

Teachers' Roles in Overcoming Difficulties in Learning English of Junior High Students in Special Needs Schools (SLB) at Bengkulu City

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Abstract

This study aims to find out teachers roles in overcoming difficulties in learning English of junior high students special needs schools (SLB) at Bengkulu city. The background of this problem arises because SLB students still face difficulties in learning English, while the role of teachers in overcoming these difficulties has not been clearly described. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with Observation Sheet and Question Lists instruments. The results of the study show that 10 teacher roles according to Harmer in (Naibaho, 2019) are applied in teaching English to overcome the difficulties of learning English for junior high students in Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Bengkulu City. However, the level of implementation varies depending on the classroom context and student needs. There are 10 teacher roles in teaching children with special needs, namely (1) controller (2) organizer (3) assessor (4) prompter (5) participant (6) resource (7) tutor (8) observer (9) performer and (10) teaching aids. Teachers carry out these roles in overcoming students' learning difficulties by guiding each student with special needs individually, repeating instructions and materials gradually, managing the class in a structured manner, providing direct examples through gestures and facial expressions, and using learning media that are appropriate to the conditions and needs of students. Researchers suggest that English teachers in special needs schools continue to optimize their roles in learning, because teaching students with special needs requires appropriate and consistent strategies. For future researchers who are interested in conducting similar research, it is recommended to conduct a

more in-depth analysis of the implementation of each teacher's role and also at other levels of education.

Keywords: *Teacher Roles, Students with Special Needs, Learning Difficulties, English Language Teaching.*

INTRODUCTION

Education fundamentally develops knowledge, skills, and character across generations to foster independent individuals who contribute to society (Putri, 2023). Beyond transferring academic knowledge, it builds community relationships that enhance collective learning experiences Syekh et al. (2023). In Indonesia, this right is constitutionally guaranteed by Article 31, Paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution, which explicitly includes students with special needs, ensuring they receive equitable and inclusive educational services despite physical, intellectual, or emotional differences.

Within this landscape, teachers in Special Needs Schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa or SLB) face exceptionally complex responsibilities. They must move beyond traditional instruction to become facilitators, motivators, and emotional supporters. This professional adaptability is critical because special needs students encounter profound learning barriers, including cognitive impairments, physical limitations, or emotional anxieties that hinder academic progress, language development, and social interaction (Baiti et al., 2024; Gull et al., 2025).

This challenge is more pronounced in foreign language instruction, specifically English. Preliminary observations at five State Special Needs Schools (SLB Negeri 1 to 5) in Bengkulu City revealed that junior high school students (SMPLB) face significant obstacles. They continuously struggle to grasp simple vocabulary, retain materials, maintain concentration, and follow instructions. These non-uniform barriers are deeply influenced by intertwined internal factors like cognitive capacities and external factors like learning environments Rachmadi et al. (2023). While these difficulties are well documented, the precise operational roles that English teachers deploy to mitigate them remain insufficiently described.

Theoretically, an English teacher must command multifaceted roles to navigate these classroom dynamics. Harmer (as cited in Naibaho, (2019) conceptualizes these into ten distinct typologies: controller (managing classroom activities), organizer (structuring learning tasks), assessor (offering corrective feedback), prompter (encouraging vocabulary or speech production), participant (engaging within student tasks), resource (supplying linguistic input), tutor (guiding individual or small-group projects), observer (evaluating pedagogical efficacy), performer (deploying dynamic classroom behaviors), and teaching aid (utilizing bodily gestures as language models). The necessity of these holistic competencies aligns with Minister of Education Regulation No. 26 of 2022, the OECD's TALIS framework, and UNESCO (2021) guidelines, demanding that modern educators evolve into flexible innovators.

The application of these ten roles is highly contingent upon the learners' characteristics. Students with learning difficulties often display communication deficits, reading/writing adjustments (e.g., dyslexia or dysgraphia), and slow information processing (Budiani, 2023; Pertiwi & Harsiwi, 2025; Salsabil et al., 2025). Furthermore, SLB teachers encounter an expansive classification of student disorders, including mental (intellectual disability/tunagrahita), physical (visual, hearing, speech, or motor impairments), and emotional disorders (ADD/ADHD) Setyaningsih et al. (2022). Consequently, a single teaching methodology is inadequate, requiring teachers to dynamically shift roles.

Although prior studies highlight the pedagogical value of adaptive teaching, most literature remains constrained to inclusive elementary schools. A notable empirical gap exists concerning how English teachers at the junior high school level (SMPLB) within dedicated special schools implement Harmer's ten professional roles to counter localized learning barriers. This study addresses this gap by investigating the entire population of public special schools in Bengkulu City (SLB Negeri 1 to 5).

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to describe the implementation of teachers' roles based on Harmer's framework in overcoming English learning difficulties among junior high school students at SLB in Bengkulu City. To maintain empirical focus, the scope is limited to the active instructional and supportive roles of one representative English

teacher from each public SLB, without examining broader national curricula or medical diagnoses. Ultimately, this research offers significant practical and scientific contributions to inclusive foreign language pedagogy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the real-time operationalization of teachers' roles in natural learning environments without field manipulation (Hardani et al., 2020). The research was carried out across all five State Special Needs Schools in Bengkulu City (SLB Negeri 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, with field data collection spanning from December 2025 to February 2026. Through a purposive sampling technique, five active English teachers each representing the junior high school level (SMPLB) of their respective institution were selected as the primary research subjects.

Data collection relied on two synchronized qualitative techniques: non-participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. For the observation phase, classroom interactions were systematically captured via field notes and video recordings. This process utilized a structured observation checklist centered on Harmer's ten conceptualized teacher roles: controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, observer, performer, and teaching aid (Naibaho, 2019). To triangulate and discover the pedagogical rationale behind these observed actions, face-to-face interviews were conducted using a six-item open-ended questionnaire adapted from (Agustina et al., 2023). These questions specifically probed into the students' language barriers, instructional adaptations, the use of physical gestures or realia, classroom management under disruptive conditions, evaluation criteria, and the teachers' self-perceived dominant roles. All interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for rigorous assessment.

The generated field data were analyzed using the interactive qualitative analysis model by Miles and Huberman as cited in (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024), which advanced through three continuous stages until data saturation was reached:

Data Reduction: Raw files, including observation notes and interview transcripts, were filtered and simplified. In relevant data outside the scope of English instructional processes and Harmer's ten roles were systematically discarded.

Data Presentation: The reduced, organized data were transformed into systematic narrative descriptions. The findings were mapped to highlight which specific roles among the ten typologies were dominant, rare, or completely absent across the five participating schools.

Conclusion Drawing: Final meanings and insights were extracted by cross-referencing and triangulating the thematic patterns derived from both classroom observations and interview transcripts to comprehensively answer the central research question.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Characteristics of English Learning Difficulties in SLB

Based on the data analysis of intensive observations and interviews conducted with five junior high school English teachers (SMPLB) across five Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Bengkulu City, a diverse range of learning difficulties faced by students with special needs was identified. These challenges encompass deficiencies in basic literacy skills, such as reading and writing, as well as phonological impairments that hinder the precise pronunciation of vowel sounds. The teachers also identified a significant weakness in short term memory, where newly instructed material could be forgotten within mere seconds. Furthermore, there were sensory barriers, including communication difficulties for deaf students (tunarungu) and visual impairments for blind students (tunanetra), cognitive limitations for intellectually disabled students (tunagrahita), and emotional regulation issues, such as tantrum behaviors in autistic students. This situation was further compounded by low intrinsic learning motivation in several schools, as students already perceived English as an overwhelmingly difficult subject. The sheer diversity of these operational barriers directly influenced how teachers adjusted, combined, and adapted their ten instructional roles based on Harmer's theory to accommodate each student's specific needs within the classroom.

Adaptations of Teacher Roles According to Harmer's Categories In managing classroom dynamics, all five teachers consistently executed their role as a controller (teacher as controller) through a humanistic, flexible approach rather than a coercive one. Efforts to maintain order and student focus were carried out texturally, utilizing physical stimuli such as tapping the blackboard, clapping hands, employing specific voice intonations, or applying the "silent way" a technique where teachers lowered their voices to compel students to focus on their facial expressions. Classroom control was also managed spatially by arranging student seating in the front two rows or positioning the teachers' desk in the middle of the students to facilitate close supervision. When students exhibited signs of fatigue or loss of focus, teachers countered this by implementing ice breaking activities, educational games, or singing songs together. Meanwhile, to address tantrum behaviors in autistic students, teachers adopted a progressive emotional management strategy by allowing the student to calm down outside the classroom before welcoming them back to resume learning once their psychological state had stabilized.

As an organizer (teacher as organizer), teachers managed the instructional workflow by designing highly simplified, structured, and step-by-step directions. Classroom organization was executed by connecting new topics such as vocabularies regarding colors, fruits, animals, or verbs with the students' daily empirical experiences. Teachers in these special education settings prioritized modeling strategies, where they provided a concrete example of a task before asking the students to work independently. Given the students' cognitive and memory constraints, teachers systematically repeated instructions or questions three to five times within a single session to ensure long term retention. This organizational process was heavily supported by the integration of concrete visual media, such as illustrative posters, flashcards, real objects, and smartphones, to help students formulate tangible concepts out of abstract linguistic components.

Regarding evaluation, the function of the teacher as an assessor (teacher as assessor) shifted from conventional academic standards toward formative assessments based on individual progress and levels of

independence. Passing criteria were meticulously tailored to each child's disability, ensuring that rigorous academic benchmarks were not forced upon them. Instead, assessment indicators heavily weighted affective and behavioral aspects, including regular attendance, neatness of writing, willingness to open books, and compliance with basic classroom instructions. Teachers delivered immediate positive reinforcement, using verbal praise such as good, very good, nice, or smart to appreciate correct answers. For students with severe speech or communication impairments, even the slightest response whether expressed through body language or physical gestures was counted as an added value to their classroom participation score.

The roles of a prompter (teacher as prompter), participant (teacher as participant), and resource (teacher as resource) were synchronously implemented to cultivate an emotionally secure learning environment. When students encountered cognitive blocks while writing or identifying vocabulary on the board, teachers acted as prompters by providing gradual hints, such as referencing the Indonesian meaning first or repeating animal names to stimulate guessing without dictating the final answer. As participants, teachers dismantled rigid social boundaries by positioning themselves as trusted friends to confide in, motherly figures who actively hugged, comforted, and danced with the children, or co-players in group games to mitigate psychological stress. When serving as a resource, teachers became adaptive informants; they modified materials into Braille or raised letters for blind students, utilized sign language for deaf students, demonstrated precise phonetic articulations, and spoke directly next to the ear of a student with multiple sensory impairments.

Lastly, the roles of a tutor (teacher as tutor), observer (teacher as observer), performer (teacher as performer), and teaching aid (teacher as teaching aid) served as the backbone for individual instruction. The tutoring role was manifested through circular mobility around the room to offer private one on one guidance, which included physically holding the pencils of students with severe motor difficulties. For autistic students with high energy outputs, teachers collaborated closely with shadow teachers. All instructional interventions were guided by the teacher's role as an observer, who carefully mapped out students' basic literacy skills, focus

duration, independence levels, and memory capacities before initiating follow-up actions. As performers and teaching aids, teachers transformed their physical presentation expressively through theatrical gestures, kinetic demonstrations, and vibrant facial expressions. Some teachers intentionally wore thick, bright red lipstick so that deaf students could read their lip movements (lip-reading) optimally, which was further synergized with interactive technology such as laptops, digital whiteboards, and televisions.

Dominant Teacher Roles in the Learning Process

Although all ten of Harmer's roles were implemented comprehensively, the intensity and dominance of specific roles varied significantly across teachers based on the primary characteristics of the disabilities in their respective classrooms. For Teacher 1, the most dominant role was that of a prompter, as the teacher consistently relied on gradual stimulus cues to build the students' cognitive independence. Conversely, Teacher 2, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 demonstrated a powerful dominance in the tutor role. This phenomenon was driven by classroom contexts involving severe intellectual, speech, or motor impairments, which demanded constant, close one on one mentoring throughout the lesson alongside communication adjustments using hand gestures and sign language. Meanwhile, Teacher 3 exhibited a unique trifecta of dominant roles, functioning heavily as a controller, assessor, and teaching aid simultaneously. Teacher 3 seamlessly integrated strict spatial management, constant formative feedback, and a diverse range of multisensory media such as TVs and facial expression posters to regulate student behavior and stimulate academic interest.

Core Research Insight for Readers

In essence, the core finding of this study emphasizes that English instruction at the junior high school level (SMPLB) in Bengkulu City does not revolve around fulfilling prescriptive curriculum targets or achieving conventional academic scores; rather, it focuses on developing functional independence and behavioral regulation in students with special needs. Readers can understand that executing Harmer's ten roles

in an SLB setting demands extreme pedagogical flexibility and infinite patience. The ultimate effectiveness of special education is heavily dictated by a teacher's capacity to dismantle rigid instructional barriers, translate abstract linguistic material into concrete visual and kinetic stimuli, and balance their identity as an educator, emotional regulator, and psychological safe haven for children with unique physical and cognitive limitations.

DISCUSSION

The implementation of Harmer's ten teacher roles across Special Needs Schools (SLB) in Bengkulu City exhibits varying levels of intensity, largely influenced by the classroom context and the specific characteristics of students' disabilities. In managing classroom behavior, the role of the teacher as a controller is manifested through strategic student seating arrangements, physical cues, and vocal intonations to maintain focus. Adopting a personal approach and temporarily pausing the lesson when a student experiences a tantrum represents a concrete application of the instructional duties mandated by PERMENDIKBUD No. 26 of 2022. This practice strongly supports the framework of Rachmadi et al. (2023) regarding the critical role of emotional regulation as an internal factor for learning readiness. This emotionally secure learning environment is further augmented by the participant role, where teachers step down from rigid professional boundaries to act as mother figures or trusted friends. This alignment reinforces the theory of Dirsia et al. (2022), which characterizes teachers as essential character builders who must instill a fundamental sense of psychological security in their students.

The organizer, prompter, resource, and teaching aid roles complement one another in helping teachers overcome students' difficulties in learning English. As an organizer, the teacher structures English lessons by using simplified language, systematic learning activities, and explicit modeling techniques that enable students to follow the learning process more easily. This structured instruction supports the theory of Armella & Rifdah (2022), which emphasizes that students with learning difficulties require highly structured, step-by-step guidance to process information

effectively. It also reflects the principles of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), which encourage teachers to organize learning according to students' mental development and individual learning needs (Suharsih, 2022). To reinforce this structured learning process, teachers simultaneously perform the prompter role by providing repeated explanations, slow pronunciation, and clear lip movements whenever students experience difficulties in understanding instructions or recalling vocabulary. These practices represent a form of temporary scaffolding proposed by Bransford in Dewi (2019), helping students overcome communication barriers and memory limitations identified by (Rezieka et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers strengthen students' understanding through their roles as resources and teaching aids by preparing simplified learning materials and utilizing concrete visual media, including flashcards, pictures, real objects, television displays for interactive word-guessing activities, and expressive body movements. The use of these instructional media makes abstract English concepts more concrete and meaningful for students with intellectual and sensory impairments, supporting Bransford's (1999) theory in Dewi (2019) that visual learning media reinforce conceptual understanding (Setyaningsih et al., 2022). At the same time, these classroom practices also reflect the implementation of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method highlighted by Lituhayu in Dewi (2019), which strengthens vocabulary comprehension through meaningful physical involvement. Therefore, the integration of the organizer, prompter, resource, and teaching aid roles demonstrates that structured instruction, continuous prompting, and the use of appropriate visual and physical learning media collectively contribute to reducing the English learning difficulties experienced by junior high school students with special needs.

Individualized instruction is a fundamental component of English teaching in Special Needs Schools (SLB), making the tutor, observer, performer, and assessor roles closely interconnected throughout the learning process. Among these roles, the tutor role emerges as one of the most dominant because, in the absence of shadow teachers in most schools, English teachers assume full responsibility for providing intensive one-on-one

guidance to assist students in reading, writing, and pronouncing English words according to their individual abilities. This individualized guidance represents the practical implementation of Individualized Instruction, which is considered essential in addressing students' basic literacy difficulties (Azka et al., 2025). To ensure that this guidance is implemented effectively, teachers simultaneously perform the observer role by continuously monitoring students' responses, learning progress, and behavioral changes throughout the learning process. These observations enable teachers to adjust instructional strategies according to students' actual diagnoses and individual learning needs, which is consistent with (Maryanti et al., 2021). Furthermore, teachers strengthen communication through their performer role by utilizing expressive hand gestures, clear verbal articulation, and bright red lipstick when teaching deaf students to facilitate lip reading and improve students' understanding of English materials. This instructional practice reflects the multisensory learning principles proposed by Azka et al. (2025), which integrate visual and kinesthetic elements to clarify linguistic meaning (Dewi, 2019). In addition, the implementation of individualized instruction is also reflected in the assessor role, where teachers evaluate students not only through academic achievement but also through their willingness to speak, responsiveness to classroom instructions, and behavioral development. The assessment process is conducted individually according to each student's disability characteristics, which aligns with the adaptive assessment criteria for children with special needs proposed by Budiani (2023) and fulfills the professional function of assessment in improving instructional delivery (Agustina et al., 2023). Therefore, the integration of the tutor, observer, performer, and assessor roles demonstrates that individualized guidance, continuous observation, adaptive communication, and individualized assessment collectively contribute to overcoming English learning difficulties among junior high school students with special needs.

Based on the overall implementation of Harmer's ten teacher roles, their functions can be systematically grouped into three operational categories: dominant, supporting, and limited. The tutor, prompter,

controller, and performer roles emerge as the dominant roles because they are implemented consistently in almost every English lesson to address students' major learning barriers, including difficulties in reading, writing, vocabulary retention, emotional regulation, and sensory limitations. Through these roles, teachers provide intensive individual guidance, repeated explanations, classroom management, and adaptive communication that enable students to participate more effectively in the learning process. Supporting these dominant roles are the organizer, assessor, resource, and teaching aid roles, which contribute to organizing learning activities, assessing students' progress, preparing appropriate learning materials, and utilizing concrete instructional media that facilitate students' understanding of English. Although these roles play an important part in supporting instruction, they are implemented according to classroom needs and are not applied as intensively or continuously as the dominant roles. Meanwhile, the participant and observer roles are categorized as limited because they are implemented only in particular instructional situations. The participant role mainly appears during interactive activities, such as educational games, whereas the observer role is generally integrated into teachers' direct instructional and tutoring practices rather than being performed as a separate activity. Therefore, although all ten teacher roles contribute to the learning process, their frequency and intensity of implementation vary according to students' characteristics and the instructional demands encountered in special education classrooms.

Overall, the dominance of the tutor, prompter, controller, and performer roles highlights the distinctive characteristics of English teaching in Special Needs Schools (SLB) and both expands upon and contrasts with previous studies. Compared with the findings of Agustina et al. (2023) in inclusive elementary schools in Bengkulu City, where the tutor role was less dominant because instructional responsibilities were shared with shadow teachers, teachers in the Special Needs Schools (SLB) involved in this study assume full responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process independently. Consequently, the tutor role becomes the most prominent role in supporting students throughout English learning

activities. Similarly, while Nurmayani et al. (2025) concluded that teachers' roles at SLB Melati Medan were relatively simple and less varied, the findings of the present study indicate that English teachers in Bengkulu City perform multiple teacher roles in a more adaptive, individualized, and context-specific manner according to students' characteristics and learning needs. These findings reinforce the principles of individualized and differentiated instruction proposed by Azka et al. (2025), demonstrating that successful English language teaching in special education depends not only on delivering learning materials but also on intensive individual guidance, adaptive communication, and instructional adjustments tailored to each student's learning capacity. Therefore, this study extends previous research by providing empirical evidence that effective English language teaching at the junior high school level in Special Needs Schools requires the integration of multiple teacher roles to accommodate students' diverse learning needs.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This research concludes this study found that all teacher roles in teaching students with special needs are implemented by educators in the learning process, but with varying levels of implementation depending on the classroom context and student needs.

There are 10 teacher roles in teaching children with special needs, namely (1) controller (2) organizer (3) assessor (4) prompter (5) participant (6) resource (7) tutor (8) observer (9) performer and (10) teaching aids, the teachers carry out these roles through individual guidance, structured classroom management, step by step instructions, direct demonstrations using gestures and expressions, and the use of learning media appropriate to students' abilities. They help students overcome difficulties by guiding each special needs student individually, repeating instructions and material gradually, managing the class systematically, providing direct examples through gestures and expressions, and using suitable learning media. This approach enables teachers to support students in overcoming difficulties in reading, writing, pronunciation, memory, intellectual differences, sensory challenges, and behavior management. It shows that

teachers actively assist students in addressing a variety of learning challenges

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher Suggest that English teachers in special needs schools continue to optimize their role in learning, as teaching students with special needs requires appropriate and consistent strategies. Schools are expected to support the implementation of teachers' roles to ensure more effective learning. Future researchers interested in conducting similar research are advised to conduct a more in depth analysis of the implementation of each teacher role and also at other levels of education.

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