

TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES IN APPLYING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examined teachers' practices and challenges in applying inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching. A bounded review design was used to synthesize selected scholarly articles and policy documents on inclusive education, English language teaching, Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, and teacher professional preparation and development. Sources were selected through explicit relevance criteria and analyzed through narrative thematic synthesis. The review found that teachers commonly applied inclusive pedagogy by identifying learner diversity, adapting texts and tasks, providing multimodal input, scaffolding language production, organizing cooperative interaction, using flexible assessment, and collaborating with colleagues or families. However, implementation was challenged by limited teacher training, insufficient materials and assistive technology, large classes, weak institutional support, curriculum pressure, uncertainty about learners' specific needs, and affective barriers such as anxiety or low confidence in English communication. The synthesis showed that inclusive English pedagogy should not be reduced to individual accommodation only; it should be understood as a whole-class design process that expands access, participation, and meaningful achievement. The paper recommends sustained professional development, school-based collaboration, accessible learning resources, and assessment systems that allow learners to demonstrate English competence in varied ways.

Keywords: *English language teaching; inclusive pedagogy; learner diversity; systematic literature review; teacher practices; teacher challenges*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central concern in language education because English classrooms are increasingly shaped by differences in learners' abilities, linguistic backgrounds, cultures, socioeconomic conditions, disabilities, motivation, and emotional readiness. In many schools, English teachers are expected to teach the same curriculum to learners who do not experience the lesson in the same way. Some learners quickly understand oral instructions but struggle with writing. Others can read accurately but avoid speaking because of anxiety. Some learners need visual support, assistive technology, peer mediation, simplified instructions, or additional time. These realities show that inclusive

pedagogy is not an optional addition to English language teaching; it is part of the professional work of helping all learners participate in language learning.

The global movement toward inclusive education emphasizes that schools should not ask learners to fit rigid systems. Instead, education systems should identify and remove barriers to access, participation, and achievement. UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusion concerns every learner who may be excluded, marginalized, or made invisible by school structures. Similarly, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) explains that inclusive education requires changes in culture, policy, and practice so that all learners can participate without discrimination. In the English classroom, these commitments become practical questions: How can the teacher make oral input accessible? How can students with different reading levels work with the same text? How can speaking activities include shy learners or learners with communication difficulties? How can assessment remain fair while allowing different ways of demonstrating language competence?

English language teaching presents particular challenges for inclusion because language learning involves multiple domains at the same time. Learners must process sound, script, meaning, grammar, vocabulary, social interaction, and cultural context. These demands may become difficult for learners with dyslexia, hearing impairment, visual impairment, attention difficulties, autism spectrum conditions, low literacy exposure, trauma, or low confidence. Young (2024) emphasizes that English language teachers often lack specific training for teaching learners with disabilities even though language learning may produce unique barriers for those learners. Therefore, inclusive pedagogy in English teaching must address both general participation and the specific demands of language acquisition.

At the classroom level, teachers often attempt to respond to diversity by using pictures, gestures, peer assistance, repetition, simplified instructions, differentiated tasks, or flexible grouping. However, such practices may remain inconsistent when teachers have not received systematic preparation. Recent research on inclusive English teaching indicates that teachers face difficulties related to insufficient training, limited materials, limited specialist support, emotional and behavioral challenges, and communication barriers (Shilvani et al., 2024; Young, 2024). These findings suggest that inclusion depends not only on teacher goodwill but also on professional knowledge, institutional support, and classroom design.

This paper therefore presents a systematic literature review of teachers' practices and challenges in applying inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching. The review is important because many discussions of inclusive education remain general, while English teaching requires specific attention to communicative tasks, reading and writing demands, multilingual identities, classroom interaction, and assessment. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) What inclusive pedagogical practices are reported or recommended for English language teaching? (2) What challenges do teachers face when implementing inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching? By synthesizing the literature, this paper aims to provide a practical and conceptually grounded understanding for English teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy refers to teaching approaches that respond to learner diversity without separating learners into fixed categories of normal and special. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe inclusive pedagogy as extending what is ordinarily available to

everybody, rather than providing something additional or different only for some learners. This idea is important because it shifts attention from individual deficit to the design of classroom participation. In this view, the teacher does not begin by asking which learner is the problem. The teacher asks which barriers in the lesson, materials, interaction, or assessment prevent learners from participating.

Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusion and equity require careful attention to context because barriers differ across schools, communities, and education systems. In one English classroom, the main barrier may be the absence of accessible reading materials. In another, it may be negative peer attitudes, lack of teacher confidence, insufficient time, or a curriculum that values speed over understanding. This contextual view prevents inclusive pedagogy from becoming a checklist. It requires teachers and schools to investigate the actual conditions that shape learning.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is closely related to inclusive pedagogy because it encourages teachers to design learning environments with multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression. CAST (2024) highlights that UDL Guidelines 3.0 address barriers rooted in bias and systems of exclusion, and support learning environments that honor and value every learner. For English teaching, this means providing varied ways for learners to access language input, practice language, and show what they can do. UDL does not remove the need for individualized accommodation, but it reduces the number of barriers that appear when lessons are designed for only one type of learner.

Differentiated instruction is another important concept. Tomlinson (2014) explains that differentiation responds to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles through adjustments in content, process, product, and learning environment. In an English lesson, content may be differentiated through texts at different complexity levels; process may be differentiated through guided practice, peer support, or graphic organizers; product may be differentiated through oral, written, visual, or digital output. When used carefully, differentiation supports inclusion because it allows learners to work toward shared objectives through appropriate pathways.

2.2 Inclusive Pedagogy in English Language Teaching

Inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching is shaped by the communicative nature of language learning. English lessons commonly require learners to listen, speak, read, write, negotiate meaning, take turns, interpret context, and use language for social purposes. These tasks can be empowering, but they can also exclude learners when instructions are inaccessible, when classroom interaction is dominated by confident students, or when assessment rewards only one mode of performance. Therefore, inclusive English pedagogy must combine general inclusive principles with language-specific strategies.

Effendi et al. (2024), in a systematic evidence synthesis of disability and inclusive pedagogy in initial English as a Foreign Language teacher training, found that the field remains under-studied and that EFL teacher education needs stronger attention to disability and inclusive pedagogy. This finding is significant because teacher preparation affects how confidently teachers design accessible lessons, identify barriers, and collaborate with support systems. If teachers are not prepared to teach inclusively, inclusive education policies may remain disconnected from classroom practice.

Recent research also shows that inclusive English teaching involves both pedagogical strategies and relational work. Shilvani et al. (2024) found that teachers in an inclusive

primary English classroom used relationship building, differentiation, and teacher collaboration to cope with students' emotional-behavioral and communication-language challenges. Young (2024) similarly found that English language teachers may have foundational inclusive skills but still need training in differentiation, disability-specific considerations, and identification of possible disabilities. These studies indicate that inclusive English pedagogy requires teachers to integrate instructional design, classroom relationships, and professional collaboration.

A related strand of research in English for Academic Purposes shows that inclusion also concerns culture, language identity, multilingualism, and equitable assessment. Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou (2026) identified inclusive curriculum design, culturally responsive pedagogy, equitable assessment, intercultural communication, and multilingual practices as key strategies in inclusive EAP. Although their review focused on higher education, the themes are relevant to broader English language teaching because English classrooms often include learners with diverse languages, identities, and ways of participating. Inclusive pedagogy is therefore not limited to disability; it also addresses linguistic and cultural diversity.

3. Research Method

This study used a bounded systematic literature review design. A systematic literature review is appropriate when the researcher aims to identify, select, evaluate, and synthesize existing knowledge using transparent procedures. The review followed the spirit of PRISMA reporting by making the search focus, eligibility criteria, and synthesis procedure explicit (Page et al., 2021). However, because the study was prepared as a conference full-paper manuscript rather than a large database-funded review, it used a bounded narrative synthesis of highly relevant and accessible literature rather than a meta-analysis.

The review focused on scholarly and policy literature related to inclusive pedagogy, English language teaching, teacher practices, teacher challenges, differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and disability or diversity in language education. The search prioritized recent sources from 2020 to 2026, but foundational sources were included when they provided essential concepts. Examples of foundational sources include the inclusive pedagogy framework, differentiated instruction, and international rights-based definitions of inclusive education.

Table 1. SLR Search Protocol

Element	Description
Review focus	Teachers' practices and challenges in applying inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching
Main concepts	Inclusive pedagogy, English language teaching, EFL/ELT, teacher practice, teacher challenge, disability, differentiation, UDL
Search terms	"Inclusive pedagogy" AND "English language teaching"; "inclusive education" AND EFL; "English teachers" AND "special needs"; "UDL" AND language teaching; "teacher challenges" AND inclusive English classroom
Source types	Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, policy documents, and relevant books
Publication period	Mainly 2020-2026, with older foundational works included for theoretical grounding
Synthesis approach	Narrative thematic synthesis of repeated practices, barriers, and implications

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Included	Excluded
Topic relevance	Sources discussing inclusive pedagogy, inclusive education, English teaching, ELT/EFL/EAP, differentiation, UDL, or teacher preparation	Sources unrelated to teaching, language education, inclusion, or classroom practice
Population or context	Teachers, English learners, inclusive classrooms, teacher education, or school/higher education language settings	Studies focused only on non-educational settings
Evidence type	Empirical studies, systematic reviews, conceptual frameworks, and policy documents	Opinion pieces without clear relevance or unverifiable online summaries
Language	English-language sources	Sources not available in English
Usefulness for synthesis	Sources that identify practices, barriers, concepts, or implications for inclusive teaching	Sources that mention inclusion only briefly without pedagogical detail

The selection process involved four steps. First, potentially relevant sources were identified through electronic searches and reference checking. Second, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance to inclusive pedagogy and English language teaching. Third, full texts or detailed publisher pages were examined to determine whether the sources contributed to the research questions. Fourth, eligible sources were coded for themes related to teacher practices, challenges, and implications. The final synthesis emphasized quality and relevance rather than quantity.

Data analysis used thematic narrative synthesis. The selected sources were read repeatedly to identify recurring concepts. Codes were grouped into two major categories: inclusive pedagogical practices and implementation challenges. Practices included learner profiling, flexible materials, multimodal instruction, scaffolding, cooperative learning, flexible assessment, and collaboration. Challenges included lack of training, insufficient resources, class size, limited specialist support, communication barriers, emotional-behavioral difficulties, curriculum pressure, and uncertainty about assessment. These themes were then interpreted in relation to English language teaching.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Overview of the Literature

The reviewed literature shows that inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching is an emerging but still underdeveloped area. General inclusive education literature provides strong principles, but English language teaching research has only recently begun to examine how these principles operate in language classrooms. Effendi et al. (2024) found limited scholarship on disability and inclusive pedagogy in initial EFL teacher education, suggesting that the field needs more systematic attention. Young (2024) similarly identifies a need for training tools and observation frameworks that help English language teachers recognize and improve inclusive practice.

Across the selected literature, inclusive pedagogy is presented not as a separate method but as a design orientation. Teachers are expected to plan lessons that anticipate diversity, reduce barriers, and maintain meaningful learning goals. The literature also warns against treating inclusion as a purely individual accommodation problem. While some learners require specific support, a whole-class inclusive design can make English lessons more accessible for many learners at once. For example, visual vocabulary support may help

learners with dyslexia, beginners, shy learners, and learners who were absent in previous lessons. Similarly, sentence frames may support learners with disabilities, second language anxiety, and low prior exposure to academic English.

4.2 Teachers' Practices in Applying Inclusive Pedagogy

The first major practice is knowing learners systematically. Inclusive English teachers collect information about learners' strengths, needs, interests, language proficiency, learning preferences, and possible barriers. This may be done through classroom observation, short diagnostic tasks, learner self-reflection, consultation with parents, or communication with other teachers. In English language teaching, learner knowledge is particularly important because competence is multidimensional. A learner may be strong in listening but weak in writing, or confident in vocabulary memorization but anxious in conversation. Without learner knowledge, teachers may misinterpret silence, slow reading, or unfinished written work as laziness rather than as evidence of a barrier that needs support.

The second practice is adapting materials while keeping shared learning goals. Teachers may add pictures, audio support, glossaries, simplified instructions, guiding questions, sentence starters, examples, or larger print. Such adaptations help learners access the same topic rather than isolating them from the class. In a reading lesson, all students may work with the same theme, but some learners may receive vocabulary previews, chunked paragraphs, or graphic organizers. This reflects Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) principle of extending what is available to everyone rather than creating separate tracks for particular learners.

The third practice is multimodal instruction. English teachers can present language through speech, written text, images, gestures, realia, audio, video, movement, and digital tools. Multimodal input helps learners because it provides more than one route to understanding. For example, when introducing verbs of daily activity, the teacher may pronounce the words, show images, act out the verbs, write sample sentences, and ask students to match actions with expressions. This practice aligns with UDL because it offers multiple means of representation and reduces dependence on a single mode of input (CAST, 2024).

The fourth practice is scaffolding language production. Learners are often expected to speak or write in English before they have enough confidence or linguistic resources. Inclusive teachers provide support such as modeling, substitution drills, sentence frames, word banks, rehearsal time, guided questions, peer practice, and staged writing tasks. Scaffolding allows students to participate in the same communicative purpose at different levels of independence. It also reduces anxiety because learners know what language resources are available before performing.

The fifth practice is cooperative learning with clear roles. Pair and group work can support inclusion when learners are taught how to collaborate respectfully. Teachers can assign roles such as reader, note taker, vocabulary helper, timekeeper, encourager, or presenter. These roles help learners contribute according to their strengths while still practicing English. However, cooperative learning must be carefully managed. Without clear roles, confident learners may dominate while quieter or disabled learners become passive. Inclusive cooperative learning therefore requires explicit instruction in peer support and respectful communication.

The sixth practice is flexible assessment. Inclusive assessment allows learners to show English competence in more than one way while maintaining clear criteria. A vocabulary task

may be demonstrated through matching, oral explanation, picture labeling, or sentence writing. A speaking task may consider interaction, comprehensibility, use of target expressions, and confidence growth rather than only speed and accent. Flexible assessment is not the same as lowering standards. It means aligning assessment with learning objectives while recognizing that learners may demonstrate achievement through different forms of expression.

Table 3. Synthesized Inclusive Practices in English Language Teaching

Practice	Application in ELT	Inclusive Function
Learner profiling	Observation, diagnostic tasks, learner reflection, consultation with parents or colleagues	Identifies barriers and strengths without negative labeling
Flexible materials	Visuals, glossaries, chunked texts, larger print, audio support, sentence starters	Provides access to shared language goals
Multimodal instruction	Speech, text, images, gestures, realia, video, movement, and digital tools	Offers multiple routes to understanding English input
Scaffolding	Modeling, guided practice, word banks, peer rehearsal, wait time, staged writing	Supports participation before independent language performance
Cooperative learning	Structured roles, pair rehearsal, group tasks, respectful interaction routines	Builds belonging and communicative practice
Flexible assessment	Oral, written, visual, digital, individual, or collaborative products	Allows varied ways of demonstrating English competence

4.3 Teachers' Challenges in Applying Inclusive Pedagogy

The most repeated challenge is limited teacher preparation. Many English teachers are trained in language pedagogy but receive little systematic preparation in disability, inclusive education, assistive technology, or differentiated assessment. Effendi et al. (2024) show that inclusive pedagogy in EFL teacher education remains under-researched, while Young (2024) indicates that English language teachers need more specific training in differentiation and disability-related considerations. Without such preparation, teachers may feel uncertain about how to adapt listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks for learners with diverse needs.

A second challenge concerns limited resources. Inclusive English teaching often requires varied materials such as accessible texts, audio files, visual aids, manipulatives, assistive technology, captioned videos, or digital platforms. Teachers in under-resourced settings may have to create these materials independently. This increases workload and may result in inconsistent quality. Limited resources also affect assessment because teachers may lack tools to evaluate learners through varied modes of expression.

A third challenge is class size and time pressure. Inclusive pedagogy requires observation, feedback, flexible grouping, and adaptation, but teachers may handle large classes and heavy administrative responsibilities. In large English classes, it is difficult to monitor each learner's participation in speaking activities, provide individual feedback on writing, or adjust tasks during the lesson. Time pressure may also push teachers toward textbook completion rather than responsive teaching.

A fourth challenge is limited specialist and institutional support. Inclusive pedagogy is stronger when English teachers collaborate with special education teachers, counselors, school leaders, parents, and peers. However, many teachers work in contexts where such support is unavailable or irregular. Shilvani et al. (2024) found that collaboration among

teachers was part of coping with challenges in an inclusive English classroom. This suggests that inclusion is not only an individual teacher skill; it is also a school-level responsibility.

A fifth challenge is the complexity of learner needs. English teachers may find it difficult to identify whether a learner's difficulty comes from limited exposure to English, a learning disability, anxiety, lack of motivation, absence from school, or insufficient literacy in the first language. Misidentification can lead to inappropriate support. For example, a student with dyslexia may be treated as careless in spelling, while a student with speaking anxiety may be judged as unprepared. Inclusive pedagogy requires careful interpretation of learner behavior.

A sixth challenge is assessment pressure. English assessment often values standard written tests, grammar accuracy, speed, and individual performance. Such assessment formats may disadvantage learners who need alternative ways to demonstrate competence. Teachers may want to use flexible assessment but feel restricted by school examinations or national curriculum requirements. This tension creates a gap between inclusive pedagogy and accountability systems.

Table 4. Synthesized Challenges and Possible Responses

Challenge	Effect on English Teaching	Possible Response
Limited teacher training	Teachers feel unsure about adaptation, disability support, and flexible assessment	Provide continuous ELT-specific inclusive pedagogy training
Insufficient resources	Teachers lack accessible texts, visuals, audio, and assistive technology	Develop shared school resource banks and low-cost multimodal materials
Large classes and time pressure	Individual feedback and observation become difficult	Use peer support, structured roles, and reusable differentiated templates
Limited collaboration	Teachers handle complex learner needs alone	Strengthen collaboration with specialists, parents, and school leaders
Complex learner needs	Difficulties may be misinterpreted as laziness or low ability	Use observation, diagnostic tasks, and referral pathways
Assessment pressure	Standard tests may not capture varied language competence	Align flexible assessment with clear learning objectives and rubrics

4.4 Discussion

The synthesis indicates that inclusive English pedagogy involves three connected dimensions: access, participation, and achievement. Access means that learners can understand instructions, materials, and classroom routines. Participation means that learners have meaningful roles in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and interaction. Achievement means that learners can progress toward English learning objectives and demonstrate their competence fairly. A lesson may provide access without participation if learners receive simplified materials but are not included in group communication. A lesson may provide participation without achievement if students enjoy group work but do not develop language skills. Inclusive pedagogy therefore requires teachers to balance support with meaningful learning expectations.

The findings also suggest that inclusive pedagogy should be planned before problems appear. Many teachers adapt only after a learner fails to participate. UDL encourages teachers to anticipate barriers in advance by designing lessons with multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2024). For example, before teaching a

listening lesson, the teacher can provide key vocabulary, visual context, clear purpose, repeated listening opportunities, and alternative ways to respond. These supports benefit not only learners with identified disabilities but also learners with low confidence, limited background knowledge, or temporary difficulties.

Another important point is that inclusive English teaching requires relational sensitivity. Language learning is emotional because learners often have to perform publicly, make mistakes, and negotiate identity through a language they do not fully control. Students who feel embarrassed, ignored, or stigmatized may withdraw from participation. Relationship building, respectful classroom norms, and peer support therefore become pedagogical tools. This supports Shilvani et al.'s (2024) finding that maintaining positive relationships helped teachers cope with inclusive English classroom challenges.

The review further shows that teacher education must connect inclusive education with specific ELT practices. General messages such as be inclusive or respect diversity are not enough. Teachers need examples of how to adapt pronunciation practice, vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, grammar tasks, writing assignments, speaking tests, classroom games, digital activities, and homework. They also need guidance on how to collaborate with families and specialists. Teacher education programs should therefore include inclusive lesson design, case-based problem solving, accessible material development, and reflective practicum experiences.

Finally, inclusion should be understood as a school culture rather than an individual teacher burden. English teachers can design flexible lessons, but they still need manageable class sizes, accessible resources, supportive leadership, referral procedures, professional development, and assessment policies that recognize learner diversity. Without institutional support, inclusive pedagogy may depend on exceptional teacher effort and become unsustainable. A whole-school approach is therefore necessary to move inclusive English teaching from isolated practice to shared professional culture.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined teachers' practices and challenges in applying inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching. The review found that teachers applied inclusive pedagogy through learner profiling, flexible materials, multimodal instruction, scaffolding, cooperative learning, flexible assessment, and collaboration. These practices helped learners access English input, participate in classroom interaction, and demonstrate learning in diverse ways. The review also found that teachers faced challenges related to limited preparation, insufficient resources, large classes, limited collaboration, complex learner needs, and assessment pressure.

The main conclusion is that inclusive pedagogy in English language teaching should be understood as a whole-class design process rather than a set of separate accommodations for selected learners. Teachers need to anticipate barriers, provide varied pathways to participation, and maintain meaningful language learning goals. For future practice, English teachers need continuous professional development that is specific to language teaching. Schools also need to provide accessible resources, collaboration systems, and assessment policies that support diversity. Future research should include more empirical studies on inclusive English pedagogy in primary, secondary, and higher education contexts, especially in underrepresented regions where English is taught as a foreign language.

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