

A Narrative Inquiry of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher's Experiences in Working with Special Needs Students

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Abstract: This study is intended to unravel how an EFL teacher working in a special needs school teaches her students. The central issues of this study are challenges and strategies employed by the teacher, government concern, readiness, and future expectations of the teacher. Narrative inquiry is carried out as the method of the study. This study involves a participant who has been teaching as an EFL teacher for special needs students for more than seven years. The in-depth narrative interview is conducted to collect the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the results, the researcher confirms the interpretation of the data with the participant. From the story told by the participant, it is concluded that the biggest challenge faced by the teacher in teaching special needs students is growing their motivation. Thus, the teacher shall be wise in planning the lessons based on each students' characteristics to enhance their learning motivation. Furthermore, in relation to the government, supports in forms of training and material availability have been given by the Indonesian government. In terms of readiness, most of the English teachers working with special needs students have limited knowledge and experiences at the initial stage of their careers. However, the teachers learn along the way through trials and errors and from a series of training provided to develop their professional skills. In the future, it is expected that the English pre-service teachers can be prepared to teach special needs students as a part of their training and education. Furthermore, the existing teachers are expected to continue learning from different media so that they can keep improving the quality of their teaching.

Keywords: special needs students, English, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

The equality of education for Indonesian children is guaranteed by Act No. 20 Year 2003 regarding education. This Act states that children with special needs have all the rights to proper education at any level. Farrel (2003) defined a child is considered to have special educational needs if during the learning process this child shows learning difficulties that are not the case of other children at the same age. Moreover, Hallahan and Kauffman (2003) classified learners with special needs as those with hearing impairment, intellectual impairment, physical disabilities, and gifted children. In Indonesia, children with special needs generally go to either special education schools or inclusive schools. At these schools, English is taught along with other compulsory subjects as stated in Indonesian educational curriculum.

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In teaching English for students with special needs, certain strategies need to be applied by the teachers. Teaching strategies refer to a set of methods implemented by teachers to help their students comprehend the lessons and achieve the goals of their study. Effective teaching strategies have been central issues in the field of ELT all over the globe. However, although there is abundant literature related to teaching strategies out there, choosing the best strategies for the class is always problematic for teachers. This is in line with the statement by Miller *et.al.* (2011) mentioning that teaching strategies may not fit all learners in all time. Situational factors are highly contributed to the decision-making regarding which strategies to apply. Many times, teachers have so much on their plate to decide which one is more important – finishing the materials first or focusing on students' competence achievement first? This is even harder when the teachers are faced with special need students.

The problems related to English teaching for learners with special needs arise because of many reasons. One of them is teachers' premature preparation. The pre-service English teachers in Indonesia are not prepared to teach students with special needs. Based on my prior study, almost all English Language Education Study Programs all over the country do not offer English for Special Needs classes to prepare their students to be the teachers of the special needs students in the future. Hence, when facing the 'special' class, most of the English teachers rely on their own guts and experiences to teach without proper knowledge from their department back in schools.

In relation to research on this field, the study on teaching English for students with special needs is not something new in the context of Indonesia. Hadi, Wahyuni & Sulistyawati (2019), Dewi (2019), and Setiadi (2017) are among the Indonesian researchers interested in the investigation of English teaching for special needs students. However, their investigations on the matter focus on the strategies employed by the teachers (Hadi, Wahyuni & Sulistyawati, 2019; Dewi, 2019) and the linguistic exploration of the classroom members (Setiadi, 2017). Meanwhile, this study was aimed to explore the topic from the perspective of narrative inquiry. This study was an attempt to narrate the experience of an EFL teacher working in a special needs school. Her story was intended to give the readers understanding about the situation faced by a teacher of special needs students so that pedagogical and psychological reflections could be made.

METHOD

Narrative Inquiry

This study is conducted by deploying a small narrative inquiry involving one teacher named Hen (her real name was hidden for privacy reasons). Narrative inquiry is a methodology in which stories are used as data (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). Narrative inquiry seeks to unravel how people think through events and how they make meanings through their experiences (Sunday, Ramugondo & Kathard, 2020). In the field of education, narrative inquiry began to get a massive amount of attention as a research methodology since Connelly and Clandinin's work in 1990 (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is a part of qualitative approach where the researcher aims to understand the participant(s)' story through interviews or memo (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Setting and Participant

This study took place in a special needs senior high school located in Banjarmasin. In this school, the students were from different special needs backgrounds, including hearing impairment, intellectual disability, physical disabilities, gifted children, and multiple disabilities. The participant of this research was a teacher with more than seven years experiences teaching at the school. The teacher was in her early 30s. She worked at the school as a full-time English teacher. The participant was consent of the objective of this research and was willing to share her experiences to a broader audience.

Data Collecting Technique

The data was collected through an in-depth interview where the participant was asked several questions, but she could extend her answers as she wished. The main focuses of the interview were the participant's experiences and thoughts related to her teaching strategies, government's concerns, readiness, and future aspirations. The researcher tried not to give any verbal and facial reactions towards the participant's answers to avoid research bias.

Trustworthiness

To guarantee the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher asked the participant's evaluation towards the data interpretations made by the researcher. All data presented in this research came from the participant herself without any influence from other parties.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges and Strategies

Hen said that the biggest challenge in teaching special needs students was making them interested in learning English. Getting their attention and interest to learn this foreign language required extra efforts, from building students' trust to preparing suitable media. Hen believed that the challenge she was facing as an EFL teacher in a special needs school was similar to the challenges faced by EFL teachers in general schools. Improving students' motivation and assuring them about the importance of English was never easy, especially for lowly motivated students. Special needs students required attention that would help them adapt to the new environment after confining themselves into small circles (Chrysostomou & Symeonidou, 2017).

The next challenge faced by Hen and her fellow teachers was understanding the students' need. Because they were dealing with students with different special needs, the teachers should be clever enough in designing proper teaching plans to meet these needs. This is what made their jobs as EFL teachers for students with special needs different from other teachers. In special needs classrooms, the teachers were required to teach with different teaching plans for different students based on their needs. No one-for-all teaching plan would work in a special needs classroom. This led to another challenge discussed below.

Another challenge in teaching special needs students was choosing suitable teaching methods, tools and media to help the students. It was common for teachers to feel comfortable teaching in the way that they always did and using the media they were familiar with. However, what made teachers comfortable was not always the best for the students. In

this situation, Hen said, the teachers' innovation and willingness to learn and get out of their comfort zones were challenged.

All challenges came with strategies to overcome them. According to Hen, to grow students' interest in learning English, she had to make connections first with every student. Knowing her students as individuals made it easier for her to communicate with them. In other words, at the beginning of the academic year, she did not directly come with the lesson, but she focused on building connections with her students first. Then, when she mapped what each student needed, she would design different teaching strategies for different students. She claimed her approach of teaching as an individual approach.

Once the teacher could understand the characteristics of every student, the next move would be more impactful than treating every student in an equal manner. Her belief was in line with Westwood (2017) who claimed that for disabled students and those with significant learning difficulties, the teachers should recognize that their students' progress can be achieved in different ways.

Hen also mentioned that students with different needs should get different treatment in the classroom so that their full potential could be enhanced. For example, gifted students were usually excellent at remembering vocabulary. Thus, most of the time the focus of teaching these students were to improve their vocabulary mastery and speaking. On the other hand, the teaching focus of mentally challenged students, whose mental age was generally younger than their physical age, was introducing English in fun ways through various audiovisual media and games. Hen claimed that this individual approach was the most effective approach when dealing with special needs students. She proudly said that many of her students could pass the national examination with satisfying results. Some of them even continued their education to university level.

Furthermore, in relation to the teaching process, she and her fellow teachers were constantly trying to present various activities in the classroom so that the students would not be bored. The teachers at her school applied stimulus and response strategy to check what activities were suitable for the classrooms. Hen believed that a successful classroom should have at least two things: 1) the students who loved their teachers, and 2) the teachers who kept on learning to teach better. The two, Hen believed, would make the classroom run in harmony despite the challenges it was dealing with.

Government's Concern

In relation to the concern from the Indonesian government, Hen mentioned that the government put a serious attention to the education for the students with special needs. Hen admitted that she was satisfied with the help provided by the government for an EFL teacher like her. Not only providing teaching handouts for both teachers and students, but the Indonesian government had also provided workshops and seminars for the teachers.

For the English lessons using Curriculum 2013, Hen mentioned that the books for teachers and students were easy to access. They were also available for every grade and for students with different needs. Furthermore, Hen agreed that the books provided by the

government were relevant and practical. For someone who had not graduated from a special education major like her, Hen claimed that the books and lesson materials given by the government were helpful. However, she said that teachers' innovations were still crucial to ensure the teachers gave the best quality of education for the students.

Furthermore, the government of Indonesia showed their attention to the quality of the education for the special needs students by encouraging teachers' professional and pedagogical developments. Hen said that workshops and conferences were available for the teachers to join. These workshops and conferences were designed to equip teachers with more ground knowledge on how to teach in special needs classrooms. In these kinds of activities, not only did teachers receive training and education, but they also had the chance to meet with other teachers from different special needs schools so that they could share and learn from each other.

In relation to the curriculum, Hen said that the existing curriculum was excellent and relevant for the students. However, the core issue was not the curriculum. Hen believed that no matter what the current curriculum was, it was the teachers who played the central roles in the teaching and learning process. The teachers were required to be adaptive in the way that they should know how to teach in their context.

Furthermore, the teachers were required to comprehend their students' level of proficiency and understanding based on different needs. Because the special needs students were heterogenous in characteristics, the main job of the teachers was to adjust their teaching for each student in the classrooms. Hen's statement was supported by Desiningrum (2016) who believed that the education for the students with special needs could be optimized when the teaching methods employed by the teachers were designed based on the needs of the students.

Readiness

Because the school where Hen was teaching was designed for students with different needs, Hen said that prior to the enrollment, the student candidates were given assessment by the appointed experts to identify their needs. The school also conducted interviews with the students' guardian and the students themselves when possible. The interviews were conducted to map students' learning habits and characters so that the results could provide valuable information on how to teach the students later. The students who passed the assessment and were considered ready to continue their education at the school were then accepted to be enrolled as new students. The readiness of the students was taken into serious consideration by the enrollment committee before deciding whether the student candidates were fit at the school.

The readiness of the teachers was another story. Hen said that not all the teachers in her school graduated from special needs education majors. Hen did not have any idea how to teach English for special needs students before admitting to her school. She held a bachelor's degree from the English Language Education Study Program where she did not get any theoretical and practical knowledge on how to teach English in a special needs school. Therefore, Hen said that it was really difficult at first. However, Hen said as the

time went by, she learned how to teach the students with special needs through various professional development trainings hosted by the ministry of education and other parties. In these trainings, she finally could understand the art of teaching and understanding her students.

Furthermore, Hen also said that what she did daily at school had helped her grow a better understanding of her role. Hen agreed with the notion of experience is the best teacher. Her daily interactions with the students helped Hen build more confidence as a teacher. She directly learned from the trials and errors how to be a creative teacher. Hen believed that it was necessary for a teacher like her to keep innovating in the classrooms. The teachers should be able to think about various collaborative activities that could stimulate the students' active involvement in the teaching and learning process.

Lastly, Hen believed that all teachers of special needs students should prepare themselves mentally. The best way to do it according to her was to love the students unconditionally. The teachers should be aware of the fact that every child was born special. The teachers should realize that a good education could help the students get a good life ahead despite their diffabilities. When the teachers were sincere, Hen claimed that an affective connection with the students would be easier to form. Teachers' identities and motivations played vital roles in carrying out their duties. This was in line with the statement from Salifu and Agbenyega (2016, p.70). They believed that motivation is one of the factors determining teachers' success in educating the students with special needs. By having a high motivation driven by affection towards their students, the teachers would be able to feel the joy of their duties.

Future Expectation

Hen believed that the students with special needs should be given their rights as they are for other students. Furthermore, she was assured that each of the special needs students was born with different gifted talents. Therefore, it was the job of the teachers to guide them to find and develop those talents. In relation to EFL teaching, Hen hoped that more capable teachers can be parts of special needs schools in the future.

To reach that expectation, the changing should be made in the university level, especially in the English Language Education Study Program designed to prepare their students to be English teachers. English pre-service teachers should be given opportunities to learn about how to teach English for different special students. Furthermore, they should also be given chances to directly observe and teach in special needs schools so that once they graduate later, they have developed the theoretical and practical experiences to deal with the students with special needs.

Furthermore, Hen also hoped that the existing EFL teachers working in the special needs schools are also expected to keep themselves informed with the latest teaching trends in the EFL area so that they can maximize the use of technology and other supporting media in their classrooms. Despite being special, Hen believed that the students should not be left behind in this fast-changing world.

CONCLUSION

At least three conclusions can be proposed based on the results of this study. First, the readiness of the English pre-service teachers to teach students with special needs shall be taken into consideration. The English Language Education Study Program is suggested to offer classes designed to prepare its students to teach English not only for general students but also for special needs students. Second, the teachers working with special needs students are required to invest their time not only in lesson planning but also in understanding each student's talents and characteristics. By doing so, the goal of education can be achieved more optimally. Finally, the attention from authorities, schools, teachers, and other related parties is needed in a long turn to ensure that the equal education for all children in Indonesia can be met and implemented without any discrimination.

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