

## **English Teacher's Challenges and Solutions in Teaching Intellectual Disability Students (Case Study)**

**Sab'na**

[sabnathalib@gmail.com](mailto:sabnathalib@gmail.com)

**Nasrullah**

[nasrullah01@ulm.ac.id](mailto:nasrullah01@ulm.ac.id)

**Elsa Rosalina**

[elsa.rosalina@ulm.ac.id](mailto:elsa.rosalina@ulm.ac.id)

**Universitas Lambung Mangkurat**

### **ABSTRACT**

English teaching is now inclusive in nature, which means it involves everyone without leaving any one behind. This is also the basis for English language education being everyone's right, including special needs. There is several research on teaching English specifically for disabilities that are very useful for helping teachers' teaching methods, improving strategies, and updating teaching materials. Yet, only a few studies talk about students with intellectual disability. Therefore, the aim of this research is to investigate the English language teaching in the form of challenges and the solutions, this research focused to analyse English teacher's challenges and solutions in teaching students with mild intellectual disability in SLBN 1 Martapura. Qualitative method is used in this research. To collect the data needed, the observation and interview were done to an English teacher. The finding revealed that the challenges faced by English teacher were challenges in; a) classroom management, b) dealing with students' lack of general cognition, c) overcoming students' lack of focus, d) overcoming students' short memories, e) improving students' English vocabulary pronunciation. Furthermore, the solutions to solve those challenges including harnessing a group learning model, choosing fun media and method, utilizing concrete objects, using ice breaking, modifying references, and using repetition. Thus, English teacher faced many challenges in teaching students with mild intellectual disability.

**Key words:** English Teaching Challenges: Intellectual Disability; Special School

### **INTRODUCTION**

Several reports state that there are still many challenges in teaching students with special needs. Yunisari (2021) believed that this happened because their needs were different from other normal students in general. Due to deficiencies in cognitive and adaptive abilities, they are unable to use the complete facilities provided by the school like other general students. Therefore, support from teachers is needed in the

teaching and learning process. A subject that is considered quite difficult to teach is English. Naghmeh (in Khakim, 2021) stated that learning foreign languages is difficult for students with special needs. Since learning a foreign language also means introducing new values and social identities to children, it is important for teachers to have adequate skills to be able to fulfill the needs of special needs students.

Ideally, teacher must have teaching qualifications that are fit to the subject being taught, as well as teaching students with special needs. The Decree of Minister of National Education Number 16 (2007) declared that the teacher who teaches students with special needs have to be a graduate of special needs education or a certain subject. In the case of English teachers, they certainly need to have a bachelor's degree in English Language Teaching. However, in teaching students with special needs, good communication is also needed between the teacher and the students, as said by Fardila (2018), communication is necessary in special needs education system as the key of academic performance, psychological and physical development achievement. The selection of teaching techniques or strategies in the classroom is also very important. As stated by Allam (2021), strategies must be considered in the context of teaching in special education classes.

Still, there are still many teachers who do not pay attention to these ideal conditions, as a result, there are several challenges in teaching students with special needs. Lack of training is also a factor there is a less synchronization between learning goals and aspects achieved by students. As found by Allam (2021), most primary schools' local teachers lack special training in teaching children with learning disabilities. Indeed, it is important for teachers who teach students with special needs to receive various training about special needs students so that they know how to handle the challenges in teaching students with special needs. This is in accordance with what Pocaan (2022) stated, in order to hone student development, it is important for special education teachers to obtain relevant support programs. For this reason, the teacher's performance level influences the students' success.

Certain studies showed that there are various kinds of challenges in teaching English to special needs students. Utami (2021), who investigated intellectual and developmental disability students, shortened as IDD, stated that problems in teaching appear due to teachers' lack of knowledge in creating teaching methods and media. Students' poor memory skill and lack of self-confidence are other factors of teaching problems in class. A similar situation found in the research done by Fazira (2023), the research showed that the teacher had problems in applying models and media, had no experience in Merdeka curriculum, meanwhile, students' lack of focus and short memory issues also occurred in teaching intellectual disability students. Meanwhile, research finding by Dalilan (2021) found that the limitations of students' four language skills become obstacles in learning English in intellectual disability class.

Based on previous studies, it can be concluded that English teachers encountered various kinds of challenges in teaching special needs students. Starting from

communication problems, attitudes and limits of students' understanding of the material to the teacher's lack of ability in selecting media and methods used in the classroom. Despite there is a significant studies on students with special needs, yet, study about teaching English as a foreign language to intellectual disability student is still lacking. In simpler terms, the studies that discuss specifically the English teachers' challenges and solutions in teaching students with intellectual disability is hardly found. Thus, the researcher has an urgency to research more so that the research for intellectual disability student is more accommodated, especially the students with mild intellectual disability. Therefore, this research is intended to investigate the English teacher' challenges along with solutions in teaching students with mild intellectual disability in SLBN 1 Martapura .

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Previous Related Study**

Revita Putri Utami with Suharyadi and Utari Praba Astuti (2021) made a research study entitled “EFL Teachers’ Problems and Solutions in Teaching English to Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disability”. By using descriptive qualitative method, they conducted this research to investigate teachers’ problems in teaching English to IDD students and how to overcome the problems. Five English teachers at SLB Pembina Tingkat Nasional Bagian C Malang were observed and interviewed. The results showed that there several problems faced by the teachers in teaching students with IDD: 1) Teacher’s English proficiency showed that teachers had problems in vocabulary and sometimes mispronounce words, 2) The teachers failed to know what methods or media to utilize. 3) Apart from the problem of differences between each students' ability, the researcher found that lack of memory was another problem in teaching English, students also did not have the confidence to speak. The solutions from the teachers to overcome those problems were: 1) To explain the material in detail, the teacher used videos taken from YouTube, furthermore, the teacher also provided examples of pronunciation via an application on a cellphone. 2) As a methods and media, teachers used drilling, storytelling to explain, colorful handmade posters, YouTube videos, English learning applications on cellphone, and BSE or electronic school book provided by the government. 3) Drilling methods is used by the English teachers to help students remember vocabularies. Song were used while showing the real objects to the students, the English teachers gave speaking examples before let the students try, the English teachers also asked students who understood better to teach the other students.

A research by Ismi Fatwa Fazira (2023) with a title “The Problem Faced by Teachers In Teaching English For Intellectual Disability Students (A Case Study: English Teacher at SLB N Pati)” was done to discuss the problems along with solutions by English teachers when teaching intellectual disabilities students. This research used qualitative descriptive method and a case study design. In collecting the data, observation, interviews and documentation were done to an English

teacher at SLB N Pati in class 7C3. Based on the results, there were four categories of problems in teaching intellectual disability students, they are: a) Curriculum, teacher did not have experience in Merdeka learning. b) Attitudes and behavior of students, teacher had difficulty attracting the attention and focus of students with intellectual disabilities. c) Material, the teacher had difficulty in teaching writing and reading skills. d) Learning models and media, the teacher had difficulty applying the learning model and also had problems due to the lack of learning support media. To overcome those problems, there were four solutions: a) The government needs to continue to provide provision and training for teachers. b) The teacher must have a high level of patience and be able to understand the character of each student. c) the phase of the given material to the students must be decreased by the teacher. d) It would be better to use a question and answer learning model, direct instruction and modeling.

Another research entitled “The Practices And Obstacles Of English Language Teaching In Intellectual Disability Classroom: A Case Study At Special School (Slb) In Palembang” done by Dalilan, Eka and Indah (2021). This research is investigated to reveal about the practices and obstacles in learning English of intellectual disability students that affected the teaching practice. This research used a case study method. The data were collected by doing interview and observation to two English teachers at SLB-C Tuna Grahita Palembang. The result of this study revealed that English teaching and learning practice in the class was quite similar with the regular one. Then, the researchers found various obstacles that affected the practices of English language teaching by the intellectual disability students, which are related to the skills limitation; writing, reading, speaking and listening. They also found that each students with intellectual disability had diverse lesson retention ability.

### **The Concept of Intellectual Disability**

Schalock (2021) determined intellectual disability as a condition marked by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, which includes many common social and practical skills. This disability is defined in a person before the individual is 22 years old. Schalock (2021) also said that the diagnosis of intellectual disability needs the existence of significant limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as conveyed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills, and a verification that the disability started during the developmental period. Although these three criteria are consistently the basis for diagnosing people with intellectual disability, over time there are differences in determining precession in the diagnostic process.

### **Classifications for Intellectual Disability**

The three main goals of the classification are to describe (a) the support needs intensity, (b) the limitation extent in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills, or (c) the limitation extent in intellectual functioning (Schalock et al., 2021). The severity is classified as mild (with IQ range 55-69), moderate (with IQ range 35-51), severe (with IQ range 20-35), and profound (with IQ range <20), based on several indicators of functioning and clinical judgment (Shree, 2016). Of all the classifications, 75% of people recognized to have mild intellectual disability. Different from other classifications, mild intellectual disability is considered capable of communicating after further investigation. Just like Boardman (2014) said, the majority of people with intellectual disability experience communication difficulties of some sort, however, people with mild intellectual disabilities often have superficially adequate speech and language skills, more subtle communication become clear after further investigation. Patel (2018) also added that most of people with mild intellectual disability are able to do basic self-care and home activities while only a few of moderate intellectual disability are able to do them. Despite considered quite capable, mild intellectual disability still requires support as needed basis, episodic or short-term.

### **Characteristics of Intellectual Disability**

According to Shree (2016), there are several characteristics of intellectual disability which have affects to their lives; their academic, as well as their capability to adjust to home, school, and community environments. The classifications are: 1) General Cognition, the pace of individual's learning is influenced by their cognitive development, whereas, Patel (2018) stated that in childhood and adolescence, intellectual disability is acknowledged by deficits in cognitive and adaptive skills clinically. If a certain education support are applied, only a few studies show that students with intellectual disability may attain the same rate as their peers, however, they are still remain behind generally (Vakil et al. 1997; Wehman, 1997; Shree & Shukla, 2016). 2) Learning and Memory, the learning and memory capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities are significantly below average in comparison to peers without disabilities (Shree & Shukla, 2016). The research done by Lindblad (2013) also showed that from 33 children with mild intellectual disability, 22 (67%) had memory problems. It happens because of the delayed rate of their intellectual development. 3) Attention, the influence of children's focus make them facing the difficulty in distinguishing and answering questions in learning activity and social life. Saunders (2001, cited in Shree, 2016) stated that children with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty distinguishing and attending to relevant questions in both learning and social situations. In Lindblad (2013) mild intellectual disability in school aged children was strongly associated very high rates of deficits in attention. 4) Adaptive skill, in contrast with their non-disabled peers, the adaptive skill of people with intellectual disabilities are frequently not comparable (Shree & Shukla, 2016). In fact, this skill plays an important role in the classification of intellectual disability. As Jonker (2021) said, since the introduction of the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), adaptive skill plays a leading role in the

classification of an intellectual disability. 5) Self-Regulation, according to Panadero (2014), the students' ability to control cognition, behavior, emotion and motivation by using their personal strategies to reach their goals is the definition of self-regulation. In contrast, people with intellectual disability shows otherwise. Patel (2018) stated that some associated behavioral symptoms such as self-injurious behavior, aggression, self-induced vomiting, and difficulty with sleep may showed by children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities. 6) Speech and Language, Shree (2016) stated that individuals with intellectual disabilities may experience delayed speech, language understanding and formulation issues. This also applies to indicative of mild intellectual disability in preschool, problems typically fall under the category of a general "developmental delay", one of them is delayed speech (Lindblad, 2013). It has an impact on children's ability to communicate themselves in learning and socially. 7) Motivation, some reasons that may make children with intellectual disability less focused and less motivated are created by the past experiences of failure and anxiety (Shree & Shukla, 2016). These failures and anxiety cause them to need motivation or reinforcement from others rather than themselves. Low learning motivation causes students with intellectual disabilities to pay less attention during teaching and learning activities (Fazira, 2023). 8) Academic Achievement, persistent problems in academic achievement are caused by the cognitive inefficiencies from children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities (Hughes et al., 2002; Macmillan, Siperstein, & Gresham, 1996; Quenemoen, Thompson, & Thurlow, 2003; Turnbull et al., 2004; Shree, 2016). Each classification of intellectual disability have different capabilities in learning, thus, they also have different academic achievements. 9) Physical characteristics, the severity of intellectual disability is correlated with physical condition. It is in line with what Westling & Fox (2004, cited in Shree, 2016) that most of children with severe and profound intellectual disabilities suffer from various disabilities that affect almost every aspect of their intellectual and physical development.

### **The Challenges in teaching English to Students with Intellectual Disability**

Jon (2021) said, as Indonesia's most prioritized foreign language, English is deemed the modern means to communicate. Though it is not used as a daily language, English opens up job opportunities in education and foreign companies, including intellectual disability. However, students with intellectual disability have lower levels of intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior during the teaching process. Therefore, this caused the problems with the attitudes and behavior of students. As Fazira (2023) stated that these issues refer to the lack of student's focus on learning, memory, motivation in learning, and difficult to control student's emotion. It is quite similar with what Damapoli (2023) found, the teacher face difficulty to control behavior of students during learning process and to communicate with students. Apart from factors caused by students, there are also difficulties that originate from the teacher's abilities. Utami (2021) states that the teachers' shortage are the lack of teacher's ability in selecting methods and media, vocabulary, and mispronounced words. Afterwards, Fazira (2023) added in his research, the teacher has difficulty

choosing the appropriate material and generalizing material achievements between one student and other.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Samples**

This research used a qualitative method which focused on the actions of the teacher in conducting learning activity in the classroom. In addition, to obtain research results that are appropriate to the real life context in which this phenomenon occurs, this research used a case study approach. To get the information about challenges and solutions, the observation and interview were done to an English teacher in SLBN 1 Martapura. The researcher focused this research on examining the challenges and solutions faced by English teachers in teaching students with mild intellectual disability at the secondary school. The researcher conducted an interview with a secondary school teacher that has seven years of teaching experience in this school. She took a short course in inclusive study before she worked with students with special needs and followed several communities related to special needs students.

### **Instrument and Procedure**

The instruments used to obtain the data needed are as follows:

1. Observation Checklist  
In this research, the researcher used observation checklist to collect data from the learning process in the classroom. The researcher became a non-participant observer because the researcher was not involved and participate in teaching and learning activities.
2. Interview  
The data were also collected by doing in-depth interview in order to identify and explore the experience of the subject. Moreover, to get richer information, the researcher used a semi-structured interview technique.

The data of this research are collected by following these procedures:

1. The researcher prepared the questions for the interview and the observational checklist.  
In this research, the researcher created an instrument based on specific information that the researcher wanted to know, specifically, the challenges that occurs during the learning process. Then, the instrument was given to one of the experts at ELESP in Lambung Mangkurat University as a validator who could validate the suitability of the questions in instrument with the research questions using a validation sheet.
2. The researcher determined a meeting with the English teacher to conduct the interview and observational in the classroom.

The researcher used Indonesian in order to get better quality of communication with the teacher. The researcher used the record tool as material for cross checking if there is information data that was not noted.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyse the data, the researcher used thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) with following the six steps of analyzing data: 1) familiarizing with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining themes, and 6) producing the report.

### **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Different from Dalilan (2021) who found that English language teaching process in intellectual disability classroom were quite similar to those in the regular one, this research finding showed otherwise. Middle school and high school students are combined into one class by looking at the similarities in their thinking ability. The English teacher also adapted teaching materials to students' ability levels because it must be more focused toward students' needs. Of course, these differences raise challenges for the teacher in teaching English to students with mild intellectual disability in the classroom. After conducting interview and observation, the researcher found that English teachers confront five challenges in teaching students with mild intellectual disability, namely; a) The challenge in classroom management, b) The challenge in dealing with students' lack of general cognition, c) The challenge in overcoming students' lack of focus, d) The challenge in overcoming students' short memories, e) The challenge in improving students' English vocabulary pronunciation.

#### *The Challenge in Classroom Management*

Although there were no students who suddenly left the classroom as in the Linusi's research, in this research's observation, the researcher found that several students with mild intellectual disability were very expressive during the learning process; they shouted or talked to other friends, meanwhile, the other students seemed quieter. Furthermore, in the interview, the English teacher stated that the differences in characteristics, level of thinking ability, and learning needs of students with mild intellectual disability are the challenges for the English teacher in classroom management. For example, some students can be very active while others are passive, it can lead to disruption of class conduciveness. Just like Patel (2018) said, children with intellectual disability may manifest aggression. It certainly hinders the teacher in creating a conducive class. Without it, class efficacy can be lowered, and even no improvements in information transfer can be achieved (Linusi et al., 2022).

#### *The Challenge to Teach Students with Low Cognitive Level*



Through the observation, researcher discovered how students with mild intellectual disability needed a long time to understand the lesson or answer teacher's question in the learning process. Afterwards, in the interview phase, the English teacher confirmed by saying that their lack of cognitive ability made them slow in thinking. Just like Fazira (2023) found in her research, experiencing disturbances in cognitive function causes individuals with intellectual disabilities to experience difficulties in capturing or receiving learning material. This slowness makes them easily give up on learning, so, they tend to depend on the teacher. An individual with mild intellectual disability needs support with academic skills (Lindblad, 2013). In this research, another challenge appeared due to the low cognitive level, the students cannot learn using books or references that have been provided because most of them cannot understand the language used in these references.

#### *The Challenge to Overcome Students' Lack of Focus*

In the classroom, the researcher observed that the level of focus of students with mild intellectual disability is quite low, they quite often talked or did other things that were not related to the learning. This is quite similar with what Fazira (2023) found, that the focus of students is not on learning but on other things, like normal children in general, they also like to chat and play with their friends during class hours. According to teacher's view, compared to normal student in general, attention spend of student with mild intellectual disability tends to be shorter. Teacher thoughts that it could be caused by their inability to imagine abstract things. Just like Lindblad (2013) said, person with mild intellectual disability needs support with abstract thinking. This challenge also led to other challenge, the students' lack of focus can effect the learning and disturb other students, so, sometimes the English teacher needs to deal with the conflicts that occur between the students.

#### *The Challenge To Handle Students' Short Memory*

In the classroom observation, students with mild intellectual disability tended to forget when the teacher tested their memory of previous material. It was confirmed by the English teacher during the interview, the teacher stated that apart from the lack of focus of students with mild intellectual disability, their memory term was also short. In contrast to normal children in general, children with intellectual disabilities have low concentration and memory Fazira (2023).

#### *The Challenge to Improve Students' English Pronunciation*

The researcher observed that students with mild intellectual disability had difficulty in pronouncing English words. They repeated vocabulary several times in an inaccurate way. As Shree (2016) explained, that people with intellectual disabilities may have delayed speech, language comprehension and formulation difficulties. Through interview, the English teacher also said that students with mild intellectual disability had difficulty in mentioning English vocabulary which related to their lack of ability, as a result, they experienced difficulty in mastering English

vocabulary. This finding is in accordance with what Linusi (2022) discovered, due to the varied in English spelling and pronunciation, along with the small vocabulary of students with intellectual disability have, they faced difficulty in pronouncing English words. Moreover, they also still have quite difficulty communicating their understanding. To deal with the challenges that teacher faced in teaching English to students with mild intellectual disability, there are several solution that the teacher used to solve those challenges, namely; a) using a group learning model, b) choosing fun media and method, c) using concrete objects, 4) using ice breaking, d) references modification, 5) repetition.

#### *The Efforts of Teacher to Manage Classroom*

In the interview, the English teacher said that the first thing that must be done to manage the class is that the teacher needs diagnose the abilities of each student. With this, the teacher could choose the right learning model to blend the students' differences. Because the level of understanding influenced the difference in students' active and passive attitudes, the teacher created a solution using a group learning model so that students with mild intellectual disabilities could cover each other's weaknesses. For instances, students who have difficulty in reading can be grouped with students who can read, or, students who still have difficulty in writing can be helped by students who can write. This is in line with Irkinovich (2021), working in pairs and groups helps to identify and correct gaps in the knowledge of each student, in addition, pair work fosters a willingness to help each other. However, this finding is quite different from previous findings which stated that the used of private assisstent as solution. The two teachers can work together in the same classroom and take turns giving directions to the students, or both can help kids while the other delivers instructions to other students (Linusi et al., 2022).

#### *The Efforts of Teacher to Teach Students with Low Cognitive Level*

As a solution for this challenges, the researcher realized that the English teacher repeated the material when she found that some students still did not understand the explanation. It was confirmed by the teacher during the interview. The teacher used the drill method or repetition to ensure all students understood the material well. For example, the teacher repeated last week's material to make sure the the students could understand the new material well. Just as Damapoli (2023) discovered that students with mental retardation took a long time to understand what the teacher said so the teacher repeated the material 3 times and explained it very slowly. Next, to deal with challenge related to teaching references, the English teacher also made modifications to the references, so, teaching materials have been simplified and narrowed in order to adapt to their abilities.

#### *The Efforts of Teacher to Overcome Students' Lack of Focus*

English teacher said that ice breaking is a solution that can make students with mild intellectual disability focus again to the lesson in the class. This method is also used in research done by Fazira (2023), teachers can also do ice breaking in the middle

of class hours to attract students' attention again. Fitria (2023) also agreed by saying ice breaking create an atmosphere that was before noise becomes more conducive. Apart from that, English teacher added another solution to prevent the students from losing focus, the teacher said it is useful to connect the material to their lives or concrete objects around them to help them understand the teacher's explanation. The teacher also said it was important to choose fun methods to attract student's attention, such as playing videos or using concrete media that they could see and hold.

#### *The Efforts of Teacher to Handle Students' Short Memory*

Through observations, the teacher often repeat explanations in class, this can certainly help students with mild intellectual disability to remember better. The teacher said during the interview that the grill method must always be used in every meeting, either orally or in writing. For example, to remind them of the material about days and dates in English, repetition is done by asking students to write the day and date in English everyday, meanwhile, the most frequently used oral repetition is greeting in English. Fazira (2023) also believed that repetition is a solution to this challenge, this low memory causes the teacher to repeat several times in each meeting, to remind the material taught in the previous meeting. Apart from that, It was also found that inviting students to participate in making teaching media helped them remember the lessons well. The English teacher said that students with mild intellectual disability felt happy when the teacher displayed or exhibited their work, so, it could leave meaning and good memories for them.

#### *The Efforts of Teacher to Improve Students' English Pronunciation*

In the class, the teacher is heard giving examples about how to pronounce English vocabulary by repeating it several times until the students with mild intellectual disability abled to pronounce it correctly. During the interview, the English teacher said that the right solution to ensure students with mild intellectual disability could pronounce English vocabulary well is to provide examples of pronunciation in a slower and per-syllable, then use repetition or the grill method. However, this method is different with what Linusi (2022) found in his research, many foreign language teachers, employ the Total Physical Reaction or TPR technique which emphasized body language, so the teachers must be more physically and verbally involved.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study revealed five challenges faced by English teacher in SLBN 1 Martapura in teaching students with mild intellectual disability. Those challenges are the challenge in managing the classroom, the challenge to teach students with low cognitive level, challenge to overcome student's lack of focus, the challenge to

handle students' short memory and the teacher's challenges to improve students' English pronunciation. With seven years of teaching experience in this school and following several communities related to special needs students, the English teacher employed some solutions to overcome those challenges, including harnessing a group learning model, choosing fun media and method, utilizing concrete objects, using ice breaking, modifying references, and using repetition.

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