



The Implementation of Universal Design for Learning in English Instruction at an Inclusive Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

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Inclusive education in elementary schools ensures equitable learning opportunities for students with diverse needs; however, instructional practices often assume learner homogeneity. This study investigates the implementation of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework in English language instruction at an inclusive elementary school in Yogyakarta, focusing on the principles of multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and examined using an interactive analysis model. The findings indicate that UDL is implemented contextually, particularly in engagement and representation, as teachers utilize game-based learning, participatory activities, and multimodal resources to enhance motivation and accessibility. However, implementation of action and expression remains limited, particularly in assessment practices, which are still largely standardized and dominated by written tests. These findings suggest that UDL implementation remains at an emerging stage, where diverse instructional strategies have not yet been fully aligned with differentiated assessment approaches. This study contributes to the limited literature on UDL in English language teaching in inclusive elementary contexts in Indonesia and highlights the need to strengthen teachers' competencies in designing flexible and differentiated assessments.

Keywords

Elementary Schools
English Instruction
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**Introduction**

Inclusive education emphasizes the right of all students to learn without discrimination, including those with special needs, within a unified system. It is grounded in principles of justice and equality that treat diversity as an inherent aspect of learning rather than a barrier [1]–[2]. In Indonesia, national policies have strengthened its implementation by encouraging regular schools to enroll and support students with diverse learning needs [3]. However, evidence shows that success depends not only on policy and access but also on teachers' readiness to design instruction that responds to student diversity [4].

In practice, inclusive schools still face significant challenges, particularly the persistence of uniform learning designs. Many teachers plan instruction as if students share similar abilities, learning styles, and learning pace. This approach can create barriers for students with special needs, including those with cognitive impairments, attention disorders, or specific sensory needs [5]. Although these students are physically present in regular classrooms, they may not be fully engaged in learning. This condition suggests that inclusion requires more than physical placement; it demands fundamental changes in instructional design and practice [6].

These challenges are more pronounced in English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction. English learning requires multiple linguistic and cognitive skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For students with special needs, conventional approaches that rely on textbooks and written exercises often limit access [7]. Studies indicate that inclusive students may struggle to understand instructions, process written texts, and express their understanding through restricted assessment formats [8]. English instruction in inclusive settings therefore requires flexible approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a relevant framework to address these challenges. It draws on neuroscience evidence that individuals learn in different ways [9]. UDL promotes designing instruction to be accessible from the outset rather than modifying it after barriers appear. Its three core principles are multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression [10].

In English language learning, UDL enables teachers to present content through varied modalities, including text, images, audio, video, and interactive tasks. Varying representation helps learners with reading or language processing difficulties understand content more effectively [11]. Offering choices in activities and assessment, such as oral presentations, visual projects, or video tasks, allows students to demonstrate understanding according to their strengths and preferences [12]. UDL can reduce learning barriers and increase engagement in inclusive classrooms.

Despite growing interest in UDL, research on its implementation in English language learning in inclusive schools in Indonesia remains limited. Most studies address general subjects or higher education, while school-level EFL contexts are underexamined [13]. Several studies in Indonesia have examined the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), particularly in higher education and general inclusive learning contexts. For example, [14] investigated the impact of UDL on students with disabilities in higher education and found that UDL enhanced students' confidence and participation in learning activities. Other studies in Indonesia [15] have also focused on teacher training and self-efficacy related to UDL implementation rather than classroom practices in English language learning. However, research specifically addressing how UDL is implemented in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction within inclusive elementary school settings remains limited. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring teachers' implementation of UDL principles in inclusive EFL classrooms in Indonesia. Existing work also tends to focus on outcomes rather than how teachers enact UDL in planning, instruction, and assessment. Examining implementation is essential to connect UDL theory with classroom practice [16]–[17].

This study addresses that gap by analyzing the implementation of UDL in English language learning in inclusive schools, with a focus on teacher practice. It examines how UDL principles are applied, identifies instructional practices that reflect these principles, and explores the challenges and adaptation strategies used by teachers in inclusive classrooms. The findings are expected to contribute to UDL scholarship in EFL and offer practical recommendations for teachers, schools, and policymakers to support inclusive and equitable English instruction.

Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative method with a case study design. A qualitative approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in English language learning in inclusive schools, which cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone [18]. It enables exploration of participants' meanings, experiences, and interpretations within their natural context [19]. The case study focused on a single bounded system, English language learning in an inclusive school [20]. This

design is appropriate for examining how and why a phenomenon occurs when its boundaries with the context are not clearly defined. It supports a holistic analysis of UDL implementation, including classroom dynamics, teacher strategies, and student experiences.

The study was conducted at Intis Yogyakarta Elementary School, an inclusive school that provides English instruction in regular classrooms with diverse learners. The site was selected purposively because it implements inclusive education and has experience supporting students with special needs. This selection ensured a context relevant to the research focus and capable of providing information-rich data [21]. The participants consisted of two English teachers and 32 students enrolled in English classes at the inclusive elementary school. Among the students, five were identified as having diverse learning needs, including learning difficulties and physical disabilities.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Multiple methods were used to enhance credibility through triangulation [22]. Interviews involved English teachers and selected students. Non-participant observations were conducted to gather direct evidence of classroom practices, with the researcher acting solely as an observer [20]. Observations focused on the three UDL principles: multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression [9]. Document analysis was used to support and verify findings from interviews and observations.

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, consistent with qualitative research procedures [22]. The study applied an interactive analysis model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, interview, observation, and document data were selected and coded according to themes related to UDL principles. Data display involved organizing findings into descriptive narratives and thematic matrices to identify patterns and relationships. Conclusions were developed iteratively and verified to ensure the accuracy and consistency of interpretation [22].

Results and Discussions

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework uses multiple means of accessing content, engaging in the learning process, and demonstrating learning outcomes. The findings of this study are organized around the three core UDL principles: multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.

A. Multiple Means of Engagement

Engagement in UDL emphasizes student motivation, interest, and active participation through varied strategies. [23] refers to this as the “why” dimension of learning. The focus is to design an environment that captures and sustains motivation throughout the lesson [24]. Interviews indicated that teachers promoted active engagement through games, group work, presentations, and student involvement in instruction.

“When we design it, we use a lesson plan called a DLP (Daily Learning Proposal). We prepare it before class, and to capture students’ interest, I usually start with a game.”

The teacher adapts methods to students’ characteristics, which are predominantly visual, by using PowerPoint and games to stimulate interest. She also varies activities, including games and presentations, based on class needs. These practices align with the principle of multiple means of engagement, which aims to sustain motivation and participation.

The teacher also integrates games as review activities and applies participatory strategies. Students are involved in reading, asking questions, and occasionally teaching content to peers. This approach fosters student agency. The teacher encourages participation without pressure, creating a supportive environment where students feel comfortable answering questions, even when incorrect. Observations and student interviews confirmed that the teacher consistently invites responses, interacts actively, and does not penalize mistakes.

“With games and by involving students in the process, the lesson becomes more effective.”

Teachers also present material and conduct assessments through topic-related games. Classroom observations showed that after a lesson on describing people, students played a game in which one student acted as an artist, drew a classmate, and described their features while others guessed the person. This activity supports speaking practice in an enjoyable, low-pressure setting.

The findings show consistent use of engagement-oriented strategies, including game-based learning, collaborative tasks, and two-way interaction. These practices reflect the UDL principles of recruiting interest and sustaining effort and persistence [9]. Games at the start of lessons function as both icebreakers and instructional strategies that prepare students for learning. This aligns with [25], who found that game-based activities enhance intrinsic motivation and cognitive engagement in inclusive settings. Student participation in presentations, group discussions, and peer teaching also indicates efforts to build student agency [26]. From an affective perspective, the teacher creates a psychologically safe environment in which errors are treated as part of learning rather than failure. This practice aligns with the UDL principle of self-regulation, which highlights the role of emotional support in sustaining engagement [27]–[28].

However, these strategies remain largely whole-class and do not fully address individual differences in motivation. This suggests that UDL implementation in engagement is at an early stage, where varied strategies are applied but not yet differentiated at the individual level.

B. Multiple Means of Representation

Multiple Means of Representation in UDL refers to presenting content in varied ways. As shown in [2], this principle emphasizes delivering information through text, visuals, audio, and direct experience to accommodate diverse ways of understanding. In the observed inclusive

elementary school, English teachers presented material progressively, moving from basic to more complex concepts and linking content to students' daily experiences.

"I usually start from the basics and connect the material to their daily lives."



Source: personal documentation

Fig. 1. Students' engagement in the classroom

Interviews also showed that teachers use diverse media and resources. The school's textbooks include reading texts, audio for listening, and video links as supplementary materials, which support multimodal instruction. When needed, teachers add external resources such as online platforms and interactive tools. These practices align with UDL principles of perception and comprehension, which emphasize providing alternative representations to support varied learning needs [10].

"Fortunately, our book is supported by an application with audio, video, and games. If that is not sufficient, I look for additional sources, usually online, such as Wordwall or quizzes."



Source: personal documentation

Fig. 2. Teacher showing short animated video related to the materials

App-based textbooks with audio, video, and digital games integrate technology to enhance accessibility. [29] found that multimodal representation improves comprehension, particularly in foreign language learning, which involves complex linguistic processing. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers use a range of media, including images, videos,

audio, PowerPoint, learning applications, and digital games such as Wordwall and quizzes. These resources are typically implemented in whole-class instruction and rotated during lessons. In terms of accessibility, audio for listening tasks, instructional videos, and visual images help address different learning styles.

However, differentiation based on specific sensory or cognitive needs remains limited. Instruction tends to be uniform, as students are grouped based on perceived similar abilities rather than individualized needs.



Source: personal documentation

Fig. 3. Using Power Point and picture in explaining the texts

Teachers present material progressively, moving from basic to more complex concepts, and connect it to students' daily lives. This approach reflects scaffolding and the activation of prior knowledge, which support the development of meaningful understanding.

However, differentiation in representation remains limited. Variation occurs mainly in the use of media rather than in adaptations for specific sensory or cognitive needs. Instruction is still delivered in a whole-class format, which limits the potential of UDL to provide fully inclusive access. This suggests that implementation of the representation principle is multimodal but not yet adaptive.

C. Multiple Means of Action and Expression

The third UDL principle, Multiple Means of Action and Expression, emphasizes flexibility in how students demonstrate knowledge [30]–[31]. Some students communicate more effectively through speaking, while others perform better through writing, drawing, or digital media. This flexibility enables students to show their abilities without being restricted to a single assessment format. Observations indicated that teachers assign projects for each unit, particularly in higher-level classes.

"Each unit in the textbook includes a project, which gives students opportunities to express themselves."

This principle requires opportunities for varied forms of expression [32]. Findings show that students engage in presentations, projects, and language practice across speaking, writing, and listening. Projects are used as a space for students to explore ideas and demonstrate

understanding. Although assessment remains largely based on written tests, teachers include practical components such as speaking tasks and projects in overall grading. However, students are not given options in assessment methods, and all students complete the same tasks. Compared to the other UDL principles, implementation of action and expression is less developed. While teachers provide varied activities, evaluation remains dominated by uniform written tests. UDL emphasizes offering choices in how students demonstrate understanding [5],[33], yet such flexibility is limited. This aligns with [8], who note that assessment practices often remain constrained by traditional approaches.

The use of projects indicates potential for deeper UDL implementation. Projects allow students to explore ideas and express understanding more creatively. However, without variation in assessment criteria or product formats, they do not fully reflect UDL flexibility.

In terms of scaffolding, teachers provide support through guiding questions and direct instruction. However, this support is not accompanied by structured development of metacognitive skills, such as self-reflection or the use of clear rubrics. This suggests that implementation of action and expression remains at a surface level, where varied activities exist but are not integrated into a flexible and differentiated assessment system.

Table 1. Summary of the Analysis of UDL Implementation

Main Theme	Category	UDL Implementation
Multiple Means of Engagement	Game-based learning	Learning activities begin with games, including reviewing previously learned material through game-based activities.
	Student involvement	Students are engaged in discussions, question-and-answer sessions, alternating text reading, and presentations.
	Emotional support	Students are provided with motivation, and the teacher corrects pronunciation in a supportive and non-judgmental manner.
Multiple Means of Representation	Visual support	The teacher provides learning materials in the form of images, flashcards, reading texts, and short videos.
	Audio-visual integration	Video materials are used to support the content being studied; background music accompanies task completion, and listening exercises are incorporated.
	Simplification of Learning Materials	Instruction is delivered progressively, starting from basic concepts, with vocabulary reinforcement by listing key words from the text on the board.
Multiple Means of Action and Expression	Variety of Tasks	Assignments tend to be uniform within each class; however, they vary across different proficiency levels (e.g., Starters, Movers, Flyers, and High Flyers). While this indicates some level of differentiation, flexibility in assessment within the same classroom remains limited.
	Variety of Tests	Assessment practices are predominantly written, although some evaluations are conducted orally.

There are gaps in the implementation of UDL principles. Engagement and representation are more developed than action and expression. Teachers adopt instructional strategies, such as varied media and activities, more readily than approaches that require systemic change, including differentiated assessment.

This result supports [16], who argue that UDL implementation often begins with changes in teaching methods before progressing to comprehensive redesign. In this study, UDL can be characterized as an emerging practice. Teachers show awareness of student diversity but still face constraints in fully applying UDL principles, particularly in assessment.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that UDL in English learning in inclusive elementary schools is implemented in practical and context-sensitive ways. Teachers demonstrate an understanding of flexible material presentation, varied methods, and the importance of students' emotional engagement. Implementation of multiple means of engagement is strong, reflected in the use of games and active student participation, consistent with student-centered learning. In terms of representation, the use of multimodal resources, including visual, audio, and digital media, shows teachers' awareness of students' diverse learning needs and accessibility requirements. However, differentiation based on individual needs is not yet systematically incorporated into formal lesson planning.

For action and expression, teachers provide varied tasks, but the assessment system remains dominated by written tests, which limits the application of alternative forms of expression. Theoretically, this study reinforces the idea that successful UDL implementation in EFL contexts depends not only on teachers' conceptual understanding of UDL, but also on their ability to apply its principles in assessment practices. Practically, the findings highlight the need for teacher training that emphasizes alternative assessment and differentiated evaluation as integral components of UDL.

Limitation and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single inclusive elementary school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the observation period was relatively short, which may not fully capture long-term implementation of UDL practices. Third, the study did not measure the impact of UDL on students' learning outcomes quantitatively. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools and adopt mixed-method approaches.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in collecting data, analysing data, and reporting data during this research was conducted.

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