

A Systematic Review of English Language Learning Among Students with Special Needs in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines English language learning among students with special needs in public schools, focusing on documented challenges and instructional responses. Although legal frameworks support inclusive education, implementation remains uneven. Reported barriers include shortages of qualified teachers, insufficient preparation for inclusive English instruction, limited funding, inaccessible learning materials, and the intersecting language and disability-related needs of learners. Searches of ProQuest, Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Virtual Learning Resource Center identified 32 records; six studies met the final eligibility criteria. The synthesis highlights explicit and individualized instruction, culturally responsive and sheltered approaches, collaborative teaching, assistive and audiovisual technologies, and family engagement as promising supports. The findings underscore the need for sustained professional development, accessible resources, stronger multidisciplinary collaboration, and consistent policy implementation to ensure equitable English language learning opportunities for students with special needs.

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INTRODUCTION

The right to education for children with special needs is a fundamental human right recognized worldwide. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights explicitly affirms that everyone has the right to education (United Nations, 1948). In the United States, students with special needs require additional support because of physical, emotional, behavioral, or cognitive disabilities that affect their learning and development. Under the (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004), eligible students are entitled to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. IDEA (2004) covers disabilities such as autism, deafness or hearing impairment, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, orthopedic impairment, and other health impairment. The least restrictive environment provision supports inclusive practices by requiring students to learn alongside peers without disabilities whenever appropriate.

Educating students with special needs in the United States is complex because public schools serve heterogeneous populations with diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Increasing migration has further diversified the population of English language learners (ELLs)

who require special education services. Schools must therefore strengthen both general and special education programs to address these learners' intersecting language and disability-related needs. Effective provision requires collaboration among general education, bilingual education, English language, and special education teachers, as well as families.

English language learning refers to the process of developing proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It includes the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation for effective communication and comprehension. McLeskey et al. (2004) identified the shortage of qualified special education teachers as a persistent concern with serious implications for students with disabilities. Contributing factors include inadequate preparation programs, high attrition rates, and systemic constraints. Schools in rural and underserved areas may have particularly limited access to qualified teachers and sustained professional development. Consequently, general education teachers who lack specialized preparation are often required to teach students with special needs. The shortage of trained special education teachers and weaknesses in existing preparation programs call for comprehensive reforms in teacher education and professional development. Preservice programs should include specialized modules on inclusive education, while in-service programs should provide practical strategies, accommodations, and evidence-based interventions for teaching students with disabilities.

This systematic review is relevant to English, English as a second language (ESL), and special education teachers; language policymakers; school administrators; families; and language researchers. It also offers implications for English language studies, language teaching and learning, educational management, curriculum development, special education legislation, and sociolinguistics. This review systematically identifies and synthesizes studies on inclusive English language education for learners with special educational needs in public basic education. By examining research retrieved from academic databases and search engines, it seeks to clarify the challenges documented in the literature and the instructional responses proposed, thereby informing future research, policy, and practice. This review is guided by the principles that ELLs with special needs should be educated in inclusive environments, language and literacy should be supported across the curriculum, and instruction should accommodate differences in learning styles, abilities, and needs. Special educational needs are conditions that require appropriate support rather than illnesses that define learners. On this basis, the review addresses the following research questions:

1. What challenges do students with special needs encounter when learning English?
2. What strategies do teachers use to support the English language learning of students with special needs?

Methodology

This section describes the data collection and analysis procedures used in the systematic review. Figure 1 presents an overview of the review process.

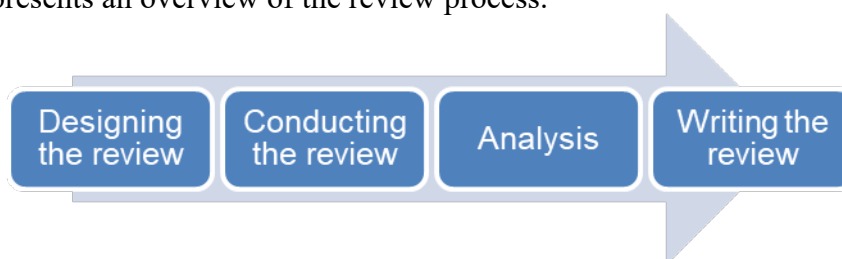


Figure 1. Overview of the Study Review Process

As shown in Figure 1, the review began with the development of a review design. A systematic review approach was selected because it provides a comprehensive account of the current state of knowledge and helps identify established findings, inconsistencies, and research gaps (Gough et al., 2017). Systematic reviews can also conserve research resources by consolidating relevant evidence and improving the accessibility of findings (Moher et al., 2009).

This section was guided by the PRISMA 2020 expanded checklist to promote transparent and standardized reporting of the review process (Page et al., 2021). Studies were included when they (a) examined challenges or responses related to English language learning among students with special needs, (b) addressed English language teaching strategies for these learners, (c) were situated in public elementary or secondary education, and (d) focused on inclusive or special education. Studies were excluded when they did not address English language learning among students with special needs, were not situated in public basic education, or did not concern inclusive education.

The review considered online scholarly publications, including journal articles, research reports, dissertations, conference papers, book chapters, and prior reviews. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies were eligible when they contributed evidence relevant to the research questions. Inclusive English language instruction served as the central criterion for determining relevance. Searches were conducted in Scopus, the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the Virtual Learning Resource Center. These sources were selected because of their broad coverage of education and language research. An initial broad search was conducted to maximize sensitivity and identify potentially relevant studies (Higgins et al., 2022). Subsequent searches combined terms related to English language learning, special educational needs, public schools, and inclusive education using the Boolean operators AND and OR. The selection process involved title and abstract screening followed by full-text screening. Records were evaluated against the predetermined eligibility criteria, and potentially relevant full texts were retrieved for final assessment. The database searches identified 32 records. After duplicate removal and title and abstract screening, 18 records remained. Full-text assessment against the inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in six studies being retained for synthesis. Google Scholar and ProQuest contributed most of the identified records, while duplicate records from ERIC and Scopus were removed before final screening.

Table 1. Study Selection

Database / Search Engine	Records Identified	Records Screened	Studies Included in the Review
Google Scholar	10	5	2
Pro Quest	16	9	3
ERIC	4	2	1
Scopus Elsevier	2	0	0
Total	32	18	6

The included studies were categorized according to five recurring topics: English language learning among students with special needs, instructional strategies, special education in public schools, inclusive education, and special education classes. A standardized extraction form was used to record each study's bibliographic information, context, design, participants, variables, theoretical perspective, data collection methods, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using an adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist. The appraisal considered the clarity of the research questions, appropriateness of the methods, rigor of data collection, depth of analysis, clarity and significance of the findings, and relevance to the review questions. Data from each study were recorded in an article-coding matrix. The extracted information was compared across studies, organized into themes, and synthesized in relation to the review questions. The analysis also identified limitations in the existing literature and potential directions for future research. Findings were synthesized narratively and presented in tables where appropriate. The synthesis was organized around the themes generated during data extraction and the objectives of the review.

Findings and Discussion

This review examined research on English language learning among students with special needs to summarize existing evidence and identify directions for future inquiry. The findings were organized into two themes: (a) challenges affecting English language learning among students with special needs and (b) English language teaching strategies for these students.

Challenges in English Language Learning Among Students with Special Needs

The review highlights a critical problem in inclusive English language education: the shortage of adequately trained teachers. This shortage affects the quality of provision because general education teachers may be required to teach learners with special needs without sufficient specialized preparation.

Paul et al. (2022) reported that some students with special needs were reluctant to respond, participate in classroom activities, complete assigned tasks, or attempt unfamiliar work. Limited attention and difficulty following instructions also affected participation. Ortiz (2001) reported that some students had trouble retaining, understanding, and recalling newly learned words even after repeated instruction. Hall (2024) found that students with special needs whose first language was not English could experience limited learning when instructional materials and procedures were unavailable in their home languages. Providing accessible explanations and directions in learners' first languages may support comprehension.

Sutcher et al. (2019) identified staffing shortages as a persistent problem in public education. Teacher burnout (Robinson et al., 2019), inadequate funding (Katz, 2019), and limited parental involvement (Herman & Reinke, 2017) may further complicate the implementation of inclusive education. Gulati (2016) reported that language teachers may encounter difficulties communicating and interacting with students who are deaf or hard of hearing when they have not received appropriate training. In one case, a teacher relied on an interpreter while developing the skills needed to communicate effectively with students. Desmita and Machrus (2019) found that teachers had trouble selecting methods and media for students with hyperactivity. They recommended conducting a needs analysis, modeling target language use, and selecting engaging materials that correspond to students' learning profiles. Urdarevic (2016) observed that curricula and textbooks designed for general education may be inaccessible to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Black-and-white printing, poor paper quality, insufficient illustrations, and inappropriate levels of difficulty can further restrict access.

English Language Teaching Strategies for Students with Special Needs

Cheatham and Barnett (2017) recommended that teachers use varied instructional approaches and design activities that reflect students' interests. Specialized instruction in inclusive settings can improve access to the general education curriculum and increase academic engagement. Teachers should connect learning activities to students' interests and experiences and make content relevant to their lives. Instruction should also provide access to the general education curriculum while incorporating individualized, research-based support for academic development and appropriate behavior (Klingner et al., 2014; Wehmeyer, 2006). Gersten and Woodward (1994) emphasized the importance of relevant curricular materials and environments in which students feel comfortable expressing ideas in a second language. Teachers can divide complex concepts into manageable steps while encouraging learners to communicate their ideas. Instruction should address oral language and listening comprehension, vocabulary, reading comprehension and fluency, and phonemic awareness (Correa & Miller, 2014; Klingner et al., 2014). Explicit instruction in reading comprehension, word study, repeated reading, and phonics has also been recommended (Vaughn et al., 2005).

Teachers should provide visual cues and graphic supports to accompany oral and written instructions. Because literacy is a central component of English language learning, collaborative

strategic reading may support comprehension. In this approach, students work in groups to assist one another and share knowledge (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Additional accommodations include allowing more time for tasks, clarifying multistep directions, and dividing extended presentations into shorter segments (Turnbull et al., 2015). Culturally responsive pedagogy can help teachers address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse learners with disabilities. Instruction that draws on students' cultural knowledge and experiences may improve engagement and academic achievement (Gay, 2002). Martínez-Álvarez (2020) identified mediation, agency, and collectivity as central constructs in the education of emergent bilingual learners with disabilities. Physical and cultural tools can mediate classroom activity, while collaborative learning allows students to exercise agency with support from teachers and peers. This perspective positions equity and sociocultural responsiveness at the center of inclusive bilingual education. Kangas (2017) found that a push-in model, in which special and general education services are provided in the same classroom, can support collaboration and reduce unnecessary separation from peers. Modeling classroom participation may also encourage learners to communicate in English.

Interaction is particularly important in inclusive settings. Students should have sustained opportunities to communicate with teachers and classmates, including through cooperative groups that promote meaningful peer interaction (Klingner et al., 2014). Ortiz (2001) described sheltered content instruction as an approach in which teachers adjust delivery to students' English proficiency while maintaining academic rigor. Strategies include slower speech, verbal and visual presentation of information, controlled vocabulary, and grade-appropriate questioning. Additional strategies include (a) modifying assessment formats to address language- and disability-related needs; (b) teaching discipline-specific language, symbols, and strategies for understanding technical texts; (c) providing opportunities for oral language development through group and peer interaction; and (d) offering supplementary intensive reading interventions delivered by specialists familiar with ESL adaptations. For students with communication difficulties, including some learners with autism spectrum disorder, nonverbal supports may be helpful. These supports include body language, gestures, pointing, eye gaze, facial expressions, vocalizations, and signing (Soto & Yu, 2014). Problem-solving activities can help students develop decision-making skills as they discuss issues relevant to their identities (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Upa and Mbato (2020) found audiovisual materials particularly useful in English instruction for students with special needs. Videos can be replayed, paused, and used to support repetition and guided practice. Gunada (2017) suggested that videos and language-learning applications can provide reliable pronunciation models, expand vocabulary, and expose learners to authentic spoken English. These resources may also support teachers who lack confidence in their own pronunciation.

Universal Design for Learning recommends multiple means of representing information, including digital talking books, text-to-speech tools, graphic representations, and flowcharts (Wehmeyer, 2006). Such options can improve access for learners with diverse needs. Text-to-speech tools may be combined with synchronized highlighting or avatars that present information, making texts more accessible to students who experience reading difficulties (Wehmeyer, 2006). Repetition and drilling can be made more engaging through songs, objects, and storytelling (Kirk et al., 2015). For example, learners may sing vocabulary in context, identify corresponding objects, and use the target words when sharing personal experiences. Students who have trouble retaining information may benefit from rhythmic and musical mnemonics that make content more memorable and engaging (Hayes, 2009).

Recommendations for Teaching Students with Special Needs

ESL teachers should demonstrate competence in the receptive and productive language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ortiz, 2001). Teaching students with special needs requires collaboration. Small-group instruction and peer tutoring can support reading fluency and comprehension (Kirk et al., 2015). Miranda et al. (2019) recommended integrated coursework in teacher-preparation programs, continuing professional development, and stronger partnerships

among schools, families, and communities. Inclusive bilingual programs can support language and academic development, avoid unnecessary segregation, and build on students' cultural and linguistic strengths (Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008).

Identifying barriers to learning can help teachers select appropriate instruction. Teachers should examine lesson content, cognitive and linguistic demands, instructional approaches, and opportunities to motivate learners. Technical vocabulary and complex concepts may create substantial challenges for ELLs, particularly in the secondary grades (August et al., 2005). Potential barriers include (a) reading levels that interfere with access to key concepts; (b) words and concepts that are unfamiliar to ELLs but assumed to be basic for native English speakers; (c) lessons that require simultaneous learning of academic concepts and English terminology; and (d) culturally unfamiliar forms of oral, written, verbal, and nonverbal expression. Wang and Woolf (2015) advocated teacher preparation that integrates content and language instruction. They also emphasized continuing professional development and stronger partnerships among educators, families, and communities. Swicegood and Miller (2015) argued that collaboration among general educators, bilingual or ESL educators, social workers, administrators, and special education professionals can strengthen teachers' capacity. Professional development should extend beyond the classroom by supporting sustained partnerships with families and communities.

Targeted individual support is another useful strategy. Teachers can guide students who require additional assistance while organizing peer support or extension activities for classmates who complete tasks earlier (Cheatham & Barnett, 2017). Teachers of English learners with disabilities require expertise in both language instruction and special education. Collaborative planning teams can combine these areas of knowledge when designing lessons for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Kirk et al., 2015). Effective provision requires coordination among teachers and support professionals (Klingner et al., 2014). Specialists in second-language acquisition, sheltered instruction, and bilingual education can help teams differentiate instruction, identify challenges, and develop plans that support language and academic learning (Turnbull et al., 2015).

ELL specialists, bilingual teaching assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and other service providers should work collaboratively. Students' individualized education programs should reflect deliberate team decisions about home-language use, English development, and access to academic content. Because ELLs with learning disabilities may receive instruction from content-area, ESL, and special education teachers, their experiences can become fragmented. Collaboration can bridge professional knowledge gaps and promote coherent instruction. Teams should identify content and skills that can be reinforced across programs, ensure consistency, and prevent gaps, duplication, or conflicting approaches (August et al., 2005). Parental involvement is an important predictor of student success (Jeynes, 2012). Families can support learning by assisting with homework, attending conferences, participating in school organizations, and contributing to educational planning (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). Educators can build partnerships with families of ELLs with disabilities by answering questions and providing credible information and resources. Such partnerships enable families to make informed language choices and participate meaningfully in educational planning (Lindholm-Leary & Howard, 2008).

Conclusion

This systematic review identified two central findings concerning English language learning among students with special needs in public schools. First, learners encounter barriers associated with shortages of qualified teachers, insufficient professional preparation, inaccessible curricula and materials, limited funding, and language-related difficulties that intersect with disability. Second, the literature recommends explicit and individualized instruction, culturally responsive and sheltered approaches, collaborative reading and peer support, audiovisual and assistive technologies, repetition and mnemonic techniques, and coordinated planning among English, ESL,

general education, and special education professionals. These findings imply that inclusive English language education requires more than formal legal protection; it depends on sustained teacher preparation, accessible instructional resources, family participation, and coordinated implementation at the school level.

The review is limited by the small final sample of six studies, the inclusion of varied publication types and research designs, the reliance on a single reviewer, and the uneven detail available across the selected sources. These limitations restrict the generalizability of the synthesis and may introduce selection and interpretive bias. Future studies should use transparent and replicable search procedures, multiple reviewers, broader database coverage, and clearly defined quality criteria. Mixed-method and longitudinal research should also evaluate the effects of targeted professional development, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching, assistive technologies, and school–family collaboration on students’ English development, classroom participation, and academic outcomes. Future policy should translate these findings into practical resources and sustained professional support for teachers.

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