



Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Pronunciation to Preschool Students with Special Needs

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ABSTRAK

Studi kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh guru prasekolah dalam mengajarkan pelafalan kepada anak-anak berkebutuhan khusus, dengan fokus pada dua guru dari sekolah swasta di Medan, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi kelas, yang mengungkap isu-isu utama dalam tiga tema: tantangan masing-masing siswa, metodologi pengajaran, dan faktor eksternal. Studi ini menyoroti kesulitan seperti keterlambatan bicara, masalah kontrol motorik, dan tantangan perilaku, yang menghambat perkembangan pelafalan siswa. Selain itu, guru melaporkan kesulitan dengan pelatihan yang tidak memadai, keterbatasan waktu, dan ukuran kelas yang besar, yang membatasi efektivitas instruksi individual. Keterlibatan orang tua juga muncul sebagai tantangan, dengan beberapa orang tua kurang memiliki pengetahuan untuk mendukung perkembangan bahasa di rumah. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa meningkatkan pelatihan guru dan membina kolaborasi yang lebih baik dengan orang tua dapat meningkatkan hasil belajar bagi siswa berkebutuhan khusus. Keterbatasan studi ini adalah ukuran sampel yang kecil, dan penelitian lebih lanjut dengan kelompok guru yang lebih besar dan lebih beragam direkomendasikan untuk mendapatkan wawasan yang lebih luas tentang tantangan pengajaran pelafalan dalam konteks ini.

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan anak usia dini, Kebutuhan khusus, Tantangan guru, Mengajarkan pengucapan..*

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the challenges faced by preschool teachers in teaching pronunciation to children with special needs, focusing on two teachers from a private school in Medan, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, revealing key issues across three themes: individual student challenges, teaching methodology, and external factors. The study highlights difficulties such as speech delays, motor control issues, and behavioral challenges, which hinder students' pronunciation development. Additionally, teachers reported struggles with inadequate training, time constraints, and large class sizes, which limit the effectiveness of individualized instruction. Parental involvement also emerged as a challenge, with some parents lacking the knowledge to support language development at home. The study suggests that improving teacher training and fostering better collaboration with parents could enhance the learning outcomes for students with special needs. A limitation of the study is the small sample size, and further research with a larger, more diverse group of teachers is recommended to gain broader insights into the challenges of teaching pronunciation in this context.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Special needs, Teacher challenges, Teaching pronunciation.

PRELIMINARY

Supporting oral language development in preschool children is crucial for building a foundation for future reading comprehension (Whorall, 2015). The more advanced a child's speaking skills, the better they can become fluent and thoughtful readers. Pronunciation, in particular, plays an important role in language learning, affecting speech clarity, comprehension, and social interaction. For children with special needs, such as developmental delays, speech disorders, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), learning correct pronunciation can be especially challenging due to the complex interaction of cognitive, linguistic, and social factors (Hickson et al., 2010). These children may struggle with auditory discrimination, motor control of speech, and phonetic accuracy, which can hinder their language development (Schwartz & Leonard, 1982). Therefore, teaching pronunciation to preschool students with special needs requires a thoughtful, individualized approach to meet their unique needs and help them succeed in language development.

Previous studies have highlighted various challenges faced by teachers when teaching pronunciation to preschool children with special needs. Smith and Yell (2013) noted that teachers often struggle with adapting their teaching methods to meet the unique needs of children with autism spectrum disorder. In a similar vein, Clark et al. (2016) discussed how time constraints and large class sizes hinder teachers from providing the individualized attention that children with speech delays require. Taylor et al. (2015) also found that teachers face difficulties integrating speech therapy techniques into their classroom practices, largely due to insufficient support. Ruddy (2019) highlighted that teachers of students with special needs bear the dual responsibility of teaching the curriculum and offering special education support, yet they often lack sufficient training, resources, and opportunities for professional development. Additionally, Santosa (2018) highlighted the challenges teachers encounter in Indonesia, pointing to the lack of adequate training and resources to address pronunciation issues in children with learning difficulties. Together, these studies underscore the consistent difficulties faced by educators across various contexts in providing effective pronunciation instruction to children with special needs.

Despite these insights, a clearer understanding of the specific challenges teachers face in managing pronunciation teaching in diverse preschool settings, particularly in non-Western contexts like Indonesia, remains under-explored, especially in terms of how local cultural and educational factors influence these difficulties. This underscores the importance of this research. It aimed to look at the experiences of these teachers, focusing on the challenges they face. This research sought to contribute valuable insights and literature on effective English language teaching for young children, specifically in teaching pronunciation to preschool students with special needs. In accordance with the research guidelines, the following is the research question: (1) What are the challenges faced by teachers in teaching pronunciation to preschool students with special needs?

METHOD

Research Design

This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by teachers in teaching pronunciation to preschool students with special needs. This study employed a

descriptive qualitative approach as it is suitable for studying a group of people or individuals who have firsthand experience with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Participant

This study used a convenient, non-random and purposeful sample of two preschool teachers at one of private schools in Medan, each of whom has experience teaching preschool students with special needs. For ethical purposes, the researcher obtained the participants' consent and shared necessary information with them prior to their participation in the study. To ensure their privacy, participants' names were substituted with pseudonyms. The table below shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Participants Background

| Participant | Gender | Age | Years at the School |
|-------------|--------|-----|---------------------|
| MP (T1) | Female | 23 | 2 Years |
| YF (T2) | Female | 33 | 7 Years |

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences and perceptions of the challenges they face when teaching pronunciation to preschool children with special needs. The interviews will be conducted in bahasa Indonesia to ensure that teachers feel comfortable expressing themselves. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes long and will be audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The researcher heavily relied on direct quotes from the participants to ensure the validity of the findings. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and copies of the transcripts were provided to all participants to verify their accuracy.

In addition to the interviews, classroom observations was conducted to observe the teachers' instructional practices, particularly those related to teaching pronunciation. The observations will focus on how teachers approach pronunciation instruction, the use of teaching materials, and how they address individual student needs. Field notes will be taken during the observations to complement the interview data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed the steps outlined in thematic proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The data collected from interviews were analyzed thematically using content analysis. The researcher prepared the interview transcripts for analysis. To enhance the credibility of the findings, direct quotes from participants were incorporated. Trust in the transcribed data was maintained by sharing the transcripts with participants and clarifying any uncertainties. The coding process began immediately after transcription, and the data were organized into categories based on the research questions. Participants' responses were grouped into themes related to teachers' challenges followed by an interpretation of the data. Finally, emerging issues were analyzed in the context of relevant concepts and prior research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The data gathered from interviews and classroom observations uncovered several key insights into the challenges preschool teachers encounter when teaching pronunciation to children with special needs. These challenges were organized into themes, such as issues related to 1) individual student needs, 2) teaching methods, and 3) external factors: parental involvement.

Individual Student Needs

Both teachers reported several key challenges related to the individual needs of their students including:

1. *Speech Delays and Disorder*

In the classroom, both teachers observed that students with speech delays, including those with developmental delays and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), face significant challenges in pronouncing words clearly and correctly. These difficulties often result in teachers needing to repeatedly ask students to repeat their words, as their pronunciation is unclear. This constant need for repetition leads to frustration on both sides: teachers become exhausted from reiterating the same material, while students grow bored from having to repeat the same tasks without feeling a sense of progress.

This scenario aligns with the findings of Schwartz and Leonard (1982), who noted that children with articulation and phonological awareness issues frequently struggle to pronounce words correctly, which causes frequent misunderstandings. As highlighted in their study, this cycle of repetition not only depletes teachers' energy but also negatively affects student engagement, motivation, and confidence. The teachers in this study reflected similar experiences, demonstrating how this challenge can lead to frustration and diminished confidence for students, ultimately hindering their speech development and classroom participation.

For instance, T1 shared,

"One of the biggest challenges I face is that many of my students have language development delays, which make it difficult for them to pronounce words clearly. For example, one of my students with a speech delay (RD) might try to say the word 'apple,' but his pronunciation may not be accurate or clear as it should be. This means that even though he understands the meaning of the word, he struggles to say it correctly."

T2 echoed T1's concerns, stating,

"I have a student with a speech delay who struggles with the pronunciation of simple words like 'cat' or 'duck.' Even though he knows what these words mean, his pronunciation is often unclear, making it hard for me to understand him. So, I have to ask him to repeat himself multiple times. It becomes frustrating for both of us."

T2's experience highlights how even familiar, basic words can become a barrier to communication, leading to increased frustration for both the student and teacher. Despite the student's understanding of the word's meaning, the difficulty in articulation creates a disconnect, making the communication process longer and

more repetitive. This not only impacts the student's confidence and sense of accomplishment, but also drains the teacher's energy, as they must revisit the same material multiple times without making significant progress.

2. Motor Planning and Control

Teachers have observed that many students, particularly those with speech disorders, face significant challenges with motor planning and control, which are essential for speech production. For these children, the coordination of movements involving the tongue, lips, and vocal cords is often difficult, leading to issues like slurred speech, mispronounced words, or the inability to produce certain sounds (Hickson et al., 2010). T1 described this issue by sharing the example of a student with a speech delay who struggles to pronounce common words, even when he recognizes the objects associated with them. For instance, when asked to repeat the words "ball" or "duck," the student has trouble articulating the "b" and "d" sounds, often slurring them, despite his ability to identify the objects in the pictures.

T1 explained:

"I have experienced that some of my students with speech delays and disorders often have trouble in pronouncing words clearly and correctly. For example, when I show them a picture of a "ball" or a "duck" and say the word for them to repeat, one of my students (RD) struggles. When he tries to say words like 'ball' or 'duck,' the sounds are often unclear or slurred. He has difficulty with the 'b' and 'd' sounds. Although he can identify the objects in the pictures, he isn't always able to pronounce their names correctly."

T2 also offered insight from her experience, explaining that these challenges are often related to the brain's difficulty in organizing the steps required for speech. Many of her students require additional support, such as speech therapy, to improve their speech and communication skills. She shared that parent of children with special needs, particularly those with speech delays, often seek out developmental check-ups and enroll their children in speech therapy to help them catch up with their peers.

T2 elaborated:

"Some of my students' parents, whose children have special needs and speech delays, take their children for check-ups with a pediatric developmental doctor and enroll them in speech therapy. This is done to help improve their children's language development, so they don't fall too far behind their peers."

This statement aligns with research by Hickson et al. (2010), who highlighted that children with speech disorders often benefit from early intervention and targeted therapy to support their language development and improve motor control for speech.

3. Behavioral and Emotional Challenges

In addition to having speech delays and challenges with oral motor planning, students with special needs often encounter significant difficulties in managing their

emotions and controlling their impulses. This can result in behavioral and emotional challenges that disrupt the learning environment. These students may display various disruptive behaviors, such as tantrums, aggression, or social withdrawal, especially when they feel frustrated, stressed, or struggle to express their emotions and needs. Teachers shared that the emotional outbursts are often triggered by unmet needs, overwhelming environments, or communication barriers, which make it harder for these students to regulate their emotional reactions. Consistent with Ruddy's (2011) research, teachers often experience significant frustration when working with students who have special needs, particularly those with behavioral and emotional challenges. In these situations, teachers are required to assume a dual role, not only as subject instructors but also as providers of emotional support to help these students navigate their difficulties.

One teacher explained:

"Their mood can shift quickly. They may seem fine at times, but suddenly, if their needs are not met, they might hit their peers, teachers, or even themselves, or have outbursts and tantrums. In these situations, I often end up spending a lot of time just trying to calm them down instead of practicing the pronunciation with them."

Another teacher shared similar experience, confirming that these emotional and behavioral challenges are a common issue when working with students who have special needs.

"I have noticed that some of the students with special needs in my class have trouble managing their emotions and behavior. When I ask them to pronounce a word, sometimes they refuse to do it. When I try to encourage or even force them to do, they can suddenly become angry. They shout, cry, and hit me or throw objects around them. They will pronounce a word only if they are willing to do so."

Both teachers also noted that they often feel confused about what is happening with their students because the students are unable to express how they feel. Teachers are left to guess whether the students are tired, sleepy, or simply unmotivated to learn. As one teacher explained, they can only rely on observing the child's daily behavior and routine to try to understand what is going on.

Based on the researcher's observation, these emotional and behavioral challenges can also affect other students in the class as well. Frequent outbursts or trouble focusing from one student can create distractions, making it harder for others to concentrate and participate in lessons. Additionally, these challenges can affect the relationships between students with special needs and their peers. Students without special needs may have difficulty understanding their classmates' behaviors, which can lead to isolation, confusion, or frustration. Sometimes, other students may feel reluctant to interact with or be around the student who is experiencing emotional outbursts, which can further isolate the student with special needs. Teachers need to create an inclusive environment where all students feel supported, while helping students with special needs manage social interactions and their emotions. This is important for fostering positive relationships and helping all students succeed in the classroom.

Teaching Methodology

Teachers highlighted various difficulties in adapting teaching methods to meet the specific needs of their students including:

1. Lack of Training

The lack of specialized training for teachers in teaching pronunciation to children with special needs is a significant challenge reported by both T1 and T2 in this study. These teachers are not specialized educators trained to work with children with special needs; instead, they are general English language teachers for young children, who, as part of their role, are also expected to teach children with special needs. They have never participated in formal training or professional development programs specifically focused on working with preschool students with special needs. Additionally, the curriculum for students with special needs is the same as that for other children in general. The school has not provided any training for teachers in this area. Without this specialized training, they feel unprepared to meet the complex needs of these students. T1 mentioned:

"Until now, I have not followed any training or professional development specifically on teaching pronunciation to students with special needs yet. As result, I realize that I still lack the knowledge and expertise needed to teach pronunciation to my students with special needs."

In line with the statement from T1, T2 explained:

"I hope to have the opportunity to participate in professional development activities, such as training or seminars, particularly focused on teaching students with special needs. If I had more knowledge, I believe I could apply more effective strategies that are better suited to the needs of my students with special needs."

In conclusion, both teachers face and experience challenges in teaching pronunciation to their students with special needs due to a lack of specialized training. They are general English teachers, not trained to work with special needs students, and have not received formal training or professional development in this area. As a result, they feel unprepared to address their students' needs. T1 acknowledged the gap in expertise, while T2 expressed a need for more professional development to improve their ability to support students, particularly in pronunciation.

This challenge is echoed by Santosa (2018), who also identifies insufficient training as a significant issue faced by teachers. It would be greatly helpful if teachers had access to more training and support on how to address pronunciation challenges. Offering workshops or professional development focused on speech therapy techniques, as well as providing access to specialists who can offer guidance, would significantly enhance teachers' ability to support children's pronunciation development more effectively.

2. Time Constraints

According to the researcher's observations and the experiences shared by teachers, time is a constant challenge in preschool classrooms. The large class sizes commonly seen in these settings make it difficult for teachers to provide the

individual attention each student requires. With a limited amount of time in the school day, it becomes even more challenging to meet the diverse needs of every child, particularly when it comes to pronunciation practice. This finding aligns with Clark et al. (2016) who emphasized that preschool students need one-on-one or small group sessions to effectively improve their speech skills. However, with large class sizes and limited time, teachers are often unable to provide this level of individualized instruction, which can impact the progress of students needing extra support.

Furthermore, teachers are often required to repeat pronunciation exercises multiple times with students to help them master sounds and words. This repetition, although necessary for the child's progress, takes up valuable teaching time, further limiting opportunities for other important lessons or activities. Teachers are also faced with the challenge of managing students who experience behavioral and emotional issues. These students often require significant additional support to regulate their emotions and behavior, which can be time-consuming and disruptive to the class. Managing these behavioral and emotional challenges takes time away from other teaching activities, making it even harder for teachers to give enough attention to pronunciation practice and other academic needs.

In addition to managing these complex classroom dynamics, teachers are tasked with covering multiple subjects throughout the day. This broad curriculum further limits the time available for focused pronunciation practice and other individualized support. T2 shared her experience in this regard, explaining how time is always a major challenge when trying to teach pronunciation to preschool students. She elaborated:

"In my experience, time is always a major challenge in the classroom. Preschool students often need individual attention or small group sessions for pronunciation practice, which takes up a lot of time, especially with a large number of students. It becomes even more difficult when teaching children with speech delays, as they struggle to pronounce words and need to repeat them several times until they can pronounce them correctly. This is very time-consuming and exhausting."

T2's insight highlights how the combination of large class sizes and the specific needs of students with speech delays complicates the teaching process. Children with speech delays often take much longer to learn how to pronounce words correctly, requiring them to repeat words many times to achieve proper articulation. This extended repetition can leave teachers feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. Balancing the need to provide individualized attention with the requirement to cover a broad curriculum only makes this challenge more difficult. Ultimately, this dynamic can hinder teachers from effectively meeting the needs of all their students, especially those who need more time and focused attention to improve their speech skills.

External Factors: Parental Involvement

Support for a child's language development should not rely solely on the school; parental involvement is just as crucial. While this partnership can be highly beneficial, it also presents unique challenges for teachers. T1's experience, as mentioned in her

statement, illustrates one of the core challenges: parents who are reluctant to accept that their child's progress is slower than expected, particularly when it comes to pronunciation development.

T1 shared:

"I have faced situations where parents couldn't accept that their child wasn't making the progress they expected. They would get upset or frustrated, and sometimes it felt like they didn't believe their child was struggling."

This situation is common in classrooms where children with speech delays or other special needs require more time and tailored support. Many parents, influenced by their hopes and high expectations for their child's progress, struggle to understand why improvements in language acquisition especially in pronunciation appear slow or inconsistent. As noted by Whorall (2015), this mismatch in expectations often leads to frustration for both parents and teachers. Teachers find themselves in the challenging position of having to explain that every child progresses at their own pace, especially in areas like speech development, where children with special needs may require more time and specialized interventions.

In many cases, parents are unaware of the complexities involved in speech and language development for children with special needs. As a result, teachers must adopt a sensitive and patient approach to communicate these complexities and manage the expectations of parents, who may find it emotionally challenging to accept that their child may have additional learning needs or developmental delays. Teachers must also emphasize that progress may look different for each child, and that steady, albeit slower, improvements are still valuable steps forward.

T2's experience reflects another dimension of the parental involvement challenge:

"Some of my students' parents aren't sure how to teach pronunciation effectively to their children with special needs, so they don't practice or go over it at home."

The lack of understanding among parents about how to support their child's language development at home can hinder the child's progress. Parents often lack the tools or knowledge to reinforce speech practices outside of school, limiting the child's opportunities for consistent practice. Teachers, therefore, must not only guide the children but also equip parents with strategies to support language development at home (Whorall, 2015).

Both T1's and T2's experiences highlight the need for clear, ongoing communication between teachers and parents, as well as managing parents' expectations in line with the child's individual progress. Teachers must act as both educators and emotional support providers, helping parents understand that language development is a gradual process, especially for children with unique developmental challenges. Fostering strong, collaborative relationships between teachers and parents is essential for the success of children with special needs, as both home and school environments play a critical role in the child's progress.

Discussion

Teaching pronunciation to preschool children with special needs presents unique challenges, as highlighted by several studies across different countries. These studies emphasize various factors that contribute to difficulties in providing effective pronunciation instruction, including inadequate training, insufficient resources, lack of individualized attention, and limited support from other professionals.

Smith and Yell (2013) examined the challenges teachers face when working with children on the autism spectrum. They noted that teachers often find it difficult to adapt their teaching methods to meet the specific needs of these children, particularly in the area of pronunciation. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often affects a child's ability to communicate effectively, making it harder for teachers to find appropriate strategies that address the children's specific speech and language needs. The study highlights the need for tailored approaches and specialized training for educators working with children with ASD.

Similarly, Clark et al. (2016) identified time constraints and large class sizes as significant obstacles for teachers attempting to provide individualized attention to children with speech delays. These factors limit the ability of teachers to offer the necessary support for pronunciation development, particularly for children with specific speech and language challenges. The study suggests that smaller class sizes and more time for individualized instruction could mitigate some of these challenges.

A study by Taylor et al. (2015) explored the integration of speech therapy techniques into regular classroom practices for children with speech and language delays. The study found that teachers often struggle to implement these techniques due to insufficient support and resources. While speech therapy is crucial for children with pronunciation difficulties, the lack of collaboration between speech therapists and classroom teachers creates a gap in providing consistent and effective instruction. Taylor et al. advocate for more integrated support systems between educators and speech therapy professionals to enhance teaching outcomes.

Ruddy (2019) highlighted the complex role of teachers working with students with special needs, who are tasked with both delivering the standard curriculum and providing specialized education support. This dual responsibility can be overwhelming, as many teachers often lack the necessary training, resources, and professional development opportunities to effectively address the diverse needs of these students. As a result, these teachers may struggle to implement effective teaching strategies and provide the level of individualized support that students with special needs require.

Santosa (2018) explored the challenges faced by teachers when working with preschool children with learning difficulties. A significant barrier identified was the lack of adequate training and resources to address pronunciation issues. Teachers often struggle to implement effective strategies for children with special needs, and the absence of specialized training further exacerbates the issue. Santosa's study underscores the importance of professional development and resources to improve teaching practices in this area.

Overall, these studies highlight the common challenges faced by teachers across different countries in teaching pronunciation to preschool children with special needs. The recurring themes include the lack of specialized training, insufficient resources, and the need for more individualized attention and collaboration between educators

and other professionals, such as speech therapists. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving outcomes for children with special needs in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges preschool teachers face when teaching pronunciation to students with special needs, including issues like speech delays, motor planning difficulties, emotional regulation challenges, and the lack of specialized training. Time constraints and large class sizes further complicate the ability to provide individualized instruction, while parental involvement is sometimes hindered by a lack of knowledge on how to support pronunciation at home.

However, one notable limitation of this study is the small and non-diverse sample size. The study focused on only two teachers from a single private school in Medan, which may not fully represent the experiences of teachers from different regions, schools, or with varying levels of experience. Future research should expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of teachers to provide more generalization insights into the challenges faced by preschool teachers across different contexts.

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