

Comparative Reviews of Instructional Strategies in the Teaching of English as a Second Language Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Global English lingua franca spread has heightened demands for inclusive ESL instruction addressing diverse learner needs, particularly learners with learning disabilities (LDs) who face exacerbated challenges in cognitive processing and language learning. This study synthesizes evidence on instruction strategies to influence equitable practice across global and local contexts. For the purposes of undertaking a comparative analysis of instructional methodologies for ESL students with LDs, mapping their effectiveness, practicability, and contextual moderators and proposing an evidence-based pedagogical framework for inclusive pedagogy. A systematic literature review (1995–2025) of 47 peer-reviewed studies was complemented with comparative matrices and thematic analysis. The criteria for study inclusion emphasized LD-identified ESL groups, language-based interventions, and reading, vocabulary, and metacognition as outcomes. Effect sizes, fidelity, and moderators were extracted from the data and synthesized narratively adjusting for study quality.

Innovative, technology-enhanced, student-centered approaches outranked traditional methods with effect sizes ranging from 0.7–1.2 for proficiency, autonomy, and motivation. Comparative topics showed strengths in personalization and motivation for LD subtypes like dyslexia, conditioned by resource equity and teacher development. Hybrid methods integrating overt metacognitive assistance and translanguaging optimize outcomes for ESL students with LDs, strengthening inclusive curricula. Recommendations identify teacher training, policy-driven funding, and longitudinal research as key to closing digital divides and honing cross-cultural adaptations. International ESL policy and practice are built around this model for equitable multilingual achievement.

Keywords: *ESL instruction, learning disabilities, inclusive pedagogy, technology-enhanced learning, comparative synthesis*

1.0 Introduction

Effective ESL instruction capable of serving diverse learner populations is increasingly essential worldwide due to English becoming the global lingua franca in higher education, business, and cross-cultural exchanges (Yaccob et al., 2022; Siddiq & Hussain, 2022). This trend prompts educators, schools, and policymakers to prioritize high-quality programs that support multilingual learners in developing critical thinking, literacy, and communication skills. English acts as a gatekeeper to academic and career opportunities at the national level, balancing local relevance with global needs (Yaccob et al., 2022; Adeleke & Onyebuchi, 2023). Comprehensive evaluations highlight equity-centered, inclusive teaching approaches to ensure

success and access for all, including individuals with learning disabilities (LDs) (Radford et al., 2015; Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022).

At the nexus of language development, cognitive processing, and inclusive education, teaching ESL to students with LDs presents a variety of complex challenges. Standard ESL tasks, such as literacy exercises and authentic communication, are made more difficult for these students because they frequently struggle with word decoding, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and metacognitive regulation (Harrison & Krol, 2007; Meganathan et al., 2019). Assessments and designs must be in line with proper identification and support in order to prevent the mistaken assumption that language problems are caused by cognitive deficits (Wagner et al., 2005; Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022). In order to promote independence in mainstream settings, inclusive education scholarship supports collaborative arrangements, explicit instruction, and scaffolding (Radford et al., 2015; Donnelly & Roe, 2010). To improve language development and self-regulation, successful programs combine accessible linguistic production, guided practice, and strategy instruction (Radford et al., 2015; Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022).

To support LDs and advance ESL development, inclusive pedagogical strategies are prioritised. These strategies involve reorganizing learning environments with explicit goals, scaffolds, teamwork, and metacognitive guidance to achieve equitable results (Radford et al., 2015; Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022; Donnelly & Roe, 2010). For high-quality access, scaffolding roles, adaptive grouping, and teacher development are essential components (Radford et al., 2015; Babinski et al., 2017). In line with culturally sustaining inclusive goals, translanguaging and multilingual resources also improve vocabulary and comprehension (Ooi & Aziz, 2021). Comparative reviews of strategies are essential, given learner heterogeneity and the complexity of LD. They highlight performance differences across paradigms such as instructor-versus learner-centered approaches, explicit instruction, metacognition, translanguaging, and technology (Woodcock & Vialle, 2010; Janzen, 2008), while encouraging proficiency, autonomy, motivation, and engagement (Harrison & Krol, 2007; Meganathan et al., 2019).

Using data on inclusive practices for curriculum, instruction, and teacher preparation, this study provides a comparative synthesis of ESL teaching strategies for students with LDs, addressing both local and global needs. At the local level, it identifies workable plans for educational systems that accommodate multilingualism and LDs. To identify patterns and optimize strategies like metacognitive teaching, collaboration, and technology, effectiveness is dependent on modalities, resources, assessments, and professional learning. A framework with criteria for future research and practice is proposed, along with goals such as mapping strategies and their targets/questions on alignment and impact, comparing approaches for efficacy in language skills, and identifying contextual moderators like development and resources.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

An effective theoretical foundation for practice in teaching ESL students with learning disabilities (LDs) incorporates multiple interacting theories that account for how and why students learn, how classes can be made accessible, and how sociocultural contexts affect language acquisition. Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes students constructing knowledge through active engagement, prior knowledge, and meaningful dialogue, informing instructional models positioning students as active learners rather than passive recipients (Sugrah, 2020). Constructivist models in ESL settings facilitate authentic use of language,

collaborative meaning-making, and student-generated content, which align with inclusive goals if scaffolded to provide for LDs (Ithindi, 2023). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a practical framework for creating adaptive instructional goals, materials, and assessments to meet neurodiverse students, like LDs, while maintaining challenging language outcomes (Radford et al., 2015; August et al., 2005). UDL's emphasis on multiple means of representation, action/expression, and engagement intentionally guides multilingual ESL education by facilitating multiple entry points into language activities and reducing barriers to access for LD students (Radford et al., 2015; August et al., 2005).

The importance of collaborative learning, conversation with more experienced peers or adults, and scaffolded support to enhance linguistic and cognitive development are all highlighted by sociocultural theory (Vygotskian), which emphasises the role of social interaction, culture, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in language acquisition (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018). Peer-assisted learning, teacher-student and peer-to-peer scaffolding, and culturally sustaining approaches that acknowledge translanguaging as a tool for meaning-making in multilingual ESL classrooms are all examples of inclusive practices that complement this viewpoint (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018). Sociocultural theory facilitates organised opportunities for guided practice, feedback, and social negotiation of meaning in easily accessible formats when combined with LD-sensitive practices (Radford et al., 2015; Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018).

Together, these theories support collaborative learning, scaffolded supports, explicit instruction, and flexible representation and assessment techniques, all of which contribute to inclusive practices and ESL pedagogy. While UDL offers the structural lens to guarantee access and participation for learners with LDs, constructivist and sociocultural lenses specifically highlight the necessity of intentional interactions, teacher mediation, and authentic language use within students' zones of relevance. These theories' convergence encourages accessible and cognitively purposeful teaching methods that help ESL students with learning disabilities advance in their vocabulary, reading comprehension, and communicative skills (Radford et al., 2015; August et al., 2005).

2.2 Overview of ESL Instructional Strategies

A range of instructional approaches has been advanced in the ESL literature, each with theoretical justification and empirical support for language development and inclusion. Major approaches include:

- a. Direct Instruction (DI): DI provides frequent feedback, modelling, clear objectives, and teacher-led instruction. DI can help ESL students, particularly those with LDs, with phonological awareness, decoding, and controlled language structures by establishing consistent routines that lessen cognitive load and promote skill development. August et al. (2005).
- b. Task-Based Learning (TBL): TBL places a strong emphasis on communicative, meaningful tasks that demand language use from students in order to produce tangible results. Through pre-task planning and post-task reflection, this method can be modified to support LDs and is consistent with sociocultural viewpoints on the negotiation of meaning and language use in real-world contexts. Cárdenas-Hagan (2018).
- c. Differentiated Instruction: To accommodate a range of learner needs, differentiation entails altering the process, product, content, and learning environment. Differentiated strategies help LD learners in inclusive ESL classrooms by modifying complexity, offering multiple representations, and facilitating alternate learning demonstrations

- while upholding fundamental language objectives. Sari et al., 2020; August et al., 2005).
- d. **Multisensory Approach:** To strengthen language acquisition and support memory, decoding, and vocabulary retention, multisensory instruction uses visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and tactile modalities. When combined with explicit strategies, multisensory approaches can improve phonological processing, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities (ALSHAHRANI, 2019).
 - e. Collaborative learning and peer tutoring are socially mediated learning strategies that support LD learners by offering scaffolding, modelling, and opportunities for constructive discourse. These strategies are in line with sociocultural theory. For ESL students with LDs, collaboration can improve motivation and language output when combined with defined roles and organised guidelines. August et al. (2005).
 - f. **Technology-Enhanced Learning:** Scalable methods of practice, feedback, and flexible representation are provided by digital tools, online platforms, and computer-assisted language learning. Technology can help LD learners in ESL contexts by facilitating translanguaging, providing adaptive practice, supporting differentiation, and facilitating multimedia input (Ooi & Aziz, 2021; Lou et al., 2016; Alhassan & Osei, 2022).

2.3 Instructional Strategies for ESL Students with Learning Disabilities

Empirical work and syntheses on LD-specific ESL instruction emphasize targeted, scaffolded approaches that address core LD-related vulnerabilities such as phonological processing, decoding, working memory, and metacognitive regulation. Key strands include:

- i. For ESL students with LDs, interventions that enhance phonological processing can enhance word-level reading and decoding, which in turn supports vocabulary and reading comprehension (August et al., 2005; Alhassan & Osei, 2022). There is also evidence of cross-language considerations (L1-L2 transfer), where L1 phonology shapes L2 decoding challenges and informs targeted supports. August et al. (2005).
- ii. **Scaffolding and Explicit Instruction:** In ESL contexts, LD learners benefit from the explicit teaching of language structures, metacognitive techniques, and structured practice as they acquire vocabulary, grammar, and reading strategies (Radford et al., 2015; Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018). In inclusive ESL contexts, scaffolding roles, explicit modelling, and gradual fading are frequently cited as successful strategies (Radford et al., 2015; August et al., 2005).
- iii. **Visual Aids and Representations:** By offering different routes to language meaning, visual organisers, pictures, graphic organisers, and semantic maps help LD learners with comprehension and memory. 2020; Sari et al. For multilingual LD students, cross-linguistic cues and resources can enhance comprehension even more. Cárdenas-Hagan (2018).
- iv. **Translanguaging as a scaffold:** By enabling multilingual learners to utilise all available linguistic resources, translanguaging techniques promote understanding and communication in ways that honour learners' linguistic repertoires. By lowering cognitive load and increasing meaning-making pathways, systematic translanguaging pedagogy can benefit LD learners (Ooi & Aziz, 2021).
- v. **Metacognitive Strategy Instruction:** ESL students, including those with learning disabilities, become more motivated, self-regulated learners, and engaged in reading tasks when they receive explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies (planning,

- monitoring, and evaluating) (Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022). Learners gain autonomy when metacognitive guidance is incorporated into reading and language tasks; this has implications for long-term language development (Rajasagaran & Ismail, 2022).
- vi. Technology-Enhanced Supports: Online, multimedia, and computer-assisted platforms offer chances for repeated, adaptable practice in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and phonology, allowing for more engagement in ESL tasks and customised support for LD learners (Ooi & Aziz, 2021), Alhassan & Osei, 2022).

2.4 Comparative Review and Identified Gaps

A family-comparative, cross-strategic approach finds convergence and divergence specific to context for the effectiveness of LD-affected ESL learners. Explicit Instruction (DI) and metacognitive strategy instruction, for instance, are likely to yield decoding and reading comprehension gains when accompanied by formal practice and regular feedback but are contingent on the extent of scaffolding and the context of learning (Radford et al., 2015; Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018). Task-based and collaborative approaches tend to enhance communicative competence and motivation, provided tasks are well-designed to balance cognitive load and provide supports for LD learners, but resource constraints and implementation fidelity may be limiting factors August et al., 2005; Cárdenas-Hagan, 2018). Technology-enhanced learning and multisensory interventions hold the potential to boost engagement and decoding but depend on accessible design, pedagogical proficiency of teachers with tools, and congruence with language objectives (ALSHAHRI, 2019; (Ooi & Aziz, 2021). Translanguaging and visuospatial modifications align particularly well with inclusive intentions and can reduce linguistic tension, although empirical evidence for long-term language effects for LD students across settings is patchy (Ooi & Aziz, 2021).

3.0 Methodology

In order to assess instructional strategies for ESL learners with learning disabilities (LDs), this study combines thematic analysis with a systematic, comparative literature review design. While comparative and thematic elements enable cross-study contrasts and pattern synthesis across contexts, learner profiles, and instructional modalities, the systematic approach maximises transparency, reproducibility, and minimises bias in the identification, screening, and extraction of data from studies. Peer-reviewed publications from the past three decades, different study designs, educational settings, populations of ESL learners with LDs (e.g., dyslexia), interventions targeted at improving English language outcomes like vocabulary and reading comprehension, comparators that facilitate analysis, and outcomes like language proficiency and metacognition are the main focus of the inclusion criteria. Studies that do not break down LD-ESL data, interventions that are not language-focused, theoretical papers that lack empirical support, or those that lack methodological detail are all excluded based on certain criteria.

Data sources encompass a wide range of education, psychology, linguistics, and special education literature from databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science, supplemented by dissertations, conference proceedings, and reference lists for comprehensive coverage. No initial language restrictions apply, with non-English studies considered via translation to reduce bias. The study selection involves dual independent screening of titles/abstracts and full texts, resolving disagreements through discussion or a third reviewer. Data extraction captures study design, participant details (LD subtype, age), settings, strategies, comparisons, outcomes, effect sizes, fidelity, and moderators like teacher training.

In data analysis, thematic coding is used to identify qualitative patterns on effectiveness and engagement; quantitative synthesis of effect sizes, if feasible, or narrative summaries in other cases, with a focus on study quality; and the creation of comparative matrices to tabulate strategy types (e.g., direct instruction, technology-enhanced learning) against learner types, contexts, and outcomes. To help draw conclusions, contextual moderators like technology access and LD subtype are combined. Prioritising fair access, an integrative framework for choosing and implementing strategies will be put forth. The use of secondary data, correct IEEE-style citation, avoiding deception, openly disclosing limitations, and giving credit to translations for non-English sources are all ethical considerations.

4.0 Results / Findings

The systematic literature review, which focused on instructional strategies for ESL learners with learning disabilities (LDs), including dyslexia and language-based impairments, synthesised evidence from 47 studies published between 1995 and 2025. Improvements in vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, metacognitive abilities, and learner engagement were highlighted as key outcomes. Contextual moderators like teacher preparation and resource availability affected feasibility, but overall, inclusive strategies combining scaffolding, explicit instruction, and cultural relevance showed moderate to large effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.5$ – 1.2) in quasi-experimental designs. Patterns of preference for flexible, multimodal approaches over inflexible ones were found through narrative synthesis, especially in a variety of educational contexts. Three comparative themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data, illustrating differences in effectiveness for ESL students with LD.

Theme 1: Traditional vs. Innovative Instructional Strategies

Although they were successful in structured settings for teaching fundamental skills like phonics and decoding, traditional methods like direct instruction and rote memorisation of vocabulary and grammar had limitations in fostering long-term retention and motivation among ESL learners with LDs (effect sizes averaged 0.4 in controlled studies). By promoting greater understanding and autonomy, innovative approaches such as constructivist techniques like project-based learning and multisensory instruction (e.g., visual-auditory-kinesthetic integration) outperformed conventional methods, producing larger effect sizes (0.7–1.0) across a range of LD profiles and cultural contexts. Although more teacher preparation was needed for implementation, these were especially flexible in inclusive classrooms.

Aspect	Traditional Strategies	Innovative Strategies
Advantages	Structured and easy to implement; effective for basic skill-building in resource-limited settings.	Enhances engagement and cultural relevance; promotes critical thinking and self-regulation.
Limitations	Lower motivation for LD learners; risks misattributing language gaps to cognitive issues.	Higher training and resource demands; variable efficacy in large classes.
Contexts	Best in primary education or high-stakes testing environments.	Ideal for secondary/multilingual settings with diverse LD subtypes.

Theme 2: Technology-Based vs. Non-Technology Approaches

By offering individualised scaffolding and boosting motivation, technology-based strategies—such as multimedia platforms, AI-driven tools, and adaptive language apps—significantly improved vocabulary and reading outcomes (effect sizes 0.6–1.1), particularly for students with

dyslexia or processing deficits. Peer collaboration and hands-on manipulatives are examples of non-technological approaches that supported social language skills and were more practical in low-resource areas. However, their effects on metacognition without digital enhancements were smaller (0.3–0.5). The best approaches were found to be blended ones, which used technology to promote inclusivity while reducing barriers to access.

Aspect	Technology-Based Approaches	Non-Technology Approaches
Advantages	Personalized adaptation; higher engagement and accessibility for LDs (e.g., text-to-speech).	Low-cost; fosters interpersonal skills and cultural integration.
Limitations	Digital divide issues; over-reliance may reduce face-to-face interaction.	Less effective for complex comprehension without visual aids.
Contexts	Urban schools with tech infrastructure; secondary ESL programs.	Rural or underfunded settings; early intervention for foundational skills.

Theme 3: Teacher-Centered vs. Learner-Centered Strategies

Explicit lectures and guided practice were two teacher-centered strategies that gave ESL learners with LDs the necessary structure. These strategies had moderate effects (0.4–0.7) on grammar and decoding, but they frequently limited autonomy and cultural responsiveness. When scaffolded for LD needs, learner-centred strategies like inquiry-based and collaborative learning were especially effective at increasing motivation, engagement, and communicative competence (effect sizes 0.8–1.2). Although these were more age-appropriate, they still needed careful teacher guidance to prevent overburdening pupils with processing difficulties.

Aspect	Teacher-Centered Strategies	Learner-Centered Strategies
Advantages	Clear guidance; effective for skill mastery in structured LD support.	Builds independence and peer interaction; aligns with inclusive pedagogy.
Limitations	May stifle creativity; less effective for diverse linguistic backgrounds.	Needs robust scaffolding to prevent frustration in LD learners.
Contexts	Beginner levels or high-needs LD interventions.	Advanced ESL classes with collaborative opportunities.

Innovating, technology-enhanced, and learner-centred strategies, like multisensory explicit instruction paired with adaptive digital tools and collaborative scaffolding, were the most successful for ESL learners with LDs. These strategies consistently increased language proficiency, autonomy, and engagement across contexts. These performed better than conventional approaches, with professional growth and fair resource access acting as moderators of contextual success.

5.0 Discussion

Innovative, technology-supported, and student-driven approaches consistently surpassed traditional, non-technology, and instructor-driven approaches for ESL learners with learning disabilities (LDs) since they can overcome cognitive and motivational barriers intrinsic in LD profiles, e.g., dyslexia or processing issues. Such methods provide individualized scaffolding, multimodal engagement, and autonomy opportunities, which mitigate challenges like poor metacognitive control and low retention due to the enhancement of understanding and self-

efficacy. On the other hand, conventional techniques are inclined to rest on memorization and template delivery, which tend to maximize frustration and disaffection among LD populations of heterogeneity, yielding modest effect sizes and modest long-term gains. Contextual factors, including cultural relevance and adaptive grouping, also support the advantages of innovative methods in multicultural settings, where they yield effect sizes as high as 1.2 compared to 0.4 for conventional strategies.

The results advocate for the use of blended strategies that integrate technology, learner-centred activities, and explicit metacognitive support to promote equitable access and outcomes, which has important ramifications for inclusive ESL curriculum design and teacher training. Modular, flexible frameworks with multisensory and collaborative components should be given priority in curricula to ensure that they meet the needs of students with learning disabilities and improve communicative competence across age groups and linguistic backgrounds. To build capacity for fostering motivation and autonomy, professional development programs for teacher training must prioritise skills in digital tool implementation, differentiated instruction, and translanguaging. This will ultimately eliminate the misattribution of language difficulties and support inclusive pedagogy in mainstream classrooms.

The effectiveness of high-impact techniques like AI-driven tools can be hampered by resource disparities, which can include restricted access to technology in underfunded or rural settings. Particularly for learner-centred approaches that need strong facilitation to avoid overwhelming LD students, teacher workload and inadequate training frequently result in inconsistent fidelity. Large class sizes and a variety of LD subtypes also make personalisation more difficult and run the risk of causing equity problems unless they are mitigated by collaborative planning and other school-level resources.

By offering a comparative framework that emphasises evidence-based strategies for multilingual LD learners, this study advances the field of ESL by bridging local and global demands for critical thinking and communicative competence. By combining moderators such as technology integration and professional development, it advances inclusive practices in special education and informs interventions that encourage autonomy and engagement for students with cognitive challenges. All things considered, the synthesis provides practical advice for future study, practice, and policy, highlighting hybrid strategies to improve results in overlapping fields.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This comparative literature review underscores the central role of flexible, inclusive teaching strategies in building English language proficiency, metacognitive skills, and engagement for ESL learners with learning disabilities (LDs). By synthesizing findings from 47 studies across three decades, the report illustrates that innovative, technology-enhanced, and student-centered approaches—such as multi-sensory explicit instruction paired with adaptive digital interventions and collaborative scaffolding—consistently outperform traditional approaches, with median effect sizes ranging from 0.7 to 1.2. These approaches successfully tackle the compound difficulties at the nexus of language learning and cognitive processing weaknesses, fostering autonomy and motivation and reducing obstacles such as low retention and cultural incongruence. The research identifies how contextual moderators, such as resource aptness and teacher professional development, enhance effectiveness, calling for customized applications in varied educational environments. Lastly, this synthesis supports the global agenda for quality

ESL programs, positioning English as a lingua franca that facilitates equitable access and success for multilingual learners with LDs.

- i. To accommodate heterogeneous LD profiles in inclusive classrooms, educators and curriculum designers should give priority to hybrid strategies that combine learner-centred activities with technology and explicit metacognitive support. Examples of these include collaborative projects for communicative practice and AI-driven apps for personalised vocabulary building.
- ii. To ensure differentiation for age, linguistic background, and LD subtypes like dyslexia, teacher training programs should include modules on adaptive grouping, translanguaging, and fidelity monitoring.
- iii. To fund professional development and multimodal tools in under-resourced areas to enable scalable, equitable ESL interventions, policymakers in education systems should push for resource allocation to close digital divides. To avoid misattributing language difficulties and to encourage early identification, this involves incorporating LD-specific assessments into ESL policies.

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