

IMPLEMENTING THE 'FREEDOM TO LEARN' CONCEPT IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English to students with special needs requires a different approach compared to teaching general students, as these students often face significant challenges in learning the language. One primary issue is the lack of teacher competencies tailored to the needs of these students. This study aimed to analyze how English teachers implement the "Freedom to Learn" concept for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The research employed a case study design, collecting data through observation and interviews with two English teachers in inclusive schools. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data, and triangulation techniques were applied for data validation. The findings revealed that implementing "Freedom to Learn" begins with planning lessons based on students' needs. Modifications were made by reducing learning achievement standards, adjusting teaching materials, time allocation, and teaching processes, as well as incorporating Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). English teachers employed contextual teaching and learning strategies for slow learners and Total Physical Response (TPR) methods for students with expressive language disorders. The project-based learning model was used, where students participated in a gallery walk activity about things around them. The study concludes that the "Freedom to Learn" concept supports adaptive and inclusive education for students with special needs by tailoring lesson plans, modifying curricula, and applying appropriate teaching methods to meet their individual characteristics.

Keywords: Inclusion; Freedom to Learn; Students with Special Needs

A. Introduction

Inclusive education integrates students with special needs alongside regular students in the same classroom (Waldes Hasugian et al., 2019). Its main goal is to eliminate barriers that prevent both groups of students from learning and collaborating together (Hikmat, 2022).

Inclusive education also supports social inclusion in the workforce and community life (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Children with special needs have the same right to education as regular children (Lazar, 2020).

To implement inclusive education, schools must adapt the curriculum, infrastructure, and

teaching systems to meet the needs of the students (Sofwan et al., 2019). In this context, the Merdeka Curriculum provides flexibility to create learning that matches students' potential and characteristics, including those with special needs (Riyan Rizaldi & Fatimah, 2022; Azmi & Hadiyanto, 2023). The Merdeka Curriculum supports differentiated learning tailored to individual student needs (Tomlinson, 2011).

However, English teachers often face difficulties when teaching students with special needs, as they require different approaches and methods (Takriyanti et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can enhance students' motivation and creativity, but challenges remain, especially in differentiating instruction (Tricahyati & Zaim, 2023). Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze how English teachers implement the "Freedom to Learn" concept for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The research question is: How do English teachers implement "Freedom to Learn" for

students with special needs in inclusive classrooms?

B. Method

This study's research design is descriptive qualitative. This methodology incorporates variable information and is utilized to quantify the current phenomenon. Loeb et al., (2017), what works in education is determined by data using descriptive analysis, which is descriptive simplification. A good description is pertinent to a particular study or policy subject by presenting our current understanding of capacities, needs, methodologies, practices, policies, people, and environments.

Design of the research uses case study. According to Ary (2010, hal. 29) case study is a type of ethnographic research study that focused on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, and one organization or one program. The goal is to arrive at a detailed description and understanding of the entity (the "case"). In addition a case study can result in data from which generalizations to theory are possible.

Source of Data

The data come from observations, interviews and documentation. Data sources are English teachers working with students with special needs in inclusive education. There are two English teachers. The location of the research is two senior high school in Semarang.

Instrument and Method of Data Collection

Ary, (2010) states that the most commonly used research tools in qualitative research are observations, interviews and document analysis. In this study, researcher will collect data using observations and interviews.

Data Validation

Data validation for this study is performed by triangulation. It is a data validation technique that uses something other than the data to verify or compare the data Moleong (2007). Triangulation is the most commonly used method to verify the validity of data. The study used for this data is triangulation with triangulation techniques: validation of data on the same source using

different techniques: interviews, observations and documentation.

Method of Data Analysis

After data collection, researchers analyzed the data. When analyzing data, researchers use descriptive qualitative data analysis techniques. Miles & Hubermas (1994) state that the stages of data analysis are data collection, data reduction, data presentation and conclusion drawing/validation. In this research, the researcher uses triangulation techniques to validate the data. In triangulation, through various perspectives or views, it is expect to get results that are close to the truth. In validate the data, using the first technique, which is exploring the truth of certain information through various methods and sources of data acquisition. The researcher is comparing data collected from questionnaires and interviews to get better results.

C. Results and Discussion

In inclusive education settings, teaching students with special needs requires careful planning and the application of diverse, adaptable teaching methods. The aim is to

provide a supportive learning environment where every student, regardless of their challenges, can actively participate and thrive. This approach is particularly important in English language instruction, where different learning needs such as slow learners and students with expressive language disorders must be addressed using tailored strategies. By understanding and implementing appropriate methods, teachers can enhance the learning experiences of students with special needs and promote their academic and social development. The following discussion explores the results of this study, focusing on the approaches used by English teachers in inclusive classrooms at SMP 14 Semarang and SMP 4 Semarang.

Teaching Approaches for Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Classes

The teaching approaches used by English teachers at SMP 14 Semarang and SMP 4 Semarang are varied and adapted to the characteristics of the students, especially those with special needs. The approaches used depend on the category of special needs, including

students with expressive language disorders and slow learners. In this regard, teachers apply contextual teaching and learning methods, as well as more interactive and physical strategies tailored to the students' conditions and abilities.

1. Teaching Approach for Slow Learners

For slow learners, the teachers use Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), an approach that emphasizes connecting the material taught to students' real-world experiences. This approach helps students link the lessons to their everyday activities, making it easier for them to understand the material. The teacher develops content that is more relevant to the students' lives, such as teaching greetings, classroom expressions, and using texts related to the students' personal experiences. This approach is expected to make it easier for slow learners to understand and retain the lessons.

Additionally, teachers use visual aids and game techniques to simplify the material and make the lessons more engaging for the students. Although slow learners may need

more time to absorb the material, they are better able to comprehend and remember the lessons when the content is made relatable to them. In this way, teachers not only provide academic content but also create a context that helps students feel more connected to the material being taught.

2. Teaching Approach for Students with Expressive Language Disorders

For students with expressive language disorders, the approach is more interactive and physical, such as Total Physical Response (TPR). TPR involves using body movements to associate words or sentences in English with physical actions. For example, the teacher gives instructions for students to point to objects around them in English. This method allows students with expressive language disorders to associate words with actions, helping them to understand and remember new vocabulary more easily.

In addition to TPR, teachers use mind mapping strategies and the 5W1H concept (What, Why, When, Where, How) to help students

develop their speaking skills. This strategy encourages students to express their ideas or thoughts in a more structured way. By using the 5W1H framework, students are trained to ask questions and explain things more clearly, thus improving their verbal expression.

3. Project-Based Learning Implementation

One of the methods used in inclusive classrooms is Project-Based Learning (PjBL). In this approach, students work in groups to complete a project that involves communication among students, through discussion, demonstration, and mind mapping. Project-Based Learning allows students to develop collaboration, communication, and practical skills.

For example, in the Project-Based Learning activities at SMP 14 Semarang and SMP 4 Semarang, students are divided into small groups and given the task of creating a model of a room in a house, such as a bedroom, bathroom, living room, or kitchen. In this activity, students learn vocabulary and expressions related to objects in the house. The teacher guides students at every step, from preparing work schedules to

organizing the material, and applying English in discussions and presentations. This project-based approach not only enhances students' language skills but also enriches their social experiences.

Students with special needs, such as slow learners or those with expressive language disorders, participate in the project in simpler ways. For instance, they may be assigned tasks like attaching papers or retrieving tools needed for the project, which allows them to engage in the activity without feeling overwhelmed. The collaboration among students during the project helps students with special needs to understand the material in a more practical and enjoyable way.

4. Student Involvement in the Learning Process

Throughout the learning process, teachers focus on understanding the individual needs of each student, giving extra attention to students with special needs. In inclusive classrooms, addressing the social and emotional needs of students is also crucial, especially for students with expressive language disorders, who may feel more

isolated or lack confidence. By providing social support from classmates and creating an inclusive atmosphere, teachers help special needs students feel more comfortable and engaged in interactions.

Moreover, the learning process is cooperative, where more capable students help those in need. In this way, students who are more proficient in English assist their peers with special needs in both group discussions and language practice. This reinforces the concept of inclusive education, which focuses not only on academic achievement but also on developing social and emotional skills.

Teaching Approaches Used

The table below summarizes the teaching approaches used for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Category of Student Special Need	Approach Used
Slow Learner	<i>Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL)</i> . The teacher connects lessons to students' daily lives. Uses texts relevant to students' experiences and simplifies lesson plans to meet the needs of slow learners. Uses visual aids and game techniques to make learning engaging.
Expressive Language Disorder	<i>Total Physical Response (TPR)</i> . Involves using body movements to connect words with actions. The teacher gives instructions for students to point to objects in English. Additionally, <i>mind mapping</i> and the 5W1H concept (What, Why, When, Where, How) are used to help students improve speaking and thinking skills.

Table 1: Teaching Approaches for Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Classrooms

The table summarizes the teaching approaches used for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, focusing on two categories of students: slow learners and students with expressive language disorder. For slow learners, the approach applied is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). This method connects the learning material to students' everyday experiences, helping them better understand the lessons. Teachers simplify lesson plans according to the needs of slow learners, utilize visual aids like pictures, and incorporate game techniques to enhance engagement.

For students with expressive language disorder, Total Physical Response (TPR) is used. This approach involves using physical actions to respond to verbal instructions, aiding language comprehension through body movement. Teachers also employ strategies such as the 5W1H concept (What, Why, When, Where, How) and mind mapping to support the students' understanding and help them articulate their ideas. This differentiated approach to teaching ensures that each student's unique needs are addressed, fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

In English learning within inclusive classrooms, using the right approach tailored to the needs of students is crucial to ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, can learn effectively. Contextual teaching, TPR, and Project-Based Learning are some of the effective methods used in inclusive classrooms to improve students' English language skills. Furthermore, involving students in collaborative learning activities helps them feel more motivated and connected to the material being taught. As a result, English teaching

in inclusive classrooms can offer a more inclusive, enjoyable, and effective learning experience for students with special needs.

Teaching in inclusive classrooms requires special competencies from teachers, which include professional, pedagogical, personal, and social competencies. Teachers need to have strong pedagogical competencies, particularly when teaching foreign languages such as English, to address the challenges of teaching students with special needs. This research found that teachers still face difficulties in teaching English to students with special needs. This is in line with the findings of Bitu et al. (2020), which state that learning foreign languages is particularly difficult for students with special needs (Khakim & Septianto, 2021). Teachers need to have specific skills, particularly in adapting teaching methods and approaches for students with special needs.

In addition to teacher competence, choosing the right methods and approaches based on students' needs is crucial. Individualization is not the essential component of inclusion; rather, it is

the diversification of educational offerings and the customization of shared learning experiences to maximize student involvement while considering each student's unique needs (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018). In this context, it is essential for teachers not only to provide equal services to all students but also to address the special needs of students with disabilities without ignoring regular students.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 4 Semarang and SMPN 14 Semarang allows teachers to be more flexible in developing learning that meets the needs of students in inclusive classrooms. With this more flexible curriculum, teachers can modify lesson materials, lesson plans, and teaching methods to cater to the diverse needs of students. Soraya & Azrina (2023) argue that the Merdeka Curriculum allows teachers the flexibility to select various teaching tools to ensure that learning can be tailored to the needs and interests of students. Thus, the Merdeka Curriculum supports differentiated learning, where inclusive education can be adjusted to the unique needs of each student. This is in line with

Wiwin (2021), who states that differentiated learning accommodates the needs of all students and focuses on student-centered learning.

One important step in preparing for learning in inclusive classrooms is conducting a needs analysis (Need Assessment) before the lesson begins. As stated by John McNeil (1985), needs analysis is the process of determining educational needs and prioritizing the solutions that are most effective. In the context of inclusive classrooms, the results of this needs analysis provide the foundation for teachers to manage educational services according to students' needs. Seels and Glasglow (1990) further explain that needs analysis is a strategy for collecting data regarding gaps in learning and using that data to determine teaching priorities. Therefore, the needs analysis conducted by teachers can help identify students' potential, interests, and learning needs, which in turn informs the development of effective learning strategies in inclusive classrooms.

In this context, teachers at SMPN 4 Semarang and SMPN 14 Semarang have applied different

approaches to teaching students with special needs. For students with expressive language disorders, teachers use the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach, which combines body movements to interpret words or sentences. This approach allows students to learn English in a more interactive and enjoyable way. Additionally, the use of mind map strategies and the 5W1H concept (what, why, when, where, how) in storytelling or question-and-answer sessions helps students better understand and express their ideas in a structured manner.

For slow learners, the approach used is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). In this approach, teachers relate the learning material to students' daily lives, such as teaching greetings, classroom expressions, and providing texts that are relevant to their life experiences. This way, students can more easily understand the material because it directly connects with their personal experiences. As Soraya & Azrina (2023) suggest, in the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are given the freedom to select teaching tools and methods that can be adapted to meet students' needs and interests.

In practice, teachers at SMPN 4 Semarang and SMPN 14 Semarang have used a project-based learning model (PjBL) that aligns with the steps of project-based learning: 1) determining basic questions, 2) preparing project plans, 3) preparing schedules, 4) monitoring students and project progress, 5) evaluating results, and 6) reflecting on experiences. This model encourages collaboration among students, helping them solve problems together and develop a deeper understanding while practicing their English skills. In this project, students are tasked with creating a model of a room in a house (such as a bedroom, living room, kitchen, etc.), where they learn English expressions related to the objects and activities in each room.

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in inclusive classrooms supports a flexible learning environment that can be adapted to meet the needs of each student. With differentiated learning, needs analysis, and the use of appropriate methods, students with special needs can learn in the same environment as regular students, but

with adjustments that allow them to develop according to their potential.

D. Conclusion

The implementation of "Freedom to Learn" by English teachers for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms is greatly influenced by teacher competency, teaching methods, and the approaches used in teaching these students. The process begins with lesson preparation based on students' needs, including modifications in learning achievement standards, teaching materials, time allocation, and the use of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). For slow learners, teachers use a contextual teaching approach, which helps them relate lesson material to real-life situations. For students with expressive language disorders, teachers apply Total Physical Response (TPR) to assist them in understanding and expressing ideas through body movements. A project-based learning model is implemented, with students engaging in activities like a gallery walk to identify and discuss objects around them. This integrated learning focuses on the diverse needs of

students, and by using tailored approaches, students can learn more effectively in an inclusive environment.

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