

From Heart to Heart: Teacher Strategies in Teaching English to Students with Special Needs through Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Teaching English to students with Down Syndrome presents a distinctive pedagogical challenge that extends well beyond the application of conventional instructional methods. While inclusive education has gained increasing momentum globally, the specific experiences of teachers working with students with Down Syndrome in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts remain underexplored, particularly within the Indonesian *Sekolah Luar Biasa* (SLB) setting. This study aims to explore the lived experience of an English teacher navigating the challenges and strategies involved in teaching English to a student with Down Syndrome, with particular attention to how her pedagogical approach evolved over time. Employing a qualitative approach through a narrative inquiry design, this study analyzed the teacher's journey across three analytical dimensions: interaction, continuity, and situation. Data were generated through in-depth interviews conducted online, and trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and expert review. The findings reveal that the teacher's initial experience was marked by significant difficulties in sustaining student attention and the inadequacy of conventional teaching approaches. In response, she adopted a multisensory and individualized approach centered on visualization, movement, repetition, and positive reinforcement. Over time, song-based activities, most notably the use of "If You're Happy and You Know It," proved particularly effective in enhancing student motivation, engagement, and vocabulary retention. This study underscores that successful inclusive EFL teaching is not determined solely by technical competence, but by the teacher's empathy, creativity, and sustained commitment to reflective practice. The findings carry practical implications for teacher education, school policy, and the development of inclusive learning resources in EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The provision of English language instruction within inclusive educational settings has emerged as one of the most pressing pedagogical challenges of the contemporary era. Globally, an estimated 240 million children live with some form of disability, yet a significant proportion of them remain inadequately served by existing educational frameworks (Baker et al., 2021; Bayanova et al., 2022; Blackman et al., 2022). Among the diverse range of conditions encountered in inclusive classrooms, Down Syndrome presents a particularly complex set of cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional characteristics that demand highly adaptive and individualized instructional responses (Chin & Yap, 2024; Fru-Ngongban, 2023; Shane-Simpson et al., 2024). Students with Down Syndrome typically exhibit delayed language acquisition, limited short-term memory capacity, and reduced auditory processing efficiency, features that render conventional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction not only ineffective but at times counterproductive (Mim & Rahman, 2025). In Indonesia, where inclusive education policy has been formally mandated through Government Regulation No. 17 of 2010, the reality in many *Sekolah Luar Biasa* (SLB) settings

reflects a persistent tension between policy ambition and classroom readiness, particularly in the domain of foreign language teaching (Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 66 Tahun 2010 tentang Perubahan atas PP Nomor 17 Tahun 2010., 2010). This gap between inclusive education ideals and instructional practice underscores the urgency of examining how teachers navigate the daily realities of teaching English to learners with Down Syndrome.

A growing body of literature has sought to document the strategies employed by teachers in inclusive EFL contexts. Thematically, existing studies converge on several key instructional approaches: the use of visual media and *realia*, multisensory engagement, and collaborative or co-teaching methodologies. Rowiyah & Hermanto (2025) found that teachers in inclusive elementary schools employed a range of differentiated strategies to facilitate both physical and non-physical access to learning for students with special needs, tailoring their approaches to individual student profiles. Similarly, Pratheesh & Reema (2024) demonstrated that combinations of visual media and varied teaching strategies proved effective in supporting English language instruction for students with diverse learning needs. In the specific context of Down Syndrome, Alon (2026) reported a strong student preference for visual aids and *realia*, recommending their systematic integration into EFL instruction as a means of enhancing comprehension and participation. More broadly, Williams & MacIsaac (2025) provided compelling evidence that music-based interventions exert a positive influence across four developmental domains, namely social-emotional, motor, cognitive, and communicative, in children with Down Syndrome, suggesting that song-based pedagogy holds particular promise as a language learning tool. Taken together, these studies affirm that effective inclusive EFL teaching is characterized not by a single method, but by the flexible and responsive deployment of multiple strategies calibrated to learner needs.

Despite this accumulating evidence, a notable gap persists in the literature. The majority of existing studies examine teaching strategies for students with special needs in broad or undifferentiated terms, addressing a wide spectrum of conditions without isolating the specific instructional dynamics associated with Down Syndrome. Moreover, few studies have attended to the experiential and temporal dimensions of teacher practice, that is, how teachers' strategies develop, shift, and deepen over time in response to ongoing classroom realities. The narrative dimension of teacher knowledge, including the emotional, relational, and contextual factors that shape pedagogical decision-making, remains largely unexplored in the context of EFL instruction for students with Down Syndrome. This is a significant omission, given that teaching in inclusive settings is widely acknowledged to be as much an emotional and relational endeavor as a technical one. Furthermore, the Indonesian SLB context, with its distinctive institutional culture, resource constraints, and curricular demands, represents an underrepresented site of inquiry in international inclusive education research.

This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding the lived experience of an English teacher working with students with Down Syndrome in an SLB in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Specifically, it aims to answer two research questions: (1) What challenges does the teacher face in teaching English to students with Down Syndrome? and (2) What strategies does the teacher employ in response to those challenges? By situating these questions within a narrative inquiry framework, the study seeks not only to document what the teacher does, but to illuminate how and why her practice evolved over time, capturing the interplay between challenge, reflection, and adaptation that defines effective inclusive teaching. In doing so, this study extends existing literature by offering a longitudinal, experience-centered account of EFL pedagogy for students with Down Syndrome, grounded in a specific cultural and institutional context that has received insufficient scholarly attention.

The central argument advanced in this study is that effective English language teaching for students with Down Syndrome cannot be reduced to a repertoire of discrete techniques. Rather, it is constituted through a dynamic, recursive process in which pedagogical strategies are continuously reshaped by the teacher's growing understanding of her students, her emotional investment in their development, and her capacity for critical self-reflection. This study explores

that process in depth, attending to the moments of difficulty, discovery, and adaptation that together constitute a teacher's professional journey. The findings are presented through the three analytical dimensions of narrative inquiry, namely interaction, continuity, and situation, which together provide a structured yet richly contextual account of teacher experience. The sections that follow describe the methodological framework through which this narrative was constructed and analyzed.

The urgency of this study extends beyond its immediate findings. As inclusive education continues to expand in scope and ambition across the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, the field requires not only more research on effective strategies, but a deeper understanding of the human processes through which those strategies are developed, sustained, and transmitted. This study contributes to that understanding, and in doing so, invites further inquiry into the professional lives of teachers who work, often with limited support and considerable creativity, at the frontlines of inclusive education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in narrative inquiry, a design selected for its capacity to explore and convey stories that carry personal and professional meaning, recognizing the centrality of an individual's life journey in shaping their practice (Cole et al., 2024; Dhungana, 2022; Kulsa, 2022). Narrative inquiry was particularly suited to this study because it allowed the researcher to examine not merely what the teacher did, but how and why her teaching approaches evolved over time in response to the distinctive learning needs of students with Down Syndrome. Rather than seeking generalizable outcomes, this design foregrounds the complexity and texture of lived experience, making it especially appropriate for understanding the emotional and pedagogical dimensions of inclusive English language teaching (Bevan et al., 2025; Stockless & Brière, 2024). The study was situated at a private university in Malang, East Java, Indonesia, where the researcher is based, while the research participant — Karina (pseudonym), a 24-year-old English teacher — works at a School for Students with Special Needs (SLB) in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Karina was purposively selected because she holds direct and ongoing teaching experience with students diagnosed with Down Syndrome, making her a uniquely informed source for the phenomena under investigation.

Data were generated exclusively through individual in-depth interviews, a method chosen for its ability to elicit rich, detailed personal narratives that align with the epistemological commitments of narrative inquiry (Tan, 2025). Prior to data collection, the researcher fully informed the participant of the study's purpose, scope, and potential benefits to both individuals and the broader educational community, ensuring that participation was both voluntary and ethically grounded. The interview protocol addressed three core areas: the most significant challenges encountered in teaching English to students with Down Syndrome, the ways in which the participant navigated those challenges, and the strategies she found most effective in supporting English language development among her students. Given the geographical distance between the researcher and participant, as well as constraints related to time and scheduling, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp. To minimize the risk of misunderstanding and to encourage open, uninhibited storytelling, interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, the participant's mother tongue. Throughout the sessions, the researcher adopted a non-directive stance, functioning primarily as an attentive listener rather than an interrogator, thereby allowing the participant's narrative to unfold naturally (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Lavee & Itzchakov, 2023).

Data analysis proceeded through a process of repeated engagement with the interview transcripts, beginning with verbatim transcription followed by multiple readings to develop a deep and holistic understanding of the participant's experience. The transcripts were then examined through the three analytical dimensions of narrative inquiry proposed by Wasyliv et al. (2025): *interaction*, which explored how Karina first came to teach students with Down Syndrome and how

she built relationships with them; *continuity*, which traced the emotional and professional arc of her experience over time, including the psychological and pedagogical challenges she encountered; and *situation*, which examined how she adapted her strategies to the specific demands of her inclusive classroom context. To strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed member checking throughout the transcription and analysis process, whereby the participant was invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the transcripts, identify any omissions, and clarify any ambiguities (Enworo, 2023; Freitas-Jesus et al., 2025; Van Cleave et al., 2025). In addition, the interview questions were reviewed by subject-matter experts prior to data collection, and an external review was conducted during the interpretive phase of the study (Al-Eisawi, 2022; Carpio de los Pinos & Galán, 2025). These measures were undertaken not to establish an absolute account of social reality, but to ensure that the resulting narrative faithfully represented the participant's experience and that the analytical process remained transparent and systematically grounded.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The researcher collected data to answer the problems in this study with data from the perspectives of a teacher who teach English in students with special needs especially down syndrome. The description of the findings uses a backward-to-forward flow. The dimensions of temporality, interaction, and situation were used to analyze the narrative.

Tracing the First Steps: Karina's first experiences in teaching English to students with special needs

This study found that teacher's first experiences in teaching English to students with Down Syndrome were marked by complex challenges, especially in terms of building attention and initial connections with students. Teacher realized that conventional approaches to teaching English were not entirely effective, as students tended to have difficulty following verbal instructions in a foreign language.

Excerpt 1:

“My first experience teaching students with Down Syndrome was quite challenging. At that time I was teaching English, and I realized that their attention was easily distracted. The challenge when teaching students was that students did not focus on the lessons being taught and always did other things while the lesson was taking place.”

“In the beginning, there were some difficulties in understanding the needs of students with Down syndrome, such as slow understanding of the lessons taught but with the right approach and patience, these difficulties can be overcome.”

At first, as a new teacher, Karina was concerned about how to best understand and meet the learning needs of students with Down syndrome.

Excerpt 2:

“As a teacher, the expectation before teaching students with Down syndrome is to be able to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment, where every student feels valued and has equal opportunities to learn and develop. The concern that arises when teaching students with Down syndrome is how best to understand and meet the learning needs of students with Down syndrome, as well as how to adapt to their learning styles that may be different.”

To overcome the initial problems when she teaches children with Down syndrome, Karina uses a variety of strategies, this is proven in the interview excerpt.

Excerpt 3:

“The first teaching strategy used when starting to teach students with Down syndrome

was multisensory learning with an individualized approach and emphasis on visualization, as well as consistent use of positive reinforcement. As a result, the student showed increased understanding, motivation and confidence in learning.”

Karina also admitted that she received special training and guidance from her lecturers when she was studying, related to teaching English to children with Down syndrome.

Teaching In the Moment: Between Reality and the Positive Response Karina Faces

In the current context of teaching English to students with Down Syndrome, Karina faces real challenges that demand creativity, patience and adaptation of methods. Although obstacles remain, Karina also witnesses positive responses from students, especially when learning approaches are adapted to their needs. One of the most common challenges is keeping students focused during the learning process. Students tend to lose interest in English materials that are too abstract or full of text. But Karina found that using visual, interactive and fun methods can help get students more involved.

Excerpt 4:

“If the lesson has too much writing or long instructions, they get bored quickly. But when I ask them to sing English songs with movements, they get excited. They can follow and memorize the words.”

To overcome these obstacles, Karina chose to use a multisensory approach, one of which is singing. Furthermore, Karina said she usually uses the song “If You're Happy”. This approach not only helps students understand English vocabulary, but also keeps the classroom atmosphere lively and fun.

Excerpt 5:

“I notice that they are more enthusiastic when learning is made fun and less rigid. For example, when I ask them to sing an English song with movements like 'If You're Happy and You Know It', they immediately join in, although sometimes the pronunciation is not very clear, but they try to imitate.”

Karina also emphasized the importance of adjusting learning materials and methods in teaching children with Down Syndrome, especially in the context of English learning. According to her, the approach used in regular classes cannot always be applied to students with special needs. Therefore, teachers are required to be more flexible and creative in developing teaching materials.

Excerpt 6:

“Teaching children with special needs, especially Down syndrome, must be from heart-to-heart. Therefore, it is important to customize learning materials and methods for children with Down syndrome, it is important for me to understand their individual characteristics and needs. A customized, patient and structured approach is essential to help them learn and develop optimally.”

Amidst the challenges of learning English for students with Down Syndrome, Karina found that success in the learning process is not always determined by high academic achievement, but rather by positive responses and active participation of students. In her daily practice, Karina strives to create learning activities that are not only fun, but also meaningful and easy for students to follow. Karina's narratives show that activities that involve movement, visuals, and direct interaction are the key to success in teaching students with special needs.

Excerpt 7:

“When I asked them to sing the song 'If You're Happy and You Know It', while moving, they were very happy. I think it's an example of a successful learning activity because it teaches students repeatedly with patience and gives assignments after teaching the material. From that I know that they learn faster when they move and sing.”

It is widely acknowledged that effective learning activities are typically those which integrate motor, visual and linguistic components. In this case, success is not only measured by students' ability to memorise vocabulary, but also by their level of activity in following directions, their level of interest, and their willingness to attempt using English, even in a rudimentary way. To provide a clearer overview of the findings discussed above, a synthesis of the challenges Karina encountered and the corresponding strategies she developed in teaching English to students with Down Syndrome is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Challenges and Strategies Used by Karina in Teaching English to Students with Down Syndrome

Dimension	Challenges	Strategies
Interaction	Difficulty maintaining student focus	Multisensory approach through songs and movement activities
Interaction	Students are easily distracted during learning sessions	Positive reinforcement and continuous engagement
Continuity	Slow understanding of verbal instructions	Repetition and individualized learning approach
Continuity	Boredom with text-heavy learning materials	Visualization and interactive learning activities
Situation	Difficulty understanding abstract materials	Simplified and structured learning materials
Situation	Conventional teaching methods are less effective	Song-based learning approach using "If You're Happy"

Looking Ahead: Karina's Innovative Hopes, Concerns and Aspirations

In looking ahead, Karina not only carries the passion to continue providing the best learning for students with Down Syndrome, but also harbors a number of concerns regarding the challenges they may face in the future. One of the main concerns that arises is about how to deliver English materials that become more complex as the students' education level increases. Karina feels that the higher the level of learning, the greater the need for specific strategies that can bridge students' understanding of more abstract material.

Excerpt 8:

"I'm a bit worried if the English material starts to get complicated, like grammar or long reading. Down Syndrome children usually have difficulty understanding texts that are too long or abstract. I have to think of ways to simplify the material without losing its meaning."

However, amidst these concerns, Karina also voiced strong hopes for specialized training, support from schools, and the development of more inclusive learning media. This can be seen from the interview results.

Excerpt 9:

"To minimize the challenges faced by teachers who teach students with Down syndrome in the future, there is a need for increased awareness and understanding of Down syndrome, specialized training for teachers, systematic support, and an inclusive and supportive school environment."

In looking to the future, Karina feels that the strategies she currently uses, such as the use of songs, are still very relevant and effective. The choice to stick with a strategy is not a form of stagnation, but rather the result of observing the needs of the students and their response to the learning provided.

Excerpt 10:

"In my opinion, I still have to maintain the strategy that I am currently using, which is using songs. Seeing from the success of this strategy now, so I think that in the future I have not thought of other strategies, because the strategies that I have given are in accordance with the needs of the students I am teaching at this time. and I also use an additional strategy which is repetition."

As illustrated by the quotation above, Karina perceives the utilisation of songs as an efficacious pedagogical strategy for the acquisition of English, particularly catering to the requirements of students with special needs, notably those with Down Syndrome. It is evident that songs function not only as a medium of instruction, but also as a tool to maintain focus and increase student engagement. Karina's assessment of the efficacy of this strategy is evidenced by the students' enthusiasm and their capacity to retain vocabulary through rhythm and movement. Moreover, Karina evinces a reflective attitude, which renders her amenable to the modification of strategies in the future, should the needs of students evolve.

Discussion

In light of the findings above, Karina's narrative provides an in-depth description of her early experiences in teaching English to students with Down Syndrome. The experience shows that the learning process in an inclusive classroom requires not only pedagogical skills, but also emotional readiness, patience, and the ability to continuously adapt to the needs of learners. At the beginning of teaching, Karina faced challenges in maintaining the attention of students who were very difficult to focus and students with Down Syndrome tended to have a slow understanding of the lessons taught. This is in line with the findings by Azrizal and Sali (2024) that most of the challenges mentioned by teachers during interviews included, Repetition, Task Avoidance, Limited focus and Weak Motor Function.

Karina's move to multisensory strategies and individualized approaches became an important turning point in her teaching process. The use of visual media, songs, movement and repetition not only improves student comprehension, but also creates a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere and encourages active participation (et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Ye, 2024). Strategies such as singing the song “If You're Happy and You Know It” demonstrate how musical elements and movement can facilitate language acquisition in a more natural and meaningful way (van Geest et al., 2021). The results demonstrate that music exerts a positive effect on the treatment and progress of the four primary domains of development (social-emotional, motor, cognitive and communication) in children with Down syndrome. Nevertheless, the review reveals a paucity of detail in the methodologies employed and in the specific development areas, which require further clarification in future research. In contrast to the findings of this study and the two previous studies, research by Retno Wiyati & Feni Marlina (2021) the study revealed a preference among students for visual aids in the learning of English. It is recommended that teachers utilise more visual objects and realia in teaching English for Down syndrome students, as an alternative means of enhancing the quality of teaching.

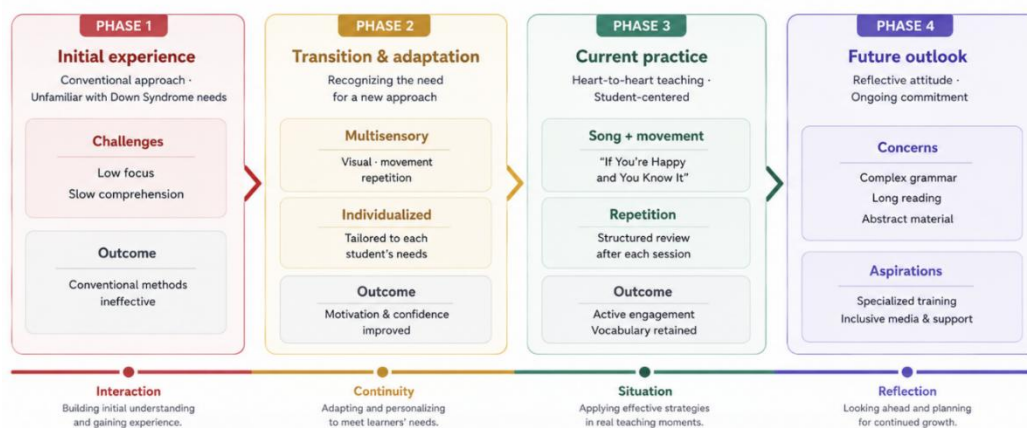


Figure 1. Karina's Strategy Development Timeline

Karina's pedagogical approach is characterised by a constant process of reflection, evidenced by her ability to adapt her teaching methods in response to the feedback she receives

from her students. She emphasises the importance of building emotional connections and teaching from the heart, which is key to success in inclusive learning. Karina's overall pedagogical development across time can be visualized as a four-phase progression, moving from initial challenges toward a reflective and adaptive teaching practice, as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

Despite her concerns regarding future challenges, including the increasing complexity of English materials, Karina maintains an optimistic outlook by continuing to implement strategies that have been effective in the past. Furthermore, she emphasises the necessity for specialised training and systemic support to ensure the efficacy of inclusive learning methodologies. Karina's experience demonstrates that the success of teaching students with Down Syndrome is not solely determined by academic achievement, but rather by the teacher's capacity to facilitate learning that is both enjoyable and meaningful, while being suitably tailored to the needs of students.

Karina's experience demonstrates that the success of teaching students with Down Syndrome is not solely determined by academic achievement, but rather by the teacher's capacity to facilitate learning that is both enjoyable and meaningful, while being suitably tailored to the needs of students. In this respect, the present study makes a modest yet meaningful contribution to the growing body of literature on inclusive English language teaching. Unlike previous studies that examined special needs education in broader or more general terms, this study foregrounds the lived experience of a single teacher working specifically with students with Down Syndrome in an Indonesian SLB context — a setting that remains underrepresented in the existing research. By adopting a narrative inquiry framework, the study captures not only what strategies were used, but why and how they evolved over time, offering insights that purely quantitative or observational approaches tend to overlook. The findings suggest that effective inclusive pedagogy is less a fixed set of techniques than an ongoing, responsive process shaped by the teacher's empathy, creativity, and willingness to learn alongside their students. As such, this study invites teacher educators, school administrators, and policymakers to look beyond curriculum and method, and to invest more deliberately in the professional and emotional development of teachers who work at the frontlines of inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that teaching English to students with Down Syndrome demands far more than technical competence — it requires emotional attunement, patience, and a genuine willingness to adapt. Karina's journey illustrates how conventional approaches gave way to multisensory strategies involving songs, movement, visualization, and repetition, each of which proved instrumental in sustaining student engagement and building a meaningful learning environment. Central to her success was the recognition that inclusive pedagogy is not a static method but a continuously evolving practice, shaped by close attention to individual student needs and honest reflection on what works. These findings carry clear implications for teacher education, school policy, and curriculum design: supporting teachers in inclusive settings means investing not only in pedagogical tools, but also in their emotional resilience and professional growth. Ultimately, what makes learning truly inclusive is not the sophistication of the method, but the depth of the teacher's commitment to every learner in the room.

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