

TEACHING Beyond Limits: A Multiple Case Study of Language Teachers' Effective Strategies in Handling Learners with Special Needs EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple-case study investigated the effective teaching strategies of regular language teachers for secondary learners with Special Needs Education (SNED) in Region XI. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five participants using maximum variation sampling to capture diverse experiences on teaching strategies in handling learners with special needs. A cross-case analysis was conducted to analyze similarities and differences after employing thematic analysis for recurring patterns and themes. Findings revealed that in teaching strategies, peer-mediated support, task simplification, and inclusive classroom support are similar in all cases, while being different in multisensory teaching, individualized support, and personalized learning instructions. To address the challenges in implementing the strategies, teachers adopted approaches such as employing supportive and positive interventions, fostering collaborative problem-solving with colleagues and specialists, and building peer accountability, which were common in all cases. Moreover, implementing instructional flexibility, personalizing learning materials with ICT tools, tracking participation to support learner needs, and applying strategic routines were different among all cases. Teachers demonstrated proactive and responsive approaches considering the workloads and other limitations of the teacher participants.

KEYWORDS: *Teaching Strategies, Special Needs Education, Best Practices, Universal Design for Learning, Social Language Theory.*

INTRODUCTION

An effective teaching strategy for inclusive education is structured techniques done by the teachers anchored on the diverse needs of the learners to build a learning environment where learning is accessible for all (UNESCO,

2009). In this context, the urgent need to support Special Needs Education (SNED) learners highlights the lack of effective English teaching strategies for them. It corroborates with Tabilin & Tombali (2024), studies reveal limited details on specific teaching strategies, and with Filipino teachers in the U.S. struggling to modify instruction. The global issues highlighted merit in this study on examining the effective language teaching strategies to cater the learners with SNED in mainstream classes.

The same challenges are faced by educators in Asia, particularly in Singapore, which highlights insufficient training in differentiated teaching methods to address special needs of students, excessive dependence on instructional adjustments rather on contextualization (Strogilos et al., 2023). This supports the findings of Ngai, & Chan, (2019) in Thailand that effective implementation of strategies for SNED learners was hindered due to inadequate resources and support for teachers, including professional development opportunities. To address, Kusuma & Fathiyah (2024) in Indonesia, recommended that teachers must pursue pedagogical knowledge and new approaches.

In the Philippines, challenges collectively highlight a widespread lack of preparedness and effective teaching strategies for addressing the diverse learning and developmental needs of students (Allam & Martin, 2021), particularly in mainstream classrooms, where language teachers struggle with managing impulsive behaviors, attention deficits, and neurological disorders such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and hearing impairments (Masedi et al., 2023; Quizana & Espiritu, 2023). Singh (2023) found that teacher participants in special education were not prepared to teach learners with learning impairments and difficulties as they do not have a course in special education.

In the context of Mindanao, teachers are often challenged when dealing with learners with special needs, considering the geographical locations, large number of students in a classroom, and integration of culture in instructions (Symaco, 2019). These varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds make the instructional process more complicated. Teachers in special education face challenges in effectively supporting students with language-related concerns (Logroño & Gongora, 2023) as it requires knowledge on appropriate teaching strategies.

Despite existing research, most literature focuses on the experiences of general education teachers handling students with special needs in inclusive classrooms (Sanchez et al., 2021; Traya & Lopez, 2023; Kilag, et. al., 2024). Since language learning presents unique challenges such as in processing information, communication, and comprehension to learners with special needs education, this gap is significant in investigating the teaching strategies of language teachers as they play a significant role to address the needs of the students. A study by De La Cruz (2020) highlights that without resolving these obstacles, future educators managing students with disabilities may face similar issues, potentially leading to program failure.

METHODS

Research Design. This research employed a qualitative approach, specifically a multiple case study, which enabled a thorough examination of intricate phenomena in authentic settings to collect detailed data from numerous sources and increase the depth of understanding of phenomena. Creswell & Poth (2016) posited that case study methodology investigates a real-world, contemporary, designated as a case or multiple delineated systems over temporal dimensions, employing extensive and meticulous data gathering from a diverse array of informational sources. This research design helped the researcher in explaining responses of the participants' experiences and how they handle and navigate the challenges in the implementation of teaching strategies to SNED learners.

Participants. This study selected five language teachers who handled learners with special needs education, who are teaching in secondary schools in the Davao region, both private and public. This limited sample size is commonly seen in case study research because it facilitates a thorough examination of the specific cases. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that having so few participants may limit the ability to apply the results to a broader population (Campbell, 2015). Researchers do not strictly define the sample size for a multiple case study; however, the literature recommends using a range of four to fifty cases as a guideline (Sarfo, 2021). Having too many cases in a multiple-case study can result in a diminished depth of the information collected and can lead to complex analysis.

Maximum variation sampling was used to select the participants, which involves finding key dimensions of variation and choosing cases that significantly differ from each other (Suri, 2011). This sampling procedure

helped in capturing a wide range of perspectives and experiences of teachers with different types of SNED learners and in different settings. The research involves the following cases: Case 1, a language teacher handling a learner with an emotional and behavioral disorder due to hormonal imbalance; Case 2, a teacher who handled learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and intellectual disability (ID); case 3, a teacher who handled visually impaired learners and ASD; case 4, a teacher who handled learning difficulty in reading; and case 5, a teacher who handled ID learners.

The primary sources of data were collected through an in-depth interview using a validated interview guide questionnaire and was conducted to language teachers who played a significant role in exploring teaching strategies and approaches in handling SNED learners. A triangulation procedure was conducted to substantiate the data from the participants. These individuals were very close to the participants and witnessed the participants' journey in applying their strategies in mainstream classrooms with particular SNED learners.

Data Analysis. This study used cross-case analysis to explore similarities and differences across multiple cases, following the approach cited by Livne-Tarandach (2015). Before comparing cases, thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the qualitative data, using Braun and Clarke's (2014) method. I coded and grouped the responses into categories, formulated the core ideas, which were then developed into themes. Experts reviewed the resulting themes to assess similarities and differences across cases.

RESULTS and DISCUSSIONS

Teaching Strategies of Language Teachers Handling Secondary Learners with Special Needs Education

There were six common themes revealed in the cross-case analysis of the five cases in this study, namely: multisensory teaching, individualized support, peer-mediated support, task simplification, personalized learning, and inclusive classroom support.

The first emergent theme is multisensory teaching. In addressing learners with special needs, teachers utilized strategies related to learners' senses that were appropriate to their learning styles. Most of the participants mentioned using larger text and auditory modes of learning, employing braille, stylus, and tactile materials, and integrating kinesthetic activities. The theme

supports the study of Agalyasri & Bhuvaneswari (2023) that this strategy was utilized for learners with sensory impairments. This approach integrates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, fostering active engagement and addressing various learning styles. The result also confirms the result of Bañados et.al, (2024) that using multi-sensory methods and interactive play-based teaching proves effective for SNED learners by boosting their participation and academic progress.

The second emergent theme is individualized support, which is similar in all cases. Teachers expressed giving one-on-one instructions or guidance to the SNED learners. It aligns with the Alvi et al, (2017) that when teachers observe learners are not engaged in the task, giving more one-on-one attention, and trying out fresh, creative approaches to instruction must be done. This theme proves how individualized instructions benefit the learners in the study of Bleistein & Lewis (2015) as it directly addresses the specific needs of learners during the learning process; however, in a large class size, this often becomes a challenge.

The third theme is peer-mediated support. In a large class size, it is challenging to cater to individual needs. Participants shared that this strategy would help them to have less supervision to the SNED learners while keeping the balance to the needs of the whole class. Teachers utilized this strategy through pairing learners with other classmates who could guide them or by using small groups. This theme is in consonance to Sam (2016) that this strategy is used for learners with ASD to intervene in social interactions through trained peers. In the case of the visually impaired in case 3, it solidifies the findings of Steinbrenner et al., (2020), peer-mediated interventions are frequently utilized to support students with disabilities by involving their peers without disabilities in the instructional process.

The fourth theme, evident across all cases, is task simplification. Participants did this strategy through giving tasks or activities that the SNED learner can perform like simplifying the language of the content, modifying and breaking learning tasks. By simplifying tasks, students with special needs and disabilities (SNED) are provided equitable access to the learning process, aligning with Kadir et. al, (2023) assertion that load reduction instruction was done through simplifying tasks or concepts from complex cognitive activities. This theme conjoined the ideas on tailoring task to the level of the SNED learners according to their abilities particularly those with intellectual

disabilities (ID) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

The fifth theme focuses on personalized learning instruction. This theme is similar to the concept of contextualization as participants shared strategies that learners can relate to real-life experiences based on their interests. Participants expressed the idea of connecting their lessons to learner's experiences, making it more personalized. Rather than prioritizing rote memorization, this strategy supports with Hamid et al. (2024) on encouraging students to construct knowledge

through hands-on and experiential activities related to their own experiences. The underlying premise is that learning becomes more meaningful when students actively engage with content that reflects real-world contexts.

The last theme is inclusive classroom support, which is evident in all cases. Participants shared by establishing clear rules for the class, providing positive reinforcement for negative behavior, and arranging a proper seat plan and spaces in the classroom that corresponded to learners' needs. Cullen et al. (2020) mentioned that behavioral disorders are disabilities that can hamper language learning or acquisition. This theme explicates the core ideas of behavior management and positive reinforcement. This theme supports Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) (Banat, 2024), which focuses on managing student behavior using positive reinforcement techniques, creating a nurturing and encouraging classroom atmosphere.

Approaches of Teachers in Dealing with the Challenges in the Implementation of Teaching Strategies

There are seven emergent themes as highlighted in the results on how the participants deal with the challenges in the implementation of the teaching strategies. The challenges and approaches presented follow the order of the teaching strategies. This arrangement highlights those participants who encountered challenges with certain strategies during their implementation.

The first theme identified is instructional flexibility. Participants consistently implement this approach through having alternative plans, changing complex tasks to simple ones when they observed that the strategy in delivering the lesson did not work. This theme reinforces the work of Davies et al. (2018) that instructional flexibility involved an ongoing adaptation of instructional methods to meet students' diverse needs; such adjustments were essential to ensure that students with disabilities can fully engage in classroom

instruction, assessments, and standardized accountability measures. This finding aligns with Damyanov's (2024) study, which emphasizes the importance of real-time modifications in instructional strategies through proper feedback, allowing teachers to adjust both content and delivery methods.

The next theme is employing supportive and positive interventions, particularly in addressing challenges related to individualized support. Participants shared techniques that stabilize students' emotional states and foster a safe, supportive classroom environment, like giving time and space to calm down and having counseling. This approach was consistently observed in cases 2, 3, and 5, aligning with Wright's (2017) emphasis on the role of effective communication in behavioral and emotional support. Strategies such as providing personal space, empowering peer support, and adjusting seating arrangements contributed to a more inclusive setting. This theme reflects the importance of purposeful communication with an empathetic approach to de-escalate behavioral and emotional problems.

The third theme is fostering collaborative problem-solving with colleagues and specialists. Participants opened up that even though they individualized lessons, there were untoward situations which were out of their control. For the participants, consulting and asking for assistance from the right persons, like colleagues, played an important role. This theme supports the findings of Gierczyk and Hornby (2021), who emphasized the need for strong partnerships between teachers and families to address diverse learner needs.

The fourth theme is the personalization of learning materials through the use of ICT tools. Participants shared on selecting appropriate resources and modifying lessons with technology for learners with special educational needs like using google apps and videos to aid learning. This theme aligns with the findings of Rutkiene and Greenspon (2018), who emphasize that

Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) provides flexible and adaptive tools that support learners with a range of impairments, whether physical, cognitive, or emotional.

The fifth theme is tracking participation to support learner needs. Participants shared that observing participation and eagerness through behavioral signs and checking task or formative outputs could address learning gaps. This theme is associated with Mubango & Ngirande (2024), who

underscored the need for continuous monitoring and adaptable time management approaches to support diverse learning needs, ensuring that every learner can actively participate in their education and enhance their academic outcomes. The theme reinforces the findings of Nguyen and Ng (2020), indicating that this approach fosters a more inclusive and responsive learning environment in which diverse learning styles and needs are recognized and deliberately accommodated.

The sixth theme is applying strategic routines for effective lesson management. Participants practiced and recognized the importance of lesson planning, advanced task assignment, and designing efficient and effective activities to address large class sizes and time limitations. This theme underpins the idea of Castro-Alonso et al. (2021) that far from being limiting, routines free up time and mental energy, making space for more engaging teaching and learning.

The last theme is building peer accountability. All cases shared similar approaches in addressing the challenges of stigma, isolation, and peer mistreatment of SNED learners through setting rules and individual responsibilities in the class. This supports Johnson and Johnson (2018), who asserted that peer accountability systems, through strategies like peer assessments and group agreements, deliberately foster a planned setting where students share responsibility for each other’s growth, and cooperation is central.

Similarities and Differences

The table below highlights the similarities and differences of the cases in teaching strategies and approaches in dealing with the challenges.

Teaching Strategies in Handling SNED Learners in Mainstream Classes. Highlighting in all the cases 1, 2, 3, and 4 utilized the same teaching strategy on applying multisensory teaching, except case 5. Four participants shared on employing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods, psychomotor activities, using braille, stylus, and tactile materials, enlarging text for the visually impaired, and shifting to an auditory mode of learning delivery effectively addressed the SNED learners. This approach integrates visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities, fostering active engagement and addressing various learning styles. It also strengthens the study of Eway et. al, (2023) that one-on-one multi-sensory instruction is especially effective for children with intellectual disabilities, as it addresses their unique learning needs.

However, Case 5 placed greater emphasis on modifying or simplifying materials and providing peer support. The next emerging theme is individualized support, prominently demonstrated in Cases 2, 3, and 5, where participants consistently employed strategies tailored to the specific needs of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SNED). These cases highlight the importance of recognizing and responding to the diverse cognitive, behavioral, and physical profiles of students, affirming the assertion of Bjorklund (2022) that no two learners perceive and process the world in the same way. Moreover, Hagenauer et al. (2023) emphasize that when teachers meet students at their levels of readiness, rather than adhering strictly to standard curriculum expectations, it fosters meaningful and supportive educational relationships.

Table 1
Similarities and Differences of Teaching Strategies and Approaches in Dealing with the Challenges in the Implementation of Teaching Strategies

Themes on Teaching Strategies	Case Unit 1	Case Unit 2	Case Unit 3	Case Unit 4	Case Unit 5
Multisensory Teaching	/	/	/	/	X
Individualized Support	x	/	/	x	/
Peer-Mediated Support	/	/	/	/	/
Task Simplification	/	/	/	/	/
Personalized Learning Instructions	x	/	/	/	X
Inclusive Classroom Support	/	/	/	/	/
Themes on Approaches in Dealing with the Challenges	Case Unit 1	Case Unit 2	Case Unit 3	Case Unit 4	Case Unit 5
Implement instructional flexibility	/	/	X	x	/
Employ supportive and positive interventions	/	/	/	/	/

Foster collaborative problem-solving with colleagues and specialists	/	/	/	/	/
Personalize learning materials with ICT tools	/	/	X	x	/
Track participation to support learner needs	/	/	/	x	/
Apply Strategic Routines for Effective Lesson Management	x	/	/	/	X
Build Peer Accountability for Inclusion	/	/	/	/	/

In contrast, Case 1 did not implement structured individualized support, as the learner, Missy, demonstrated a high level of independence and was capable of following instructions with minimal assistance. Similarly, case 4 did not incorporate individualized sessions due to the practical limitations of managing a large class.

In the context of utilizing peer-mediated support, all cases implemented peer tutoring or mixed-ability pairing to foster inclusion and support. Case 2 utilized group activities to foster the participation of students with special needs in education (SNED), particularly those with intellectual disabilities. These collaborative approaches were designed to enhance engagement and social interaction among learners. In Case 3, the teacher acknowledged the significant role of peer relationships in supporting SNED learners, with particular attention to a student with visual impairment. Also, case 5 employed peer tutoring as an intervention to assist students with intellectual disabilities, highlighting the effectiveness of structured peer-mediated instruction in promoting learning outcomes for diverse learners. Participants' strategies support Brock & Huber (2017) that peer support arrangements are a validated strategy for fostering social interactions among secondary students with severe disabilities across a range of subjects, including both core academic courses and electives.

In terms of the task simplification strategy, all cases are similar. To support inclusive education that effectively addresses the needs of SNED learners, it is essential to implement purposeful modifications and adaptations across key areas of instruction, including curriculum content, pedagogical

approaches, and the physical learning environment (Dube & Nkomo, 2022). This finding In Case 1, the teacher demonstrated responsiveness to the needs of his SNED learner by providing an alternative task.

Likewise, Case 2 adapted instructional content by replacing a writing activity with a drawing task, allowing SNED learners to express their understanding through a more accessible medium. Case 3 implemented assessment accommodations by simplifying complex terminology and reducing the number of test items, thereby making the evaluation process more manageable for students with special needs. According to Engelmann et. al (2023) text simplification is the task of rephrasing a text to better cater to the abilities of a specific target reader group.

Likewise, Case 4 modified reading activities by adjusting the questions and materials used to better suit the needs of a learner with a learning difficulty, illustrating an effort to maintain academic relevance while supporting comprehension. Finally, Case 5 employed comparable strategies, simplifying assessment language and modifying the quantity of test items to align with the cognitive and processing capacities of SNED learners. On the other hand, cases 2 and 4 experienced modifying lessons through making them relevant to the SNED learners' lives or experiences. It supported the study conducted by Hermanto and Pamungkas (2021) that adapting learning activities to fit the unique needs and characteristics of students with special needs is essential for effective instruction.

Another instructional strategy evident in Cases 2, 3, and 4 is personalized learning, which involves adapting lessons to align with students' interests and real-life experiences, a practice closely aligned with the principle of contextualization. Contextualized teaching strategies, as defined by Hamruni (2015), connect academic content to real-world experiences to promote active engagement, practical application, and deeper understanding. Among the cases, Case 2 most clearly demonstrates this approach by tailoring lessons to students' interests and simplifying tasks using concrete, real-life objects. In contrast, Cases 3 and 4 briefly mention the use of student interests to adapt instruction but lack specific examples of contextualized implementation. These cases support findings by Fandakova and Bunge (2016), who emphasized that lessons rooted in real-life experiences tend to be more memorable and impactful for learners.

However, Case 1 took a different approach. Due to the emotional sensitivity of the SNED learner, the teacher deliberately avoided personal contextualization, as it had the potential to trigger emotional distress. Instead, the focus was on modifying tasks and designing individualized activities. This aligns with the findings of Bateman and Robinson (2020), who caution that although real-life connections can enhance learning, they may also provoke emotional responses, particularly in vulnerable students.

The last strategy in which all cases are similar is inclusive classroom support. This was done through positive reinforcement and gentle discipline. The strategy employed by the participants supports the findings of Apriliani, et. al (2024) that using positive reinforcement greatly boosts student motivation, whereas punishment tends to diminish it. All cases establish clear rules, seating arrangements, positive reinforcement, and discreet redirection.

Approaches in dealing with the challenges in the implementation of teaching strategies. In terms of implementing instruction flexibility, cases 1, 2, and 5 are similar. This is evident that they have monitored closely the learners during the tasks given and have already prepared other activities in case the task is not engaging for the SNED learners. The strategy supported Maseli (2024) on the importance of identifying the nature of SNED learners like the visually impaired and deaf in chunking important concepts which they can easily adapt and learn. While other participants are trying to promote activities that can promote critical thinking and discover other potentials in the SNED learner, this would result in trial and error.

In terms of employing supportive and positive interventions, all the cases are the same. Cases 1 and 5, mentioned, use physical arrangements to minimize episodes and outbursts, while cases 2 and 3 rely on calming approaches and private follow-ups. According to Cook & Ogden, (2022) teachers must also identify and address environmental factors that trigger anxiety, which can negatively affect pupils' engagement with learning to address the kind of learning environment and approach they need. In addition, the theme agrees with the findings of Agus, et. al (2024) that using positive reinforcement greatly boosts student motivation, whereas punishment tends to diminish it. This highlights the importance of teachers focusing on encouraging positive behavior to foster a supportive and effective learning environment, especially for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SNED).

A common theme across all five cases is the practice of collaborative problem-solving among teachers and specialists, underscoring the value of professional cooperation in supporting SNED learners. As noted by Al-Amrat (2024), teacher participants viewed co-teaching and peer collaboration as highly effective strategies. Their experiences revealed that team discussions, peer to-peer learning activities, and joint planning of instructional approaches were crucial in delivering inclusive education. This collaborative approach allowed educators to draw on each other's expertise, resulting in more responsive and adaptable teaching practices tailored to the diverse needs of their learners.

Specifically, Case 4 highlighted the teacher's proactive engagement in benchmarking strategies with colleagues, which enabled her to gain new insights and refine her instructional approaches. This practice reflects a broader understanding that ongoing professional dialogue enhances the quality of support provided to students with special needs. However, despite these positive examples, Chairunnisa and Rismita (2022) observed that such collaborative practices remain underdeveloped in many educational settings, indicating a need for more systematic support structures and institutional encouragement to foster effective teamwork among educators working with learners requiring additional support

In the area of personalizing learning materials through the integration of ICT tools, Cases 1, 2, and 5 demonstrate notable similarities. In Case 1, the teacher not only incorporated technology but also customized learning tasks to align with the unique needs of the SNED learner. Mr. J's approach reflects the findings of Vaezipour et al. (2020), who emphasize that communication applications can empower students with learning challenges to participate meaningfully in classroom discussions. The strategies observed in these cases are consistent with the work of Laabidi et al. (2014), who claimed that technology-enhanced learning allows for the customization of educational experiences, which in turn improves student engagement, satisfaction, and learning outcomes particularly for students with disabilities.

In terms of the theme of tracking participation to support learner needs, all cases are consistent except for Case 4. This strategy is anchored in Liu (2024), who emphasizes the importance of this approach in improving academic success and self-confidence. The findings are further supported by Hienonen et al. (2018), who highlight that actively tracking participation plays a crucial role in identifying students who may need additional academic or emotional support,

which, in turn, can enhance both engagement and learning outcomes. This can be achieved by observing and recording students' levels of involvement—such as their responses during discussions, as noted in Case 2—their frequency of contributions, collaboration in group tasks, and non-verbal cues. Through these observations, teachers can gather real-time data to determine who is engaged and who may require additional support.

With regards to implementing strategic routines to support classroom management and instructional delivery, Cases 2, 3, and 4 demonstrate notable similarities. These cases align with the findings of Leroy et al. (2020), who emphasize that when routines are introduced early and consistently reinforced, they help minimize confusion and allow both teachers and learners to concentrate on the learning process rather than logistical concerns. In the mentioned cases, strategic routines were operationalized through practical techniques such as assigning roles or signals, chunking lesson content, and preparing structured seating arrangements. The final theme identified is the promotion of peer accountability, which is evident across all cases. This was implemented by establishing clear rules and communicating to the class their expected roles in supporting classmates with special educational needs. The findings reinforce the work of Nasiri and Khojasteh (2024), which highlights that peer accountability fosters essential soft skills such as empathy, communication, and leadership.

The findings of the study confirmed the theories of Ayantoye on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which was introduced during 1990's by Gordon, Meyer and Rose (Gordon et al., 2016) and Social Language Theory by Vygotsky. This relates to the theme since participants are utilizing the different approaches in the framework as their teaching strategies, which cater diverse needs of all learners, including those with special needs education. The themes also confirmed the latter theory that learning a language is a social activity that involves interacting with others, in which all cases agree that SNED learners are immersed in the regular setting of interpersonal interactions.

Since this study is limited in language teachers as participants, it is recommended that another study be conducted from the perspective of school administrators or principals to investigate the readiness of the schools in terms of SNED programs.

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