



Teachers' Challenges and Strategies in Assessing English Learning in Inclusive Montessori Classrooms: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies that teachers face when conducting English-language learning assessments in Montessori-based inclusive classrooms. This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach using a case study design conducted at Montessori Elementary School in Bali. The study participants consisted of two teachers with direct experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results revealed three main themes. First, teachers faced professional and operational challenges, including limited formal training in inclusive education, difficulties in managing students' diverse needs, and time-management constraints. Second, the implementation of a narrative assessment system emphasized observation-based evaluation without using numerical grades, focusing on each student's learning process. Third, teachers employed adaptive strategies, such as bilingual instruction, adjusting learning levels, and providing stimulation through repetition and hands-on activities to support students' language development. This study underscores the importance of flexible and student-centered assessment practices in inclusive classrooms. These findings also offer practical implications for teachers in designing more adaptive and inclusive assessment approaches to accommodate students' diverse needs.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Inclusive Assessment, Montessori Education, English Language Learning, Case Study, Thematic Analysis.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tantangan dan strategi yang dihadapi guru saat melakukan penilaian pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di kelas inklusif berbasis Montessori. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan di Sekolah Dasar Montessori di Bali. Peserta penelitian terdiri dari dua guru yang memiliki pengalaman langsung mengajar di kelas inklusif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian mengungkap tiga tema utama. Pertama, guru menghadapi tantangan profesional dan operasional, termasuk keterbatasan pelatihan formal dalam pendidikan inklusif, kesulitan dalam mengelola kebutuhan siswa yang beragam, serta kendala manajemen waktu. Kedua, penerapan sistem penilaian naratif menekankan evaluasi berbasis pengamatan tanpa menggunakan nilai numerik, dengan fokus pada proses belajar setiap siswa. Ketiga, guru menerapkan strategi adaptif, seperti pengajaran bilingual, menyesuaikan tingkat pembelajaran, dan memberikan stimulasi melalui pengulangan serta kegiatan praktis untuk

mendukung perkembangan bahasa siswa. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya praktik penilaian yang fleksibel dan berpusat pada siswa di kelas inklusif. Temuan ini juga memberikan implikasi praktik bagi guru dalam merancang pendekatan penilaian yang lebih adaptif dan inklusif untuk mengakomodasi kebutuhan siswa yang beragam.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Inklusif, Asesmen Inklusif, Pendidikan Montessori, Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, Studi Kasus, Analisis Tematik.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an approach that aims to provide equal learning opportunities for students with diverse needs (Salimova, 2025). UNESCO and other international organizations have supported inclusive education (Sari et al., 2022). In Indonesia, the strengthening of inclusive education is inseparable from the mandate of Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees the right to education for all citizens (Septyah, 2024). However, teachers and educational institutions still face challenges in assessing students with diverse needs, because every child has different levels of ability and achievement (Siswiyanti & Astuti, 2022).

The effectiveness of learning depends strongly on how teachers respond to each student's interests and learning pace (Lillard, 2013). Many questions and challenges have arisen regarding the unpreparedness of public-school teachers (professionally, psychologically, and methodologically) to work with and engage students with diverse needs (Berikhanova et al., 2021). Stress is a common condition in the teaching process; the most significant factors reported by teachers as causes of stress and burnout are their expectations to meet the diverse needs of their students (Woodcock & Anderson, 2025).

A Previous study by Setiawan and Ena (2019) explored the use of the Montessori approach in junior high school, focusing on students' perceptions of improving their English vocabulary. However, this research focused only on students' perspectives on vocabulary learning. It did not address the technical aspects of how teachers navigate challenges and use strategies to conduct assessments in inclusive classrooms serving students with diverse needs, especially within the Montessori approach.

Therefore, this study takes a novel approach by focusing on the elementary school level to explore challenges and the alternative assessment strategies teachers use to monitor students' English language development in inclusive Montessori classrooms. By focusing on the elementary school level, this case study is expected to fill a gap in the literature and make a real contribution to the development of more adaptive evaluation instruments for inclusive students at an early age.

To support the analysis of this study, several theoretical perspectives related to assessment strategies in inclusive classrooms are presented. This study examines four main perspectives: inclusive assessment, Montessori assessment, differentiated assessment, and the challenges of inclusive assessment. This framework helps explain how teachers adjust their assessment practices to accommodate students with diverse needs in inclusive Montessori classrooms.

The term “*Inclusive Education*” refers to educational methods designed to address these issues and support more equitable learning outcomes (Rabby & Henderson, 2025). Inclusive education is an approach to the learning process that emphasizes diversity as its primary foundation (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023). Inclusive schools integrate children with special needs into regular classes, reflecting the diversity of students within a class (Dewi et al., 2025). Inclusive education became an essential basis for understanding how Montessori teachers understand and implement assessment practices in classrooms with diverse abilities. In inclusive assessment, the focus is on fairness, which can be understood along various dimensions (Finn et al., 2025). Understanding inclusive education is important for teachers to implement it smoothly (Padmadewi et al., 2024). Respecting diversity in an inclusive classroom means that teachers must determine appropriate teaching methods, as each student has different needs (Sari et al., 2020). Additionally, the Assessment for Inclusion is designed to use assessment as a tool for inclusion by reframing the separation between inclusive assessment design and individual needs. (Nieminen, 2024).

The Montessori method emphasizes preparing the school environment. Children can develop freely, at their own pace, without any obstacles to the natural development of their abilities (Montessori, 2004). In the context of assessment, Assessment in Montessori education is a continuous process that allows for a holistic view of student achievement and is the result of the learning process (Şimşek et al., 2021). In the context of EFL, through practice, assessment, and evaluation, they learn to speak fluently by applying what they have learned and filling in gaps, ultimately demonstrating excellent language-learning outcomes. (Wiraningsih & Dewi, 2020).

Differentiated assessment is an approach in which teachers adjust assessment methods to accommodate students’ varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2001). Differentiated assessment emphasizes addressing students’ weaknesses to meet their needs through specialized learning strategies (Swasty et al., 2025). However, differentiated assessment was designed to meet students’ individual learning needs by taking into account differences in interests, learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds. Saraswati et al. (2022) state that Differentiated assessment is an approach designed to meet students’ individual learning needs by taking into account differences in interests, learning styles, abilities, and backgrounds.

Assessment in inclusive classrooms poses complex challenges due to students’ diverse developmental profiles. One of the main obstacles is that teachers find it difficult to balance the flexibility of observation methods with the rigid learning outcomes required by the national curriculum, such as the Merdeka Curriculum (Siswiyanti & Astuti, 2022). This challenge is compounded by the lack of formal training and support for teachers, leading many to rely solely on intuition or personal experience, thereby risking bias or subjectivity in assessment (Swasty et al., 2025). Teachers also often face challenges, including the lack of specific training for teaching students in inclusive education, which includes both typical students and students with special needs (Adnyani et al., 2024). Assessing students based on their readiness, learning style, and interests often requires a variety of assessment tools

and materials, which can limit resources and make it difficult for teachers to implement diverse assessments effectively (Putri et al., 2025).

METHODS

This study used interpretive qualitative research with a case study design, as explained by Creswell & Creswell (2018). Case studies allow for in-depth exploration of a limited system, namely assessment practices at a Montessori-based elementary school in Bali, hereinafter referred to as School M. This design is appropriate for investigating the “*how*” and “*why*” behind teachers’ strategies, as well as the challenges they face in an inclusive classroom environment. Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling. Two teachers from School M, who had direct experience teaching inclusive elementary classes to students with special needs (*identified as student A and student B*), participated in this study. Participants were selected because they were responsible for implementing the Montessori assessment system for inclusive students, particularly in English language learning. To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed a credibility strategy through member checking, in which interview transcripts were shared with participants to verify their accuracy and consistency. Additionally, the researcher conducted systematic coding during thematic analysis to ensure consistency in data interpretation. The data in this study were collected using semi-structured interviews to ensure the depth of the findings. The researcher will conduct interviews with participants to uncover their perceptions, beliefs, and concrete experiences related to the challenges of conducting assessments, using an interview guide developed based on Robbins and Judge’s (2013) perception theory to explore how teachers interpret the needs of inclusive students in the classroom. The collected data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify, analyze, and report patterns and main themes. This process involved familiarizing oneself with the data through interview transcripts, initial coding, and developing major themes related to assessment challenges and strategies in inclusive classrooms. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the coding and interpretation of the interview data were conducted meticulously throughout the analysis process. The analysis aimed to interpret teachers’ perceptions in depth, yielding accurate and consistent conclusions about Montessori assessment practices in inclusive classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion from the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews conducted at **School M**. The analysis revealed three main themes that emerged from the data coding process: (1) Professional and Operational Challenges, (2) Implementation of the Narrative Assessment system, and (3) Adaptive Strategies in the development of English language learning. These themes illustrated how teachers navigate the complexity of inclusive classrooms while continuously adapting their assessment approaches to meet diverse student needs.

Professional and Operational Challenges in Inclusive Assessment

Based on preliminary coding, the most significant challenge teachers often face is a lack of formal training in inclusive education (C1). Both respondents perceived the large number of students as an obstacle to providing in-depth assessments.

a) (Difficulty in managing an inclusive classroom)

"Kalau saya sendiri.... saya harus bilang yang terjadi, saya keteteran juga... karena beda ya cara mengajar kelas inklusi dengan anak-anak normal pada umumnya."

(As for me... I have to admit that I'm struggling too... because teaching an inclusive class is different from teaching typical children.)

(T1, Interview)

This suggests that inclusive classrooms impose not only instructional adjustments, but also increased cognitive and emotional demands on teachers, requiring additional pedagogical preparation. Teachers must meet the diverse learning needs of students, which often makes it difficult to manage teaching and assessment effectively in the classroom.

b) (Time Management challenge)

"Kalau si X itu dia kalau belajar shorthand, cuma bisa fokus sekitar 15 menit. Dia juga kadang ada tantrum atau suara-suara berisik karena masalah sensori pendengarannya..... Jadi kita harus pintar-pintar mengatur waktu supaya dia tetap bisa kita pantau."

(When X is learning shorthand, he can only concentrate for about 15 minutes. He also sometimes has tantrums or makes loud noises because of his auditory sensory issues... So we have to be smart about managing our time to keep an eye on him.)

(T2, Interview)

These findings suggest that teachers must continuously adjust their teaching strategies and time management to accommodate the behavioral and cognitive characteristics of students with diverse needs. As a result, teachers often divide their attention and teaching time to ensure that all students receive appropriate support during the learning process. Previous studies have reported that teachers in inclusive education settings often face challenges with classroom management and differentiated instruction due to the diversity of students' abilities (Siswiyanti & Astuti, 2022). In this context, teachers are required to implement flexible teaching strategies and adaptive classroom management practices to ensure that all students can participate effectively in the learning process.

Implementation of a narrative assessment system

The second theme reveals how School M replaced numerical grading with a narrative system that focuses on the process. Based on interviews, this school implements Achievement Levels developed by the school's Montessori expert.**C2.1 (Observation-Based and Non-Numerical Assessment):**

T1 explained in detail that evaluations do not use a numerical scale, but rather direct observation of students. She outlined the achievement categories as follows:

"Kita di sini pakai penilaian NA-C, kalau NA itu Not Applied, berarti pembelajaran ini belum dia dapatkan..... bukan dia tidak bisa, Kalau S itu sometimes, dia baru belajar tapi

belum paham betul. Kalau F (Frequently), mungkin bikin 5 masih salah satu, Kalau sudah C (Consistently), berarti dia sudah bisa tanpa kita bantu."

"Here we use the NA-C grading system. 'NA' stands for 'Not Applied,' meaning the student hasn't mastered this concept yet... it doesn't mean they can't do it. 'S' stands for 'Sometimes,' meaning they're just starting to learn but don't fully understand it yet. 'F' (Frequently) means they might still get one out of five wrong. Once they reach 'C' (Consistently), it means they can do it without our help."

(T1, Interview)

These findings suggest that the assessment process is conducted through ongoing observation, without the use of numerical scores. In the Montessori context, observation is a key element of the assessment process; teachers serve as observers, constantly monitoring students' progress and adapting instruction to meet their needs. This aligns with Yonkers (2023), who states that the role of a Montessori teacher as observer who supports learning tailored to each student's needs and development. This demonstrates that observation plays a crucial role in shaping assessment practices, enabling teachers to continually adjust their evaluations based on each student's progress.

Using the NA-S-F-C code, teachers can more fairly monitor the development of individual inclusive students. This supports Nieminen's (2024) theory of Assessment for Inclusion, in which assessment serves as a tool to embrace the diversity of students' abilities without creating separation through rankings or numbers.

Furthermore, this approach allows teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of each student's learning progress, particularly in inclusive classrooms with diverse ability levels. This can be interpreted as an effort to minimize the labeling of students, so that assessment focuses not on scores but on the individual's developmental process. This aligns with Tai et al. (2023), who state that assessment practices should avoid standardized criteria that may not fully represent students' abilities.

c) (Focus on understanding concepts rather than memorization):

T1 also emphasized the importance of assessments that test conceptual understanding, especially in mathematical logic and language, so that students do not merely memorize:

"Yang pertama itu konsep dulu.... karena kalau nggak ngerti konsep, paling menghafal doang. Jadi dia bisa nggak dengan manik-manik, dengan media apapun, dia sudah ingat ohh konsepnya begini... belajar tidak menghafal"

"First, you need to understand the concept... because if you don't understand the concept, you'll just end up memorizing it. So whether it's with beads or any other tool, they'll already know, "Oh, the concept is like this... learning isn't just about memorization."

(T1, Interview)

These findings highlight that assessments place greater emphasis on conceptual understanding than on rote memorization. This can be interpreted as an effort to ensure that assessments reflect students' deep understanding, rather than merely their ability to recall information. This aligns with the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes that learning occurs through understanding and experience

rather than rote memorization alone (Bruner, 1966). In addition, Assessments should focus on skills relevant to learning objectives and accommodate student diversity (Tai et al., 2023).

d) (In-depth narrative documentation):

Meanwhile, T2 emphasized that the system aims to avoid labeling children. Report Cards are made very detailed for each competency indicator:

“Penilaian ditekankan pada proses belajar tiap anak (Step-nya) dan bukan pada hasil tes akhir..... sejalan dengan prinsip Montessori yang tidak melabeli anak dengan nilai. Jadi di rapor kita itu detail banget, misalnya ‘able to do times small numbers”

“The assessment focuses on each child’s learning process (their progress) rather than on final test scores... in line with the Montessori principle of not labeling children with grades. So our report cards are very detailed; for example, ‘able to multiply small numbers.”

(T2, Interview)

These findings reflect that assessment documentation is conducted narratively and emphasizes each student’s developmental process. This approach allows teachers to understand students’ abilities comprehensively without reducing student achievement to a numerical score. This aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) view, which emphasizes that learning is a gradual developmental process, and with the concept of inclusive assessment, which emphasizes the importance of flexible assessment oriented toward individual development (Tai et al., 2023).

Adaptive Strategies in the development of English language learning.

This final theme describes how teachers adapt their instruction and assessment to accommodate the diverse linguistic abilities of inclusive students. The main code that emerged was “Differentiated Instructional Strategies” (C3).

e) (Two-language strategy):

Because there are differences in language ability within the class (some are fluent in English but cannot speak Indonesian, and vice versa), T2 consistently applies a bilingual approach so that no student is left behind in the instruction:

“Saya selalu pakai double bahasa, biar semuanya paham.... daripada dia nanya terus kan? setidaknya akan ada yang nyantol sedikit-sedikit. Karena kalau bahasa, kalau tidak digunakan, itu bakalan kaku.”

“I always speak in two languages so everyone can understand... rather than having them keep asking questions, right? At least some of it will stick. Because when it comes to language, if you don’t use it, it gets rusty.”

(T2, Interview)

These findings indicate that teachers employ bilingual strategies to accommodate differences in students’ language abilities within inclusive classrooms. Students will be able to keep up with the lesson material without falling behind due to specific language limitations. Bilingual instruction can support the gradual development of students’ linguistic abilities.

This is consistent with Cummins’ (2000) theory, which states that using the first language can support second-language processing and help students understand concepts more effectively. In addition, this strategy aligns with the concept of inclusive assessment, which emphasizes flexible approaches to enable all students to engage more effectively in learning (Tai et al., 2023).

(Teaching at the Right Level):

This strategy is applied to inclusive students who have communication barriers. T1 explained that for one of the students with this condition, the teacher did not impose high curriculum standards, but instead adjusted to the student's basic abilities:

"Aktivitas yang diberikan kepada Siswa X lebih fokus pada kosakata dasar (vocabulary), seperti menggunting dan menempel gambar buah. Karena ia belum mencapai Level 1, jadi kita menghindari pemaksaan materi lanjutan. Kita lebih ke realita, intinya bagaimana kita mengobservasi kebutuhan anak."

"The activities given to Student X focus more on basic vocabulary, such as cutting out and pasting pictures of fruits. Since he hasn't reached Level 1 yet, we avoid forcing advanced material on him. We focus more on reality, essentially, on observing the child's needs."

(T1, Interview)

These findings indicate that teachers adapt their instruction based on students' abilities and needs. This approach reflects student-centered teaching practices, particularly in inclusive classrooms. It can be interpreted as an application of differentiated instruction, in which teachers adapt content, activities, and difficulty levels to match students' abilities and readiness. Tomlinson (2001) emphasizes that effective learning must take into account students' individual differences so that every student can learn to the best of their ability.

Stimulation through Repetition and Hands-on Practice

Teachers provide stimulation so that students become accustomed to listening and dare to try speaking, even though their language is still mixed (code-mixing). T2 mentioned the importance of giving appreciation, such as stickers, and involving children in practical activities:

"...Jadi harus terbiasa dia mendengar dan ngomong. Kalau anak saya ngomongnya mix, saya bilang nggak apa-apa, kamu kan sudah mencoba... biasanya saya kasih stiker untuk mereka di kelas biar lebih excited"

"...So he needs to get used to listening and speaking. If my child mixes things up when speaking, I tell him: it's okay, you're trying, after all... I usually give them stickers in class to get them more excited."

(T2, Interview)

These findings indicate that teachers provide stimulation through repetition, hands-on practice, and emotional support to encourage students to feel confident using the language. This approach helps students become accustomed to communicating, even though code-mixing still occurs.

This is consistent with second-language acquisition theory, which emphasizes the importance of exposure and repeated practice in language learning (Krashen, 1985). In addition, giving stickers as a form of recognition helps boost students' motivation to keep trying to communicate in their language.

Overall, these findings suggest that adaptive learning strategies play a crucial role in supporting language learning in inclusive classrooms. Adjustments in language use, material difficulty, and teaching approaches enable teachers to accommodate

students' diverse abilities, thereby creating a more inclusive and meaningful learning environment.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that assessment practices in inclusive classrooms at School M are challenging and require ongoing adaptation, as teachers must simultaneously manage the diversity of students' needs, adjust learning strategies, and conduct ongoing assessments. The first finding reveals that teachers frequently face various professional and operational challenges, particularly when managing inclusive classrooms while managing instructional time. The second finding indicates that implementing an observation-based narrative assessment system offers a more flexible alternative focused on students' developmental processes, thereby accommodating diverse abilities without emphasizing numerical scores. The third finding highlights the importance of adaptive learning strategies, such as bilingual instruction, adjusting learning levels, and providing stimulation through hands-on practice, in supporting students' language development in inclusive classrooms. Overall, this study confirms that assessment in an inclusive context is not only related to assessment methods, but also to how teachers interpret each student's needs and adapt learning practices responsively. Therefore, a flexible, contextual, and student-centered assessment approach is key to creating an inclusive and meaningful learning environment.

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