



Navigating the Silent Struggle: A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Teachers' Problem-Focused Coping Strategies for Slow Learners

Rodiatul Audiyah Lubis¹, Farida Repelita Waty Br. Kembaren²

^{1,2}English Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

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Corresponding Author:

Rodiatul Audiyah Lubis
rodiatul0304222045@uinsu.ac.id
English Education, Universitas
Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

Abstract

This study explores how EFL teachers apply problem-focused coping (PFC) strategies, such as instructional adaptation, material modification, and remedial support, when teaching slow learners in inclusive classrooms. The study addresses a gap in the literature by examining teachers' coping strategies within the context of Indonesian inclusive EFL classrooms, an area that remains underexplored. Using a narrative inquiry approach, the study involved two female EFL teachers from a private inclusive school in Medan, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews focusing on teachers' professional experiences in managing heterogeneous classrooms. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal that teachers actively adjusted instructional practices, modified learning materials, and implemented remedial activities to address slow learners' cognitive challenges. These strategies not only enhanced students' classroom engagement but also helped reduce teachers' emotional burden. The study highlights the importance of strengthening inclusive education training for EFL teachers to support the effective implementation of active coping strategies in diverse classroom settings.

1. Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' future by providing knowledge and skills that support positive behavioral development and improve quality of life (Nurfadillah et al., 2022). As a fundamental human right, quality education should be accessible to all learners regardless of their background or characteristics, including those with diverse learning abilities. One group that requires particular attention is slow learners, who experience a slower learning pace compared to their peers.

According to G. L. Reddy (1997), slow learners are learners who show below-average academic performance because they require more time to grasp concepts, process information, and retain learning materials, yet they remain capable of achieving educational goals when provided with appropriate instructional support. This grand theoretical view emphasizes that slow learners differ in learning pace and cognitive functioning, not in their capacity to learn.

Slow learners often encounter difficulties in processing information, maintaining attention, and retaining new knowledge, which can hinder their academic progress, especially in subjects that require high cognitive and linguistic engagement such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Singh, 2004). Although their intellectual ability is slightly below average (IQ 70–90), slow learners are not classified as having intellectual disabilities; instead, they require more time, repeated explanations, and targeted instructional support to understand learning materials effectively (Khayati, 2016). Consequently, teachers face significant challenges in addressing the learning needs of slow learners, making appropriate instructional strategies and additional support essential.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, slow learners face complex challenges due to limitations in cognitive processing, working memory, and attention, which hinder their ability to understand instructions and retain new language input. These conditions require teachers to adapt materials, adjust instructional pacing, and provide individualized support, often within limited time and resources. Consequently, teaching slow learners may increase teachers' workload and emotional pressure, potentially affecting their instructional effectiveness and mental well-being.

Previous studies indicate that many teachers feel unprepared because they lack special training (Mirani & Chunawala, 2015), while the emotional pressure of teaching mixed-ability classes can cause teacher stress and burnout (Hussain et al., 2019). To deal with these difficulties, teachers use different coping strategies. The concept of coping strategies originates from the transactional theory of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who conceptualized coping as cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage internal and external demands perceived as stressful.

Coping strategies are generally categorized into problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping refers to deliberate actions aimed at modifying or eliminating the source of stress through planning, decision-making, and active problem solving. In educational settings, this theoretical foundation suggests that teachers do not merely endure instructional challenges but actively respond to them through strategic pedagogical adjustments.

Among these, problem-focused coping involves actively addressing the source of stress through planning, adapting teaching methods, and leveraging available resources (Khalid, 2017; Blindheim et al., 2025). This kind of coping helps teachers reduce stress, stay motivated, and improve their teaching results.

Despite the increasing implementation of inclusive education, teaching slow learners in EFL classrooms remains challenging due to differences in learning pace, language proficiency, and cognitive processing. Recent studies on inclusive EFL education emphasize the need for adaptive instructional practices and teacher preparedness in responding to learner diversity.

However, most studies have focused on students' learning outcomes or teachers' emotional experiences, while limited attention has been given to how teachers actively cope with instructional challenges in inclusive EFL settings. Furthermore, existing research frequently relies on quantitative approaches, providing limited insight into teachers' lived experiences and coping processes in classroom practice.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on problem-focused coping as an active pedagogical practice rather than merely a stress-management mechanism. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine emotional coping or teacher well-being, this study explores how EFL teachers employ instructional planning, material adaptation, and remedial support to address the needs of slow learners in Indonesian inclusive classrooms. By examining coping strategies within actual teaching practices, this study contributes to a more contextualized understanding of inclusive EFL instruction.

To capture teachers' lived experiences and professional reflections, this study adopts a narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry is particularly suitable because it enables researchers to explore how teachers interpret, respond to, and make meaning of instructional challenges over time. Through teachers' narratives, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the strategies they use to support slow learners while managing the complexities of inclusive EFL classrooms.

Therefore, this study aims to explore: (1) How do EFL teachers apply problem-focused coping strategies in teaching slow learners? and (2) How do these strategies help teachers manage cognitive and linguistic challenges in EFL instruction?

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to explore how EFL teachers apply problem-focused coping strategies when teaching slow learners in inclusive classrooms. Narrative inquiry was selected because it enables researchers to examine participants lived experiences, personal meanings, and professional reflections within specific educational contexts (Creswell, 2007).

In language education research, narrative inquiry allows teachers to articulate their experiences, challenges, and instructional decisions through storytelling, thereby providing rich insights into pedagogical practices and coping processes (Widodo, 2014). This approach was therefore considered appropriate for understanding how teachers interpret and respond to the challenges of teaching slow learners in inclusive EFL settings.

The study was conducted at a private inclusive elementary school in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, where students with diverse learning abilities, including slow learners, are educated in mainstream classrooms. The researcher had previously completed an eight-month teaching internship at the school, which facilitated familiarity with the school environment and helped establish rapport with participants. However, to minimize potential bias arising from this dual role as intern and researcher, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process, and interpretations were continuously reviewed to ensure that findings were grounded in participants' narratives rather than the researcher's prior assumptions.

The participants were two female EFL teachers selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included: (1) currently teaching English in inclusive classrooms, and (2) having direct experience teaching slow learners. Both participants held degrees in English Language Education but had not received formal training in special education. The use of two participants was considered appropriate because narrative inquiry prioritizes depth, richness, and contextual understanding rather than large sample sizes.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant	Gender	Educational Background	Teaching Context
T1	Female	English Language Education	Inclusive Elementary Classroom
T2	Female	English Language Education	Inclusive Elementary Classroom

Table 2. Data Sources and Analysis

Data Source	Frequency	Purpose
Classroom Observation	8 sessions	Identify coping practices in classroom settings
Semi-Structured Interview	2 interviews	Explore teachers' experiences and perceptions
Field Notes	Throughout observation	Support contextual interpretation
Thematic Analysis	Braun & Clarke (2006)	Generate themes from coded data

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of two months. Classroom observations were carried out on four occasions for each participant (eight observations in total), with each session lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The observations focused on instructional practices, teacher–student interactions, classroom management, and support provided to slow learners. Field notes were recorded systematically during each observation.

Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with both participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and explored teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies when teaching slow learners. The interview protocol was reviewed by an expert in English Language Education to ensure content relevance and clarity. Minor revisions were made based on feedback before data collection commenced. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To enhance credibility, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing data obtained from observations and interviews. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and observation notes; (2) generation of initial codes related to teachers' coping strategies; (3) searching for patterns by grouping related codes into broader categories; (4) reviewing and refining themes to ensure coherence and consistency; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually, and analytical memos were used throughout the process to document emerging interpretations and researcher reflections.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the school prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. All research data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher. During classroom observations, attention was directed toward teachers' instructional practices rather than individual students, thereby protecting student privacy and maintaining ethical standards.

3. Results

This section presents the findings derived from thematic analysis of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with two EFL teachers who had experience teaching slow learners in inclusive elementary classrooms. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis procedures, the data were coded inductively and organized into themes representing teachers' problem-focused coping strategies in responding to instructional challenges. The analysis generated three major themes: (1) Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges of Slow Learners, (2) Problem-Focused Coping Strategies, and (3) Impact of Problem-Focused Coping Strategies on Students and Teachers.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Grade 4 Teacher (Miss A)	Grade 1 Teacher (Miss B)
Learning Challenges of Slow Learners	Difficulties understanding English instructions, limited vocabulary knowledge, and low confidence in speaking activities.	Difficulties in phonics, reading readiness, sustaining attention, and understanding basic concepts.
Problem-Focused Coping Strategies	Simplifying learning objectives, using sentence frames, providing visual support, and adapting instructional activities.	Providing guided practice, remedial instruction, one-on-one support, and game-based learning activities.
Perceived Impact of the Strategies	Increased student confidence, classroom participation, and willingness to communicate in English.	Improved student independence, engagement, task completion, and active participation during lessons.

Theme 1: Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges of Slow Learners

Both participants reported that slow learners experienced difficulties in understanding classroom instructions, maintaining attention, and participating in English learning activities. However, the nature of these difficulties varied according to students' developmental levels. In the Grade 1 classroom, challenges were primarily associated with foundational literacy skills, particularly phonics, reading, and concept comprehension. Miss B explained that some students required considerably more time to understand basic instructions and frequently depended on peers for assistance.

“Some students need much more time to understand basic instructions or concepts, especially in reading and phonics lessons.” (Miss B)

In contrast, Grade 4 students demonstrated greater challenges in productive language use. Miss A observed that although some students could follow simple instructions, they often lacked confidence and vocabulary when expressing ideas in English.

“Some Grade 4 students struggled to understand basic instructions in English, even after repetition.” (Miss A)

Classroom observations supported these findings. Slow learners frequently displayed signs of confusion, reduced attention, and passive participation during learning activities. In several instances, students became distracted, relied heavily on peers, or disengaged from classroom tasks when instructions were not fully understood. These findings suggest that slow learners’ difficulties extend beyond academic performance and encompass cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral dimensions. While Grade 1 students struggled mainly with foundational literacy skills, Grade 4 students encountered greater difficulties in language production and communication.

Theme 2: Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

To address these challenges, both participants employed a range of problem-focused coping strategies aimed at modifying instructional practices and supporting students’ learning needs. Three interconnected categories emerged: instructional adaptation, interactive and remedial support, and visual-technological support.

Instructional Adaptation

Both teachers adapted instruction by simplifying explanations, modifying learning objectives, and providing step-by-step guidance. Miss A frequently broke learning objectives into smaller, achievable targets and used sentence frames to support students’ classroom participation.

“I break down the objectives into smaller, achievable steps.” (Miss A)

Similarly, Miss B simplified instructions and provided repeated explanations using more accessible language to ensure students’ understanding. Observations indicated that teachers frequently provided individual assistance, repeated instructions, and monitored slow learners more closely during classroom activities. These adaptations helped reduce students’ confusion and encouraged greater participation.

Interactive and Remedial Support

The participants also implemented remedial and interactive activities to reinforce learning. Repetition, guided practice, phonics games, picture-word matching, and one-on-one support were frequently used to strengthen students' understanding.

"I simplify the tasks and focus on one skill at a time." (Miss B)

Both teachers emphasized that remedial instruction was most effective when activities were simplified and focused on specific learning objectives. Observations further revealed that students appeared more relaxed and engaged when provided with individualized support and repeated practice opportunities.

Visual and Technological Support

Visual and technological resources emerged as another important coping strategy. Teachers used flashcards, pictures, videos, songs, educational games, and interactive slides to enhance students' comprehension and attention.

"I use videos, songs, and interactive slides to make learning more engaging and easier to understand." (Miss A)

Observation data demonstrated that visual support helped students connect abstract language concepts with concrete representations, reducing confusion and increasing classroom engagement. Overall, these findings indicate that problem-focused coping was enacted through proactive instructional adjustments rather than emotional regulation alone. Teachers actively modified learning environments and instructional practices to address the sources of classroom difficulties.

Theme 3: Impact of Problem-Focused Coping Strategies

The implementation of problem-focused coping strategies produced positive outcomes for both students and teachers. For students, supportive instructional practices contributed to increased confidence, classroom participation, and independence. Both participants reported that students became more willing to answer questions, engage in activities, and complete tasks independently.

"Students become more confident, participate more, and are less afraid of making mistakes." (Miss A)

Observations confirmed that students who initially relied heavily on peers gradually demonstrated greater initiative and participation following repeated support and encouragement. The strategies also contributed to a more positive classroom environment. Simplified instructions, visual support, and guided activities reduced students' frustration and helped maintain classroom engagement.

As a result, the classroom atmosphere became more supportive and conducive to learning. For teachers, students' progress served as an important source of professional motivation. Both participants described small improvements in students' performance as rewarding and encouraging.

"Seeing small improvements motivates me to keep improving my teaching." (Miss A)

These findings suggest that problem-focused coping strategies not only support students' academic and social participation but also strengthen teachers' commitment to inclusive teaching practices.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that teaching slow learners in inclusive EFL classrooms involves multidimensional challenges that extend beyond language instruction itself. Slow learners experienced difficulties in comprehension, attention, vocabulary acquisition, and classroom participation, which affected their engagement in English learning activities. These findings support previous studies suggesting that slow learners require additional instructional support because they process information at a slower pace and often struggle to retain new knowledge (Singh, 2004; Khayati, 2016). However, the present study further demonstrates that these difficulties are not merely individual learner characteristics but are shaped by the interaction between students' cognitive needs, classroom demands, and the instructional environment.

From the perspective of inclusive education, the findings reinforce the principle that learner diversity should be accommodated through flexible and responsive teaching practices rather than expecting all students to learn in the same way or at the same pace. Consistent with inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), the participating teachers adapted instruction, modified learning objectives, and provided individualized support to ensure that slow learners could participate meaningfully in classroom activities. These practices suggest that inclusion is not simply a matter of physical placement in mainstream classrooms but requires continuous pedagogical adaptation to address diverse learning needs.

The findings also highlight the relevance of differentiated instruction theory (Tomlinson, 2014), which emphasizes adapting content, processes, and learning activities according to students' readiness levels and learning profiles. The teachers' use of simplified instructions, step-by-step guidance, sentence frames, remedial activities, and visual support reflects differentiated instructional practices

designed to reduce learning barriers. Interestingly, differences emerged across grade levels. In the Grade 1 classroom, teachers primarily focused on foundational literacy skills such as phonics and reading readiness, whereas in Grade 4 the emphasis shifted toward vocabulary development and speaking confidence. These differences suggest that differentiated instruction should be responsive not only to learners' abilities but also to developmental and linguistic demands at different educational levels.

The findings further extend the concept of problem-focused coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Rather than functioning solely as a mechanism for stress reduction, problem-focused coping emerged as an active pedagogical practice. Teachers addressed instructional difficulties by modifying classroom practices, reorganizing learning activities, and providing targeted support for slow learners. In this sense, coping was closely intertwined with instructional decision-making. The findings therefore contribute to the literature by conceptualizing problem-focused coping as a form of adaptive teaching practice within inclusive EFL classrooms rather than merely an individual response to occupational stress.

At the same time, the findings reveal several institutional constraints that may limit the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Although teachers demonstrated strong commitment to supporting slow learners, they frequently encountered challenges related to time constraints, diverse student needs, and the absence of formal special education training. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that teachers often feel insufficiently prepared to address the complex demands of inclusive classrooms (Mirani & Chunawala, 2015).

The need to simultaneously support slow learners while managing the learning needs of other students may increase teacher workload and place additional emotional and professional demands on teachers. Consequently, successful inclusion depends not only on teachers' individual efforts but also on institutional support systems that provide adequate resources, training, and professional development opportunities.

The findings have important implications for teacher education and professional development. Teacher training programs should incorporate more comprehensive preparation related to inclusive education, differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation, and support strategies for slow learners. In particular, EFL teacher education programs need to move beyond general pedagogical training by providing practical experiences that prepare teachers to respond to learner diversity in real classroom contexts. Strengthening teachers' competencies in these areas may enhance their ability to implement effective problem-focused coping strategies while maintaining inclusive learning environments.

Beyond teacher education, the findings also carry broader implications for Indonesian inclusive education policy. While inclusive education has been increasingly implemented across Indonesian schools, successful implementation

requires more than policy mandates. Schools need systematic support through professional development programs, instructional resources, and collaborative partnerships among teachers, school leaders, and parents. Policies that emphasize teacher preparedness and continuous support may help bridge the gap between inclusive education principles and classroom realities. Therefore, strengthening institutional capacity should be considered a key component of inclusive education reform in Indonesia.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. This study involved only two EFL teachers from a single inclusive school, which limits the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. In addition, the study focused exclusively on teachers' perspectives and did not include students' or parents' viewpoints. Future research may involve a larger number of participants, incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives, and explore coping strategies across different school settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive EFL teaching practices.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers navigate the instructional and linguistic complexities of teaching slow learners in inclusive classrooms through the lens of narrative inquiry. The findings indicate that slow learners encounter significant cognitive barriers, including limited vocabulary mastery, short attention spans, and delayed processing speeds, which frequently manifest as disengagement or a heavy reliance on peers during language activities. Because English serves as a foreign language, these cognitive difficulties are amplified, creating heightened anxiety, confusion, and low academic self-confidence in heterogeneous educational environments.

To mitigate these instructional stressors and prevent cognitive overload, teachers successfully implement dynamic problem-focused coping (PFC) strategies. Rather than acting as static responses, these coping mechanisms operate as active pedagogical interventions. Key proactive strategies include:

- **Instructional Adaptation:** Simplifying instructions, providing step-by-step guidance, modifying learning objectives into smaller, achievable targets, and utilizing sentence frames to support classroom participation.
- **Interactive and Remedial Activities:** Conducting repetition activities, phonics games, matching words with pictures, and providing structured one-on-one remedial support focused on one skill at a time.
- **Classroom Management Strategies:** Implementing positive reinforcement, changing activities into games or movement-based tasks to regain focus, breaking tasks into shorter durations, and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere where students feel emotionally safe.
- **Visual and Technological Support:** Preparing flashcards, pictures, educational games, videos, songs, and interactive PowerPoint slides to reduce confusion, help students process information better, and maintain

classroom attention.

The implementation of these proactive pedagogical adaptations produces a mutually reinforcing cycle of benefits for both students and educators. For slow learners, tailored instruction reduces classroom frustration, builds oral participation confidence, and fosters greater academic independence. Simultaneously, witnessing these small increments of student progress directly enhances the teachers' professional motivation, patience, and commitment.

Ultimately, this study underscores that coping in inclusive language settings should not be viewed merely as individual emotional regulation, but as an active, structured pedagogical framework. These findings highlight the critical necessity for comprehensive professional development and specialized training programs that equip EFL educators with the necessary instructional design tools to foster equitable, supportive, and effective inclusive learning environments.

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