding the four skills in English is really required in TEYL.

The situation is more complex when it comes to students with Special Education Needs (SEN). Recently, inclusive education has been introduced in Indonesia. Some schools started to accept students with SEN to be in the same class as students without SEN. Teaching students in elementary level is a challenge but teaching students in elementary level with SEN offers a double challenge. It is possible but more effort is indeed needed. Teachers must make sure that students with and without SEN can understand the material as well as be accepting to each other. [Savic and Santovac \(2017\)](#) stated that teachers are the key in the success of inclusive teaching process. Therefore, there must be a training or skills owned by teachers in this condition.

This condition also happens in Balirejo State Elementary School (SD N Balirejo). This is one of the schools in the Special District of Yogyakarta, Indonesia that accepts inclusive students or students with SEN while other schools still doubt to accept them. Every year, SD N 1 Balirejo receives some application from inclusive students with several conditions such as visual or hearing problems, severe learning difficulties, emotional and behavioral problems, etc. Based on the observation conducted in the school, the researchers found that students with SEN sometimes face difficulties in the ELT learning process. It has been argued by both, the teacher and the shadow teacher that they often need to repeat explanations to students with SEN.

There have been several studies conducted regarding ELT and TEYL for inclusive students. However, most of them are related to perception and methods in ELT for inclusive students. For instance ([Alabsi, 2021](#); [Savic & Santovac, 2017](#); [Shaaban & Shaat, 2022](#)) who focused on teachers' perception on teaching inclusive students and the methods in teaching them. In those studies, [Alabsi \(2021\)](#) explained that some teachers have a good perception regarding teaching students with SEN but they have problems in the number of the

students because sometimes class sizes are too big with too many students. On the other hand, [Savic and Santovac \(2017\)](#) argued that most teachers in Serbia feel burdened to teach inclusive students because they think that they are not really skillful in doing so. [Shabaan and Shaat \(2022\)](#) discussed an effective method that teachers can use in teaching inclusive students namely a scenario-based learning approach.

Learning English for Children

Many experts argue that childhood is the golden age in acquiring new languages. [Farahsani et al., 2019](#) even said that humans develop their language ability along with their age. Especially at the kindergarten and elementary level, it is the time when children acquire other languages beside their mother tongue such as English. Children are able to learn new languages well as long as their environment supports it.

Everything related to children must be fun and enjoyable. Children have a low attention span; therefore, teachers or instructors need to pay attention to this ([Brawijaya et al., 2024](#); [Lunin & Minaeva, 2015](#); [Mundelsee & Reschke, 2025](#)). If the learning process is boring, undoubtedly children will prefer to do anything else inside the class that can make them happy. Furthermore, [Lunin and Minaeva \(2015\)](#) stated that there are more things that need to be taken into consideration in children's language learning.

Giving children opportunities to find out their progress is also very necessary. Some learners need some validation on how far they have learned. For instance, when students are speaking in English, or do a listening exercise, they need some feedback from the teachers about how well they did during the exercises. It can motivate them to learn more as well as give them confidence. When children feel that they have achieved something, it can boost their self-esteem. [Imran et al. \(2024\)](#) also support this by stating that experienced teachers are fundamental things because students really rely on them.

Repetition is another key to a successful learning experience. Children will easily learn new words and form sentences by repeating them over and over again. It supports the statement from ([Mattsson & Norrby, 2013](#)) earlier that when children can use the language, they are automatically learning the language. The content of the discussion is also need to be adjusted with students' daily basis. It applies for all language skills-speaking, listening, reading, and writing-as well as the language components such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar ([Jaya et al., 2025](#); [Khasanah & Jaya, 2023](#)).

Finally, teachers are ones of the key factors who can really determine the success of a student's learning experience. As the facilitators, they have to make sure that students experience a pleasurable learning process, are able to measure their progress, and can focus on their language learning. No matter what the conditions of the students are, every student must have this experience ([Maryani et al., 2025](#)).

Inclusive Students

All students, regardless of their circumstances, have the right to learn. As was already established, learning English may be challenging, particularly for inclusive pupils. According to ([Alabsi, 2021](#)), inclusive students, also known as students with SEN, are individuals who experience greater challenges and require greater assistance and support than other kids their age. As he conducted further studies, [Alabsi \(2021\)](#) noted that inclusive pupils fall into several groups, including:

- a. Pupils with serious injuries or those rendered incapacitated by a variety of disorders have challenges in their physical education.
- b. Students with multiple disabilities who have severe learning challenges.
- c. Particular difficulties: Pupils who struggle mightily to focus and comprehend language skills (writing, reading, speaking, and listening).
- d. Students with emotional and behavioral issues, such as those who are disruptive or despondent, are said to have emotional and behavioral learning challenges.
- e. Students with visual and hearing impairments, such as deaf and blind students.

Teaching inclusive children presents a number of hurdles for the instructor,

including the students' physical disabilities, cognitive and social skills deficits, emotional issues, and the sociocultural context. Here are some of the description of those conditions:

- a. Kids with physical disabilities, such as those with hearing or vision issues, are often associated with other kids.
- b. Cognitive problem associated with pupils who struggle to maintain concentration throughout class discussions. These kids struggle to focus on one subject at a time and are always drawn to something else.
- c. Students' difficulties with social skills are seen in their inability to collaborate with others. Not to add that because they believe they have failed at everything, individuals with special education needs typically have poor self-esteem.
- d. The sociocultural setting difficulty has to do with the way parents act at home and the unsupportive classroom and school administration. In this instance, ([Duran, 2020](#)) emphasized that three factors inside the school—access, participation, and support—need to be taken into account in order to have inclusive pupils. The source of information that students can access is connected to access. By participating, the school demonstrates that its staff are prepared to work with inclusive kids. The final one is support, which denotes that all of the staff members and instructors at the school are able to accept the students' circumstances.

In Indonesia, the public has been more aware of inclusive education with the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum. Prior to this, the prevailing belief in Indonesian culture was that children who required special education had to attend special schools. However, only a small number of schools—particularly public ones—are now prepared to enroll inclusive pupils. Only a small number of public schools have the courage to implement this policy; several private schools have already done so. It is not because of the teachers' abilities. According to previous studies, the issues are more related to classroom management rather than refusing to educate pupils with special needs ([Alabsi, 2021](#); [Effendi et al., 2024](#)).

Based on the previous studies and theories, there has been little research conducted into the challenges faced by inclusive students in learning English. Mostly, the discussions have been about how teachers manage the class with inclusive students inside without focusing on the English subject. Furthermore, in Indonesia, particularly in Yogyakarta as the city of education, research on this topic is needed and will contribute to the development of ELT practices. Therefore, this article aims to determine inclusive students' challenges in learning English. To achieve this goal, there are two main research questions, namely:

1. What are the challenges faced by inclusive students in learning English?
2. How do they manage the challenges in the learning process?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative descriptive research in nature. The study was carried out in SD N 1 Balirejo, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This institution is one of Yogyakarta's public schools that is renowned for providing inclusive education. Parents of children with SEN entrust them to come study here every year. By taking into account the number of instructors to pupils in each classroom, this school further promotes inclusive education. To assist children with SEN in their educational journey, they have shadow instructors or several teachers in the classroom.

Students with SEN are the subjects of this research. The researchers interviewed two inclusive students from lower classes (grade 1-3) and two inclusive students from upper classes (grade 4-6) with various conditions to collect the data. To ensure the ethical clearance of this study, the researchers keep the students' personal information confidential. Their names were written with initials to maintain their privacy. The English teachers were also interviewed to confirm the challenges faced by inclusive students in learning English. Furthermore, the objects of the research are the challenges faced by inclusive students in

learning English. The techniques of data collection were interview and library research. This study was also supervised by the Headmaster to ensure that it followed appropriate ethical consideration.

Prior to conducting the study, the authors observed the learning process in order to gather pertinent data. In order to gather data, the authors scheduled an appointment and conducted an interview with the students and English teachers to ask a number of questions. Following the schedule's establishment, the authors began gathering information by posing questions concerning the state of inclusive classrooms, the challenges of learning English faced by the inclusive students, and how they manage to face these challenges. The primary data from the interview is supported by secondary data from library research.

Following the collection of data from interviews, the data were qualitatively evaluated using the methodology of qualitative data analysis from (Kusmaryani, 2023) starting with the identification of the problem and concluding with the key results. To address the study questions, the data were categorized and identified following analysis. Structured interviews, notebooks, and the researchers themselves as human instruments were the tools used for gathering and analyzing data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Based on observation and interview results, we found that most of the students' challenges are related to both the skills and the components of the language. However, all of the respondents believe that the English teacher is very supportive and help them enjoy learning the language. The respondents were four students and two English teachers in the school. These students are those with SEN and identified in their freshman year by the enrolling system in the school. In the beginning of the academic year, this school will usually conduct a screening test for SEN students and diagnose their condition. The teachers are MT and MF who have taught English in the school for more than six years. The students' information is as follows:

Table 1

Respondents' information (Students)

Name	Case	Grade
AGR	Mentally Disabled	VI
FR	Speech Difficulty	V
AR	Social Behaviour	I
HN	Social Behaviour	III

Challenges Faced by Inclusive Students in Learning English

Even though the students' answers are varied regarding their challenges, most of them focus on language skills. One of them is an interview with a student who is in the 6th grade of elementary school who is mentally disabled as follows:

Question: "What do you think about English lessons?"

Answer: "I don't like English because I don't feel like it and I am lazy to learn." (AGR)

Question: "What do you dislike the most about English lessons? Why?"

Answer: "I don't like English lessons because I find it difficult with the material so I am lazy to learn English." (AGR)

Question: "What difficulties do you encounter when learning English?"

Answer: "I find difficulty in English lessons in all matters, especially the use of vocabularies in learning." (AGR)

Furthermore, the difficulties faced by the student in the 3rd grade also have similarities where it is difficult to understand the material in English lessons. There are several questions in the interview that focus on difficulties in language skills.

Question: "How do you feel about English lessons?"

Answer: "In my opinion, English lessons are difficult and I feel dizzy during lessons." (HN)

Question: "What do you dislike most about English lessons? Why?"

Answer: "I don't like English lessons because they are hard and I get dizzy. I find it hard to speak English." (HN)

Question: "What are the difficulties you encountered while learning English?"

Answer: "I find it difficult to pronounce English words." (HN)

Problems in socializing is the next threat. Students with social behavior problems usually encounter issues in participating actively during the learning process. This can be seen in the answers of the student with the initials (AR) who is in grade 1 of elementary school:

Question: "What difficulties did you encounter while learning English?"

Answer: "I find it difficult to follow the lesson, I also like to be silent and linger in writing." (AR)

Question: "Do your friends often help you when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "No, because I really like to stay in class, don't like to play with friends in class, and I just sit quietly in the chair playing with pencils." (AR)

Question: "Have you ever asked the teacher who teaches English lessons when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "I never ask when I have difficulties." (AR)

Therefore, it can be said that there may still be many who experience difficulties in learning English at the elementary level, whether it is at the low grade or high-grade level. This is a big challenge for inclusive students and teachers.

Students' Management in Facing the Challenges

Every student has their own way in coping with the challenges during the English learning process. These challenges unconsciously make the inclusive students look for their own way of dealing with difficulties in English lessons. Almost all of them have the awareness to ask teachers and mentors to help them. Not only that, friends also make a suggestion for them to ask when experiencing difficulties in learning English. This can be seen in the answers from the interviews of several inclusive students who commented on facing these challenges:

Question: "Do your friends often help you when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "I tell my friends to help me when I have difficulties or when I am observing, and I also often ask my mentor teacher." (AR)

Question: "Have you ever asked the English teacher when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "Never, I mostly ask my mentor to help me when I find difficulties." (AR)

Question: "Have you ever asked the teacher who teaches English lessons when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "Often and when I am in class, for example, there are indications of bullying, I usually report it to the teacher." (FR)

Question: "How do the teachers answer your questions?"

Answer: "My English teacher is able to answer my questions well because my teacher has a good character." (FR)

Question: "Have you ever asked the English teacher when you have difficulties?"

Answer: "Yes, in the class during English lessons." (HN)

Question: "How did the teacher answer your questions?"

Answer: "Many teachers here are very kind and willing to answer my questions, including the English teacher." (HN)

The findings show that not all students with SEN are able to handle their challenges well. Only a few of them can face them by having an interaction with the teacher, but the rest may be unwilling to participate or share anything in the learning process. In this case, students who have problems in socializing usually ask for help from their personal mentor or assistant.

Discussion

The objective of this research is to find out the inclusive students' challenges in learning English. In addition, this research answers two research questions, namely the challenges faced by inclusive students in learning English and how they manage the challenges in the learning process. The challenge does not only come from the nature of English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia but the condition of students with SEN is creating more issues than students without SEN. Not to mention, students with SEN find it hard to manage the challenge by themselves.

Individuals who are significantly below average in intellectual ability and intelligence are usually caused by developmental, mental, emotional, social, and physical obstacles so that they cannot adjust to the environment (Saranca, 2021; Sun et al., 2023). The comments of the mentally impaired student (AGR) in the interview show that they have difficulty in understanding the material regarding the use of vocabularies in learning. Several answers from the interview showed that mentally disabled students have a tendency to have difficulties in learning English.

The result is supported by studies by ([Hossain, 2024a](#); [Marcelo et al., 2024](#); [Marcos et al., 2024](#)) who conducted research regarding English learners and their challenge during the learning process. These studies showed that learners need to pay more attention to language skills since communication will not be effective without adequate ability in these skills. They also mentioned that it is true when people sometimes have problems in one or two skills because English is their foreign language ([Arlita & Prasetya, 2024](#)). However, support from their environment and facilitator is a crucial factor to avoid the circumstances. Furthermore, these studies also stated that challenges in the language skills can also be caused by the lack of vocabulary. When someone has a large enough vocabulary, they will be able to communicate effectively in the target language ([Hadijah et al., 2020](#); [Hartini, 2024](#); [Toba et al., 2019](#)).

For students with SEN, the use of English to communicate will be more complicated due to the limitations that they have. Particular difficulties as has been mentioned by ([Alabsi, 2021](#)) are enough evidence that students with SEN have more challenges in understanding the material compared to students without SEN. Thus, they sometimes feel dizzy or feel it is hard to follow the instructions in the classroom. They need more support in understanding basic language skills ([Yang et al., 2024](#)). From the findings, we learn that there are some children who still have difficulties in learning English, whether they are in the lower grades or the higher grades. This certainly focuses on the subject matter and how to speak using English words which are obstacles for inclusive students. On the other hand, there are challenges faced by one of the inclusion students in learning English, namely difficulties in

socializing which lead them to avoid asking or confirming with the teacher or fellow friends whenever they have difficulties. The result is in line with some relatable studies. Students with SEN often have issues regarding interaction or socialization with their peers ([Al-Korbi et al., 2024](#); [Magyar et al., 2020](#); [Yang et al., 2024](#)). Teachers and the school system have the responsibility to help these students practice their interaction so that they will have more opportunities to share information with their peers ([Hossain, 2024b](#); [Jaya & Berliana, 2025](#); [Yang et al., 2024](#)). The development of technology can be used as one of the solutions to solve this issue ([Putri, 2024](#); [Vireak, 2025](#)).

Some students can handle their problems well by good communication with the teachers, but others are just unwilling, silent, and do not ask questions during the learning process. In addition, some students may have their own “mentor” in the classroom. Students with certain conditions such as extreme anti-social behavior may have a member of their families or personal assistant to accompany them while learning. It is usually because the school or the teachers can find it hard to handle the student or it is the student who feels more comfortable to be assisted personally. [Giangreco and Doyle \(2007\)](#) in their book stated that having a personal assistant inside the classroom may give great support for the education of students with special needs. Furthermore, this statement is also supported by the studies from ([Stefanyka & Kopchuk-kashetska, 2023](#)) who believe in the idea of personal assistants for students with SEN to achieve the goal of learning process.

Future research with the same topic could focus on certain challenges faced by students with SEN in learning English such as the skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) or the components (vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar) to make the study more specific. Besides, the limitation of certain disabilities can be another focus to find out the particular challenges faced by these students.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines some of the challenges faced by inclusive students in English language learning at SD N Balirejo, Yogyakarta. The findings showed significant barriers faced by the students in terms of language skills (such as vocabulary use, pronunciation, and speaking) and social interaction, which hindered their participation and understanding during lessons. Despite these difficulties, students with SEN adopted various strategies to overcome their learning challenges, such as seeking help from teachers, mentors, and peers.

The teacher plays an important role in overcoming these challenges by fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. Their kindness, patience and adaptability will encourage students to actively engage in the learning process. Mentors and peers can also contribute by providing additional guidance and support, most importantly to always help inclusive students overcome academic and social barriers.

However, this study highlights that some inclusive students are still reluctant to seek help when experiencing difficulties whether it is in English lessons or outside of these lessons. Thus, there is a need to emphasize tailored interventions and involve proactive teachers to ensure no student is left behind. The findings also highlight the importance of developing an inclusive teaching model, such as collaborating between inclusive and non-inclusive students to create a more effective learning environment for all students and to improve teacher training. Teachers who are familiar with students with SEN will develop better classroom management techniques and find the best strategies to help SEN students especially with the subject of English. Finally, English will no longer become a scary and boring subject for every student, including those with SEN.

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