

## INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES IN FACILITATING ENGLISH LEARNING FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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### Abstract

This study investigates instructional approaches used in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in an Indonesian special school context. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved two English teachers working in a special school (SLB). Data were collected through six classroom observations (two classes across three sessions) conducted between October and November 2025 over a one-month period through six classroom observation sessions conducted twice a week, as well as semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four key instructional approaches implemented by the teachers: direct instruction, differentiated instruction, multimodal teaching, and the application of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). These approaches were adapted to accommodate students' diverse learning needs, attention spans, and communication abilities. In addition, the study identifies several challenges faced by teachers, including behavioral challenges, variation in student ability, limited learning resources, difficulty teaching English concepts, environmental constraints, lack of specialized training and support, students' mood and sensory sensitivity. To address these challenges, teachers employed strategies such as individualized support, redirection techniques, the use of visual aids, the modification of teaching materials, collaboration with parents, as well as grouping and shifting. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical insights into instructional practices for teaching English to students with ASD in the Indonesian special education context. The findings offer practical implications for educators in designing inclusive and effective language instruction for learners with ASD.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorder, classroom challenges, English language teaching, inclusive education, instructional approaches

### Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to students with special educational needs has become an important concern in contemporary education, particularly for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who experience differences in communication, social interaction, and learning behaviors. These characteristics influence how they process language input and respond to instruction, requiring teachers to adopt appropriate and flexible approaches. More recent studies confirm that students with ASD experience difficulties in language learning. [El Shemy et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight challenges in communication and language use, while [Urrea et al. \(2024\)](#) report delays in vocabulary development. [Bahameisha et al. \(2025\)](#) emphasize the importance of adaptive instructional approaches, and [Meindl et al. \(2020\)](#) show that these challenges also affect students'

engagement in learning activities. These findings are consistent with earlier work by [Yahya et al. \(2013\)](#), which identified similar difficulties among students with ASD

In Indonesian special schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa or SLB), English is generally positioned as a supplementary subject rather than a core component of the curriculum. As a result, instruction is often delivered by teachers with backgrounds in special education rather than English language teaching, which may influence how instructional approaches are selected and implemented. [Hallahan et al. \(2019\)](#) state that teachers' educational background plays an important role in shaping instructional practices in special education settings.

Instructional approaches play a key role in shaping how language is taught and learned. [Richards and Rodgers \(2014\)](#) explain that such approaches provide systematic frameworks that influence teaching methods and classroom interactions. [Tomlinson \(2014\)](#) further highlights that differentiated instruction enables teachers to address diverse learning needs by adjusting content, processes, and strategies. These perspectives underline the importance of selecting appropriate approaches when teaching students with ASD, who require structured and adaptive learning environments. Previous studies have identified various approaches that support students with ASD in learning English. [Sari et al. \(2021\)](#) found that Total Physical Response (TPR) improves listening comprehension through physical engagement. [Roberts and Webster \(2020\)](#) emphasize the importance of structured classroom environments, while [Padmadewi and Artini \(2017\)](#) highlight the role of visual supports and adaptive strategies in enhancing engagement and understanding.

Despite this growing body of research, most studies focus on specific techniques or are conducted in inclusive or mainstream settings. There is limited research examining the implementation of multiple instructional approaches in Indonesian special schools, particularly for students with ASD. In addition, many studies emphasize theoretical recommendations rather than actual classroom practices, resulting in a lack of empirical evidence on the challenges teachers face and the strategies they use in real contexts.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the instructional approaches used by English teachers in teaching students with ASD in a public special school in Palembang. It also investigates the challenges encountered by teachers and the strategies they apply to address these challenges. This study offers a novel contribution by providing an in-depth analysis of how multiple instructional approaches are implemented in real classroom settings, along with the challenges and strategies experienced by teachers. Based on these objectives, the research questions of this study are formulated as follows:

1. What instructional approaches are used by English teachers in teaching students with ASD in a special school in Palembang?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing these instructional approaches?
3. What strategies do teachers apply to overcome the challenges in teaching English to students with ASD?

## **Literature Review**

This section presents key concepts underpinning this study, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in learning contexts, challenges in teaching English to students with ASD, relevant instructional approaches, and previous research to identify existing gaps.

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### ***Autism Spectrum Disorder in learning***

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition characterized by differences in communication, social interaction, and behavior, which influence students' learning experiences. Learners with ASD often face challenges in understanding verbal instructions, maintaining attention, and engaging in social communication (Hallahan et al., 2019). They also tend to show preferences for structured routines and reliance on visual information.

Research indicates that structured and predictable learning environments, along with explicit instruction, can enhance engagement and comprehension among students with ASD (Meindl et al., 2020). Sensory processing differences further emphasize the need for flexible and responsive teaching strategies. These findings suggest that instruction must be adapted to individual learning needs, particularly in language learning contexts.

### ***Teaching English to students with ASD***

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to students with ASD presents challenges, particularly in understanding abstract language, figurative expressions, and pragmatic communication. Students may experience difficulties in interpreting meaning and using language appropriately in social contexts (Yahya et al., 2013). Limited attention span and susceptibility to distraction also require structured and well-planned instruction. Clear instructions, repetition, and consistent routines are important in maintaining engagement (Hallahan et al., 2019). The use of visual aids, modeling, and multimodal input supports comprehension and retention (Meindl et al., 2020). These findings indicate that effective instruction requires both pedagogical adaptation and an understanding of learners' cognitive characteristics.

### ***Instructional approaches in language teaching***

Instructional approaches provide the foundation for how language teaching is designed and implemented, influencing methods, materials, and classroom practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Effective instruction should consider diverse learner needs, particularly in special education contexts (Tomlinson, 2014). Research suggests that no single approach is sufficient to address diverse learner needs. Instead, effective teaching requires a balance between structured guidance and flexibility, which is particularly relevant for students with ASD.

### ***Instructional approaches for students with ASD***

Several approaches have been identified as effective for students with ASD. Direct Instruction provides clear, step-by-step guidance that reduces ambiguity (Hallahan et al., 2019). Differentiated Instruction allows adaptation of content and learning processes based on individual needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Multimodal strategies, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic inputs, enhance comprehension and engagement, especially for learners who rely on visual support (Meindl et al., 2020). In addition, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) supports attention, participation, and learning outcomes through reinforcement and structured intervention (Cooper et al., 2020). These approaches indicate the importance of integrating multiple strategies in teaching students with ASD.

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### *Previous studies*

Previous research has identified strategies that support English learning for students with ASD. Total Physical Response (TPR) improves comprehension through physical engagement (Sari et al., 2021), while visual supports and adaptive strategies enhance engagement and understanding (Padmadewi & Artini, 2017). Structured classroom environments and supportive teacher-student interactions also promote participation (Roberts & Webster, 2020).

However, most existing studies focus on specific instructional techniques rather than examining how multiple approaches are implemented together in real classroom settings. Furthermore, many studies are conducted in inclusive or general education contexts, with limited attention to special education environments, particularly in Indonesian special schools (SLB).

### *Synthesis of literature and research gap*

The reviewed literature shows that teaching English to students with ASD requires structured, adaptive, and multimodal instructional approaches. Previous studies emphasize the importance of combining strategies such as visual supports, explicit instruction, and interactive activities to enhance learning outcomes. However, important gaps remain. Most studies focus on individual techniques rather than examining how multiple approaches are integrated in practice.

Research in Indonesian special education contexts, particularly in SLB settings, is also limited. In addition, few studies explore teachers' practical experiences in implementing these approaches. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by investigating how multiple instructional approaches are applied in real classroom settings and how teachers adapt their strategies when teaching English to students with ASD.

### *Theoretical framework*

This study is grounded in perspectives that emphasize structured, adaptive, and supportive instruction for students with ASD (Roberts & Webster, 2020). Instructional approaches must provide clarity, consistency, and meaningful engagement to address students' cognitive and behavioral needs. This study focuses on four approaches: Direct Instruction, Differentiated Instruction, Multimodality and Visual Supports, and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Direct Instruction supports learning through explicit teaching and guided practice (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Differentiated Instruction enables adaptation to individual needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Visual supports enhance comprehension and reduce anxiety (Hodgdon, 1995). ABA strengthens behavior and learning outcomes through reinforcement (Cooper et al., 2020). These approaches are complementary and often integrated in practice. Therefore, this study examines how they are implemented in teaching English to students with ASD and how teachers adapt their strategies in classroom settings.

### **Methodology**

#### *Research design and approach of the study*

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore instructional approaches used by English teachers in teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A case study

design enables in-depth investigation of a bounded system, namely teachers' practices within a specific special education context (Yin, 2018). Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were used to identify instructional approaches in actual teaching practices, while interviews explored teachers' perspectives, experiences, and reasons for using those approaches. These methods provided both observable data and in-depth explanations aligned with the research objectives.

### *Research site and participants*

The study was conducted in a special education school in Palembang, Indonesia, which provides services for students with special needs, including those with ASD. The site was selected due to its relevance to the study, as it offers English instruction for students with ASD. Two English teachers were selected purposively based on their experience in teaching students with ASD, familiarity with instructional approaches, and willingness to participate. Teacher 1 had over 10 years of experience and taught Grade 9, while Teacher 2 had over 20 years of experience and taught Grades 7 and 8. Their experience enabled them to provide detailed insights into instructional practices and adaptations for ASD learners.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data collection was conducted over two months (October to November 2025). Each class was observed three times, with two observations per week, allowing identification of recurring instructional patterns. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from observations and interviews. The study involved two classes taught by two teachers. This limited number reflects the school context, where some grade levels were combined. However, repeated observations and interviews provided sufficient depth for analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Observation and interview data were transcribed, coded, and organized into themes related to instructional approaches and teaching practices. The analysis focused on how approaches were implemented and how teachers adapted their strategies in classroom settings.

### **Findings**

This study explored instructional approaches used by English teachers in teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a special education setting. The analysis identified three main themes: instructional approaches, challenges encountered during teaching, and strategies used to address those challenges.

**Table 1.** *Thematic analysis of instructional approaches in teaching English to ASD students*

Theme	Sub-Themes	Codes
Instructional approaches	Direct instruction	The teachers applied direct instruction by providing face-to-face teaching and step-by-step explanations to support students' understanding.
	Differentiated instruction	The teachers implemented differentiated instruction by adapting materials based on students' abilities and learning needs.

	Multimodality and visual supports	The teachers used multimodal and visual supports, such as pictures and real objects, to enhance students' comprehension.
	ABA-related strategies	The teachers applied ABA-related strategies, such as managing disruptive behavior and reinforcing positive actions during learning.
Classroom challenges	Behavioral challenges	The teachers encountered behavioral challenges, including students' sudden emotional outburst that disrupted the learning process.
	Variation in student ability	The teachers faced challenges due to differences in students' abilities, requiring varied levels of instruction.
	Limited learning resources	The teachers experienced limited access to appropriate teaching resources, requiring them to prepare materials independently.
	Difficulty teaching English concepts	The teachers found it difficult to teach English concepts, especially vocabulary and pronunciation, to students with ASD.
	Environmental constraints	The teachers encountered classroom conditions that made students easily distracted during lessons.
	Lack of specialized training and support	The teachers reported limited training in teaching English to students with ASD, which affected their instructional practices.
	Students' mood and sensory sensitivity	The teacher identified students' mood and sensory conditions as factors that affected their participation in learning activities.
Instructional strategies	Individualized support	The teacher provided individualized support by guiding and encouraging students gradually based on their needs and responses.
	Redirection techniques	The teacher applied redirection techniques by shifting activities to maintain students' engagement during learning.
	The use of visual aids	The teacher used visual aids to address students' difficulties in understanding the material.
	The modification of teaching materials	The teacher modified materials to simplify learning for students who struggled with English concepts.
	Collaboration with parents	The teacher collaborated with parents to support students' learning and development.
	Grouping and shifting	The teacher grouped and shifted students based on their learning needs to optimize classroom instruction.
	Teacher flexibility	The teacher demonstrated flexibility by adjusting instruction based on students' emotional readiness.
	Multisensory learning	The teachers incorporated multisensory learning by providing physical guidance and engaging students in hands-on activities.

Table 1 presents the themes, sub-themes, and codes derived from classroom observations and interviews. The findings show that teachers applied various instructional approaches, including direct instruction, differentiated instruction, multimodality and visual supports, and ABA-related strategies. Teachers also encountered several challenges, such as behavioral issues, variations in students' abilities, limited resources, difficulties in teaching English concepts, environmental

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constraints, lack of specialized training, and students' mood and sensory sensitivity. To address these challenges, teachers implemented strategies including individualized support, redirection techniques, visual aids, material modification, collaboration with parents, grouping and shifting, teacher flexibility, and multisensory learning.

### ***Instructional approaches used in teaching English to ASD students***

This section addresses Research Question 1 by presenting the instructional approaches used by teachers when teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The findings show that teachers applied multiple approaches to accommodate students' diverse learning needs and behavioral characteristics, support understanding, maintain attention, and encourage participation. Based on classroom observations and interviews, the approaches identified include direct instruction, differentiated instruction, multimodality and visual support, multisensory learning, and strategies related to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), as summarized in Table 1.

Direct instruction emerged as one of the most frequently used approaches. Teachers provided explicit explanations, modelled tasks step by step, and guided students individually, which reduced confusion and improved understanding. Both teachers consistently used repetition and structured routines during classroom activities (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). This was supported by interview data, where teachers emphasized that "we must teach face-to-face individually" (Interview, T1), "without repetition, the student forgets" (Interview, T1), and "we need to repeat and continuously prompt the student" (Interview, T2). Overall, direct instruction provided clear guidance and reinforced learning through repetition.

Differentiated instruction was applied to address variations in students' abilities. Teachers adapted materials, tasks, and levels of support, allowing students to participate according to their abilities. Observations showed the use of simplified worksheets, varied task levels, and individualized assistance (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teachers confirmed that "each student receives different materials" (Interview, T1) and "we modify the tasks based on the students' abilities" (Interview, T2). Grouping strategies were also used to support different learning needs.

Multimodality and visual support played a significant role in the teaching process. Teachers used pictures, worksheets, and real objects to support comprehension and maintain attention (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Interview data highlighted that "pictures make the material more interesting" (Interview, T1) and "for students with autism, visual media is necessary" (Interview, T2). These supports made learning more accessible and engaging.

Finally, elements of ABA were reflected in instructional practices, particularly in managing behavior. Teachers applied strategies such as redirection, reinforcement, and activity adjustments when students became disengaged (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teachers noted that "if the student gets bored, we stop the activity" (Interview, T1) and "we separate the student so others can focus" (Interview, T2). These approaches supported both classroom management and student engagement.

### ***Challenges experienced by the teachers***

This section addresses Research Question 2, focusing on challenges encountered when teaching English to students with ASD. The findings reveal difficulties related to students'

behavior, varying abilities, limited resources, conceptual learning, environmental constraints, lack of training, and students' mood and sensory sensitivity. These challenges required continuous instructional adaptation.

Behavioral difficulties were among the most prominent challenges. Students sometimes screamed, made repetitive sounds, or left their seats, which disrupted instruction and required immediate intervention (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1). Teacher 1 explained that students sometimes displayed disruptive behaviors during the lesson. As stated by the teacher, "sometimes they scream or make noises during the class" (Interview, T1). The teacher further explained that these behaviors often required the lesson to be paused so the teacher could manage the situation before continuing the instruction (Interview, T1). In conclusion, students' behavioral difficulties posed a major challenge in maintaining the flow of instruction and demanded high levels of patience and adaptability from teachers.

Variation in students' abilities also affected instruction. Some students completed tasks independently, while others required repeated explanations and continuous guidance (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). As stated by the teacher, "their abilities are different... some understand quickly, others need more time" (Interview, T1). Similarly, another teacher highlighted the differences in students' abilities during the learning process. As stated by the teacher, "each student has a different level, so we cannot treat them the same" (Interview, T2), highlighting the need for constant adjustment.

Limited resources further constrained teaching. Teachers often relied on self-prepared or modified materials due to the lack of specialized tools (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 highlighted this issue by stating, "The school does not provide the materials, so it depends on the teacher to prepare them" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 also emphasized the need to create or modify materials independently, stating, "Some materials come from the school, but we often prepare them ourselves and adjust them according to what we teach" (Interview, T2).

Teaching English concepts was also challenging, particularly for abstract vocabulary and expressions. Students required repeated explanations and concrete examples to understand basic language (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 explained, "Sometimes, there are materials that are too difficult to implement with media. For example, when we say 'good morning,' some students respond with confusion. There are English terms we cannot represent visually" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 also noted the need to repeat instructions multiple times and use songs or interactive methods to support understanding, stating, "We repeat instructions several times, and if a child enjoys singing, we use songs to motivate them" (Interview, T2).

Environmental constraints, such as classroom space and noise, affected students' focus and behavior. Observations showed that distractions and limited space made classroom management more difficult (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 2 emphasized the need for additional space during behavioral episodes, stating, "Students need a separate area if they have a tantrum, so their classmates are not disturbed" (Interview, T2).

Lack of specialized training was another challenge. Teachers relied more on experience than structured methods due to limited professional development opportunities in teaching English to ASD students. Observations indicated inconsistencies in the application of structured strategies during lessons (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 stated, "Teacher training focuses on how to handle students with autism, but there is no training on developing English skills. We rely on our experience rather than structured methods" (Interview, T1). These findings highlight that teachers' professional preparation was insufficient to implement systematic,

evidence-based practices. In conclusion, the absence of specialized training limited teachers' ability to apply structured instructional strategies and necessitated ongoing professional development.

Students' mood changes and sensory sensitivity also affected the learning process. Students with ASD sometimes experienced sudden mood changes or became sensitive to certain sounds or environmental stimuli. These conditions could influence students' participation in learning activities. Therefore, teachers needed to remain flexible and adjust learning activities according to students' emotional and sensory conditions. Observations showed that students could lose focus, become distracted, or refuse to participate due to environmental noise, tactile input, or emotional state (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2).

Teacher 1 explained, "The child's mood affects learning; if they are not in the mood, we cannot force them, so we postpone the material. Their mood often comes from home" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 noted, "If something triggers them to make errors, they will not be able to focus" (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that emotional and sensory factors required teachers to continuously adapt instructional strategies and classroom management to maintain engagement.

### ***Strategies applied to overcome these challenges***

This section addresses Research Question 3, focusing on strategies used by teachers to overcome instructional challenges. The findings show that teachers applied various strategies, including individualized support, redirection, visual aids, material modification, collaboration with parents, grouping, flexibility, and multisensory learning.

Individualized support was a key strategy. Teachers provided one-on-one assistance, simplified instructions, and adapted tasks based on students' abilities (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 explained, "To begin with, they are not interested in having a pencil and can even drop it. We guide them hand-over-hand and motivate them with activities they enjoy" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 also highlighted the importance of tailoring instruction to each student's needs, stating, "We cluster students and shift their learning activities depending on focus and readiness, so all students can participate" (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that individualized support enabled teachers to provide personalized attention, maintain engagement, and ensure that every student could participate according to their abilities.

Redirection techniques were used to manage distraction and disruptive behavior. Teachers introduced alternative activities such as games or toys when students lost focus (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 explained, "If a student becomes bored, we stop and provide a toy or game so they can learn while playing" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 noted, "When a student tantrum, we separate them to allow their classmates to focus on learning" (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that redirection helped restore attention and maintain continuity in lessons.

Visual aids supported comprehension by linking abstract concepts to concrete representations. Teachers used printed images and real objects to enhance understanding (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Teacher 1 explained, "We use Canva designs and print images for lessons because students respond better to pictures than written text" (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 added, "Real objects like apples are matched with pictures, and then we teach pronunciation, which helps students understand" (Interview, T2). These findings suggest that visual aids reduced cognitive load and acted as behavioral anchors.

Material modification was also essential. Teachers simplified curriculum content and adjusted tasks to match students' abilities, making learning more accessible. Observations revealed

that simplified tasks helped students with lower motor or cognitive skills engage in the lesson (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2).

Teacher 1 stated, “We simplify government curriculum content; for example, instead of learning numbers one to a hundred, we start with one to five, depending on students’ abilities” (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 emphasized, “We modify lessons according to students’ abilities and comfort, so they remain interested in learning” (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that material modifications created achievable tasks and enhanced students’ confidence.

Collaboration with parents strengthened classroom support. Parents assisted in preparing materials and managing students, contributing to more effective learning (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Observations revealed that students responded better when parents were actively involved in class activities.

Teacher 1 explained, “Parents provide materials and support us in implementing lessons, like preparing bead media for activities” (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 added, “Parents are very cooperative, and their involvement helps manage students effectively” (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that parent collaboration strengthened the support system and reinforced learning continuity between home and school.

Grouping and shifting strategies helped manage different learning needs by organizing students based on focus and readiness. Teacher 2 grouped students according to their focus and learning readiness and rotated learning tasks among groups (Observation Sessions 1-3, T2). Observations showed that grouping minimized overstimulation and helped teachers attend to students more effectively.

Teacher 2 stated, “We group students and shift their learning activities, some focus on tasks while others engage in alternative activities, which keeps the class manageable” (Interview, T2). These findings suggest that grouping and shifting promoted organization and allowed teachers to respond to behavioral changes efficiently.

Teacher flexibility allowed adjustments in pacing, materials, and activities based on students’ conditions, ensuring continuity in instruction. Classroom observations showed that flexible adjustments prevented disruptions and allowed lessons to continue smoothly. (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). This flexibility allowed the learning process to continue effectively even when unexpected situations occurred during the lesson.

Teacher 1 explained, “If students are not in the mood, we wait and adapt the lesson accordingly” (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 emphasized, “We separate students when necessary, and adjust activities to prevent errors or distractions” (Interview, T2). These findings indicate that flexibility allowed teachers to respond dynamically to unpredictable classroom situations. In conclusion, spontaneous adaptation was a key factor in sustaining instruction and engagement among ASD learners.

Finally, multisensory learning engaged students through hands-on activities, helping them maintain focus and participation. Teachers implemented hands-on activities such as inserting seeds into cups, assembling flowers, or working on crafts to engage students’ senses (Observation Sessions 1-3, T1 & T2). Observations revealed that these activities helped students regain focus and participate more effectively. Teacher 1 explained, “We guide students’ hand-over-hand and use tactile activities to keep them engaged” (Interview, T1). Teacher 2 added, “Practical activities involving touch or assembly help redirect attention and support learning” (Interview, T2). These findings suggest that multisensory learning helped teachers manage sensory and attentional challenges.

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## Discussion

This study examined instructional approaches, challenges, and solutions in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The discussion interprets the findings in relation to previous studies and highlights their practical significance.

### *Instructional approaches used by teachers*

This section interprets the instructional approaches used by teachers in relation to the learning characteristics of students with ASD. Direct instruction emerged as a structured approach that supports students in processing information clearly and sequentially. Its explicit and step-by-step nature helps reduce confusion and supports task completion, aligning with the need for predictability commonly associated with ASD learners.

Differentiated instruction reflects teachers' awareness of students' diverse abilities. Variations in learning pace, communication skills, and cognitive levels require flexible instruction. This finding is consistent with Meindl et al. (2020) and Urrea et al. (2024), who emphasize the heterogeneity of ASD learners and the need for individualized instructional practices.

The use of multimodality and visual supports highlights the importance of presenting information in concrete and accessible forms. Students with ASD tend to process visual information more effectively than abstract verbal input. This aligns with Dettmer et al. (2000) and Tarbox et al. (2014), who found that visual supports enhance comprehension and reduce ambiguity.

The use of ABA-related strategies indicates the integration of behavioral principles into instructional practices. Techniques such as reinforcement and redirection function as practical supports for maintaining attention and managing behavior, suggesting that effective instruction combines pedagogical and behavioral approaches. Overall, these findings show that effective teaching for students with ASD requires structured, adaptive, and visually supported instruction aligned with their cognitive and behavioral characteristics.

### *Challenges experienced by teachers*

This section interprets the challenges faced by teachers in relation to student characteristics and broader instructional contexts. Behavioral challenges reflect difficulties in self-regulation commonly associated with ASD, which can disrupt instructional flow and require immediate intervention. Beyond classroom management issues, these behaviors reduce instructional time and shift teachers' attention away from learning activities. This finding is consistent with Simpson et al. (2003), who identify behavioral difficulties as a major barrier to effective instruction, suggesting that teaching in ASD contexts inherently involves balancing instructional and behavioral demands.

Variation in students' abilities highlights the heterogeneity of ASD learners across cognitive, linguistic, and social domains. This diversity not only requires differentiated instruction but also increases instructional complexity, as teachers must simultaneously address multiple learning needs within a single classroom. Meindl et al. (2020) and Urrea et al. (2024) emphasize that such variability necessitates continuous adaptation, indicating that instructional planning in ASD settings cannot be standardized but must remain dynamic and responsive.

Limited learning resources reveal a structural gap between pedagogical demands and institutional support. The need for teachers to independently develop or adapt materials suggests

that effective instruction is highly dependent on teacher initiative rather than systemic provision. [Alnahdi \(2015\)](#) notes that insufficient resources constrain the implementation of evidence-based practices, implying that resource limitations may not only affect teaching quality but also restrict pedagogical innovation.

Difficulties in teaching abstract English concepts are closely linked to challenges in symbolic processing and language comprehension among students with ASD. As language learning often involves abstract representation, these difficulties require teachers to transform content into more concrete forms. [El Shemy et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Urrea et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight that such limitations affect vocabulary acquisition and meaningful language use, suggesting that language instruction for ASD learners must prioritize conceptual accessibility over curriculum coverage.

Environmental constraints further complicate the learning process by interacting with students' sensory sensitivities. Noise, classroom layout, and external stimuli can significantly reduce attention and increase behavioral responses. [Ashburner et al. \(2008\)](#) argue that environmental factors are integral to learning effectiveness, indicating that classroom design should be considered part of instructional planning rather than a separate issue.

The lack of specialized training reflects systemic limitations in teacher preparation. Without targeted professional development, teachers rely on personal experience rather than structured, evidence-based approaches. [Symons et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize that insufficient training limits teachers' capacity to implement effective strategies, suggesting that improving teacher competence requires institutional support rather than individual effort alone.

Students' mood changes and sensory sensitivity represent dynamic factors that continuously influence engagement and participation. These fluctuations require teachers to adjust instruction in real time, highlighting the unpredictable nature of ASD classrooms. As noted by [Ashburner et al. \(2008\)](#), sensory processing difficulties are closely linked to emotional regulation, reinforcing the need for flexible and responsive teaching approaches. Overall, these challenges demonstrate that teaching students with ASD involves interconnected instructional, behavioral, and contextual complexities that extend beyond conventional language teaching practices.

### ***Strategies used to overcome challenges***

This section interprets the strategies used by teachers as adaptive responses to the challenges identified. Individualized support reflects a fundamental strategy for addressing learner variability by providing tailored instruction and one-on-one assistance. Beyond accommodating differences, this approach enables meaningful participation by aligning instruction with students' specific needs. [Meindl et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Symons et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize that individualized support is central to effective teaching in special education, suggesting that personalization is not optional but essential in ASD contexts.

Redirection techniques function as immediate behavioral interventions that help maintain instructional continuity. Rather than merely managing disruption, these strategies support students in re-engaging with tasks. [Simpson et al. \(2003\)](#) highlight that such techniques are critical in ASD classrooms, indicating that behavioral management is embedded within the instructional process itself.

Visual aids serve as a key strategy for addressing difficulties in abstract language learning by transforming concepts into concrete representations. [Tarbox et al. \(2014\)](#) demonstrate that visual

supports enhance comprehension and reduce cognitive load, suggesting that visual strategies are not supplementary but central to effective instruction for ASD learners.

Material modification reflects teachers' efforts to balance curriculum demands with students' abilities. By simplifying content and adjusting tasks, teachers create achievable learning goals that support engagement and reduce frustration. This aligns with [Alnahdi \(2015\)](#), who highlights the importance of adaptive materials in resource-limited contexts.

Collaboration with parents extends instructional support beyond the classroom and promotes consistency in learning and behavior management. [Sheridan et al. \(2011\)](#) emphasize that parental involvement strengthens learning outcomes, indicating that effective education for students with ASD requires a collaborative approach across home and school environments.

Grouping and shifting strategies illustrate how teachers manage classroom heterogeneity by organizing students based on readiness and attention. This approach allows more targeted support while maintaining classroom structure, reflecting adaptive classroom management practices in complex learning environments.

Teacher flexibility emerges as a critical competence in responding to unpredictable classroom situations. The ability to adjust pacing, materials, and activities in real time reflects a dynamic approach to teaching that aligns with the fluctuating needs of ASD learners.

Multisensory learning addresses both engagement and sensory needs by incorporating hands-on and experiential activities. [Ashburner et al. \(2008\)](#) found that sensory-based strategies improve attention and reduce anxiety, suggesting that multisensory approaches play both cognitive and emotional roles in learning. Overall, these strategies demonstrate that effective teaching for students with ASD requires a combination of evidence-based practices, adaptive instruction, and continuous responsiveness to students' needs.

### **Conclusion, Recommendations/Implications**

This study aimed to examine the instructional approaches, challenges, and strategies used by teachers in teaching English to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The findings revealed that teachers employed four main instructional approaches: direct instruction, differentiated instruction, multimodality and visual supports, and ABA-related strategies. These approaches indicate that structured, adaptive, and visually supported instruction plays a central role in facilitating English learning for students with ASD.

The study also found that teaching in this context is shaped by multiple challenges, including behavioral difficulties, learner variability, limited resources, abstract language demands, environmental constraints, lack of specialized training, and students' sensory and emotional fluctuations. These challenges demonstrate that English language teaching for students with ASD extends beyond pedagogy, requiring the management of behavioral, environmental, and institutional factors.

To address these challenges, teachers implemented various strategies, including individualized support, redirection techniques, visual aids, material modification, collaboration with parents, grouping and shifting, teacher flexibility, and multisensory learning. These strategies demonstrate that effective teaching requires both planned instructional adaptation and flexible responses to dynamic classroom conditions. Overall, this study underscores that successful English instruction for students with ASD depends on the integration of structured teaching, individualized support, behavioral management, and sensory-responsive practices.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the importance of integrating structured instruction, differentiated learning, and sensory-responsive approaches in understanding language learning among students with ASD. It also contributes to the limited research on EFL instruction in special education contexts, particularly within Indonesian special schools.

Practically, the findings suggest that teachers should prioritize clear, structured instruction, incorporate visual and multisensory supports, and apply flexible classroom management strategies. Instruction should be individualized to accommodate diverse abilities and behavioral conditions.

At the institutional level, schools need to provide adequate resources, structured instructional frameworks such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and learning environments that are responsive to sensory needs. Strengthening collaboration between teachers and parents is also essential to ensure consistency in learning and behavior support.

For teacher education, the findings highlight the importance of professional development focusing on ASD-specific pedagogy, classroom management, and adaptive teaching practices. Opportunities for practical experience in special education settings are also necessary to enhance teacher readiness.

Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies across broader educational contexts and examine their long-term impact on students' English language development. Such studies may provide deeper insights into how instructional practices can be sustained and adapted over time.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors

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