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OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE
COURSES: A MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT**Wendy Hiew^{1*}, Bernadette Tobi², Priscilla Shak³¹ Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1060003**This work is licensed under** [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This study investigates the challenges, learning needs and coping strategies of students with disabilities enrolled in English language courses at a Malaysian public university. It also explores the perspectives of English language instructors to provide a triangulated understanding of institutional and pedagogical readiness. Using a qualitative approach grounded in semi-structured interviews with 24 students from diverse disability categories, the research provides nuanced insights into their academic and social experiences. Thematic analysis identified five overarching themes: (1) physical and environmental barriers, (2) learning and instructional challenges, (3) communication and social participation, (4) coping strategies and support systems, and (5) inclusive pedagogy and lecturer support. Findings reveal that students with disabilities face compounded barriers such as inaccessible learning environments, inconsistent teaching accommodations and emotional fatigue from self-advocacy. Instructors acknowledged a lack of formal training in inclusive pedagogy and expressed a need for structural and policy-level support. Despite these limitations, students demonstrated resilience and agency by adopting various strategies, including self-regulation, peer support and direct communication with lecturers. The study highlights the importance of systematic inclusive training for instructors, institutional support structures such as disability support centres and flexible, universally designed learning environments. It underscores the need for policy implementation that extends beyond infrastructure and addresses pedagogical practices within language classrooms. These insights contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive education in Southeast Asia and offer practical implications for

institutions striving to create more equitable English language learning experiences.

Keywords:

Inclusive Education, Students with Disabilities, English Language Learning, Higher Education, Challenges, Coping Strategies

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of global higher education reform, promoting the right of all learners—regardless of ability—to fully and equitably participate in academic life (UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2006). In university contexts, inclusion extends beyond physical access to encompass institutional responsiveness to diverse learner needs, including those of students with physical, sensory, learning and cognitive disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Foreman, 2009). These students often encounter systemic, instructional and attitudinal barriers that can hinder their engagement and success in higher education (Shakespeare, 2014).

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced the Guidelines for Inclusive Policy in Higher Education Institutions (*Garis Panduan Dasar Inklusif Institusi Pendidikan Tinggi*) in 2019 to support inclusive practices in public universities (Ministry of Education, 2019). This policy outlines the importance of accessible infrastructure, curriculum accommodations and faculty training to support diverse learners. However, the translation of these inclusive principles into pedagogical practice—particularly in English language instruction—remains limited and inconsistent (Liasidou, 2012; Rao et al., 2014). Language classrooms, especially those focused on English as a second language, often rely on rigid curricula, fast-paced instruction and standardised assessment formats that are not always adapted for students with disabilities (Mitchell, 2014; Loreman, 2017). Meanwhile, instructors themselves often report a lack of training or institutional support, relying on ad-hoc strategies rather than systematic approaches to inclusion (Forlin, 2010; Pantic & Florian, 2015).

At Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 54 students with disabilities—including those with visual, physical, hearing, speech and learning impairments—were enrolled as of August 2024. These students are required to take English language proficiency or academic English courses depending on their MUET band and programme requirements. Various infrastructures and assistance are provided by the University and its Student With Disability Management Centre to assist students with their daily needs including transportation within and outside campus, Braille typewriter and printer, and screen readers (JAWS software), among others.

Although international literature has highlighted inclusive strategies in language education (Hadjikakou & Hartas, 2008), empirical studies focusing on English language learning among students with disabilities in Malaysian higher education remain scarce. To address this gap, this study explores the challenges and learning needs of students with disabilities in English language courses at Universiti Malaysia Sabah and identifies the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. It also incorporates instructor perspectives to triangulate the findings and provide a holistic view of inclusive language teaching practices.

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges and learning needs of students with disabilities in English language courses?
2. What strategies do students with disabilities adopt to overcome these challenges?

Research Design

This qualitative study employed structured open-ended questionnaires to collect data from students with disabilities enrolled in English language courses and their instructors. Thematic analysis was used to code and categorise data inductively. To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of findings, triangulation was applied by integrating instructor data with student narratives. This allowed for the identification of converging or diverging perspectives across themes, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of inclusive teaching practices and student experiences.

Samples of the Study

The study participants comprised of two groups: (1) 12 students with disabilities: eleven who are currently pursuing their undergraduate study at Universiti Malaysia Sabah and one who has graduated; (2) five of their English Language instructors. Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies. Instructors known to have taught students with disabilities were initially contacted through face-to-face and WhatsApp. When their students with disabilities agreed to participate in the study, the researchers contacted them on WhatsApp. The questionnaire was distributed through email to the instructors and WhatsApp to the students. In some cases, students also referred to peers with similar experiences at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, further expanding the sample.

As shown in Table 1, the study involved 12 student participants with self-identified disabilities comprising four males and eight females, spanning across Years 1 to 3, with one graduate. A range of disabilities was represented: vision impairment (3 students), hearing impairment (3), physical disabilities (3), learning disabilities (2) and speech impairment (1). This diversity provided rich insights into the varied challenges and support needs experienced by students with different functional limitations.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants with Disabilities

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Types of Disability	Year of Study
1	S1	M	Hearing impairment	1
2	S2	F	Vision impairment	2
3	S3	F	Vision impairment	2
4	S4	F	Learning disability	2
5	S5	M	Learning disability	3
6	S6	M	Hearing impairment	Graduated
7	S7	F	Hearing impairment	2
8	S8	F	Physical disability	2
9	S9	M	Vision impairment	2
10	S10	F	Speech impairment	2
11	S11	F	Physical disability	2
12	S12	F	Physical disability	3

In addition, five English language instructors participated in the study, including one male and four females, with teaching experience ranging from 8 to 38 years. All were faculty members involved in teaching or supporting students with disabilities. Their experience provided valuable perspectives on inclusive pedagogical practices, instructional barriers and institutional readiness (Table 2).

The 12 students were purposefully selected to represent all identified disability types—physical, sight, hearing, speech, and learning—ensuring a broad range of perspectives. The five instructors chosen have taught these students, allowing for triangulation between student and teacher responses. Data saturation was reached as no new themes emerged, indicating that this sample size adequately captures the complexity of inclusive pedagogical practices in this study's context.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Instructor Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching Experience
1	T1	F	20 years
2	T2	M	16 years
3	T3	F	8 years
4	T4	F	38 years
5	T5	F	25 years

Research Instrument

Two structured open-ended questionnaires were developed for this study—one for students with disabilities and another for their English language instructors. Both instruments were designed to gather in-depth qualitative data aligned with the study's research questions on challenges, learning needs and coping strategies in English language learning.

The student questionnaire consisted of five sections: (1) Demographic and Background Information, (2) Learning Challenges, (3) Learning Needs, (4) Coping Strategies and (5) Perceptions of Teacher Support and Inclusivity. It is designed to prompt students to describe their personal experiences, difficulties and support systems in learning English.

The instructor questionnaire was also divided into five corresponding sections: (1) Background Information, Teaching Context and Experience, (2) Instructional Challenges, (3) Teaching Adaptations, (4) Student Engagement and Participation and (5) Institutional and Professional Support. It is designed to encourage instructors to reflect on their teaching practices, interactions with students with disabilities and views on institutional readiness.

The open-ended format enabled participants to respond in their own words, thus capturing a range of nuanced experiences and perspectives. The instruments were reviewed by two experts in inclusive education and language pedagogy to ensure clarity, relevance and content validity. The instruments were piloted with two students with disabilities and two instructors; all were excluded in the actual data collection. Triangulation between student and instructor responses strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings and allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of inclusive teaching and learning dynamics.

Given the diversity of disabilities among the student participants—including hearing, speech, mobility, and chronic health conditions—a structured open-ended questionnaire was selected over interviews or focus groups to maximise accessibility, inclusivity, and participant comfort. This format minimised communication barriers, allowed flexible response times and provided a sense of anonymity for sharing potentially sensitive experiences. It also ensured consistent coverage of all core questions while enabling student participants to elaborate at length using assistive technologies where needed. Follow-up clarification by email was undertaken when responses required further detail, ensuring depth and accuracy in the data collected.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in full compliance with institutional and international ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Data were collected at Universiti Malaysia Sabah between January and March 2025. The questionnaires were distributed in digital format. Student participants received the instrument through WhatsApp while Instructor participants received the questionnaire through email. All participants were provided with an informed consent form as part of the questionnaire package, which clearly explained the purpose of the study, assured confidentiality and emphasised voluntary participation. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, with pseudonyms used for any quoted material. All data collected would be treated as confidential and accessible only to the researchers.

Participants were given seven days to complete the questionnaire, depending on their availability and personal needs. Deadline extension could be given upon request. WhatsApp reminders were sent to student participants as follow-up to ensure a sufficient response rate. For one student with a visual impairment, the questionnaire was completed with the assistance of a caretaker, who helped read the questions and transcribe the student's responses as instructed.

This flexible, participant-sensitive approach ensured that the data collection process was inclusive and ethically sound while respecting the unique accessibility requirements of students with disabilities.

Data Analysis

Data from the structured open-ended questionnaires were analysed using Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) six-stage approach: preparing, exploring, analysing, representing, interpreting and validating. All responses were transcribed, checked for accuracy and imported into NVivo 11 for thematic analysis.

Initial readings of the data helped generate memos and preliminary codes, which were refined into broader categories through open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Themes were then visualised using tables and matrices to support interpretation. Findings were aligned with the research questions and existing literature. To ensure credibility, member-checking was conducted with selected participants to confirm that the findings reflected their experiences (Creswell, 2012).

Results

Thematic analysis of the qualitative responses from the open-ended questionnaire identified five major themes: (1) Physical and Environmental Barriers, (2) Learning and Instructional Challenges, (3) Communication and Social Participation, (4) Coping Strategies and Support System (5) Inclusive Pedagogy and Lecturer Support.

Themes 1, 2 and 3 address the first research question concerning challenges and learning needs, while Themes 4 and 5 correspond to the second research question on coping strategies. Each theme is elaborated below with supporting excerpts from the participants.

Theme 1: Physical and Environmental Barriers

Students highlighted significant environmental challenges that impacted their ability to attend and participate in English language classes. These included long travel distances between facilities, inadequate lighting, inaccessible building design, malfunctioning elevators and poorly ventilated room.

“Navigating the hilly campus was difficult, especially stairs and uneven floors, as my depth perception was poor... walking at night was even harder due to limited visibility and poor lighting. The classroom is quite far and sometimes the lift is not functioning. I had to take the stairs or wait.” (S3, visually impaired)

“There may be physical barriers, such as limited space or lack of accessibility, that make it difficult to move around comfortably.” (S15, wheelchair user)

“In my first semester, the small classroom felt uncomfortable due to the lack of air circulation... Despite this, the Smart UMS (Universiti Malaysia Sabah) library in the final semester was more conducive.” (S8, physical disability)

Instructors confirmed these structural limitations. For instance:

“There were times the lift didn’t work. We had to carry things manually for the student or switch rooms.” (T2)

“Some classes are very cramped. It’s hard to accommodate wheelchair users.” (T4)

These responses demonstrate a shared awareness between students and instructors, though it also reveals reliance on temporary workarounds rather than permanent, inclusive infrastructure.

Theme 2: Learning and Instructional Challenges

Students with sensory impairments reported difficulties with lesson delivery and understanding due to fast-paced teaching and inaccessible materials:

“I cannot catch the words when the teacher speaks fast.” (S1, hearing impaired)

“The English lessons are too fast sometimes. I can’t follow when they explain grammar without examples.” (S11, physical disability)

“Live online discussions or group breakout rooms were challenging due to overlapping audio and technical issues.” (S6, hearing impaired)

“The textbook is not accessible to students with visual impairments like me.” (S3)

“I have difficulty reading because some of the notes provided by the lecturers are in small writing.” (S2, visually impaired)

“Certain English tasks and instructions are hard to understand. It takes me more time than others to process them.” (S5, learning disability)

Instructors acknowledged these instructional limitations:

“For one student with vision impairment, the iTools and textbook were hard to follow, so we created simpler versions.” (T3)

“It’s hard to adapt the speaking component for students with speech impairments during assessments.” (T1)

“The course materials are not always friendly for students with visual or cognitive impairments. The audio recordings can be too fast and the textbook is text-heavy.” (T4)

These accounts reflect a mismatch between standardised teaching tools and the needs of diverse learners, suggesting the need for flexible instructional design.

Theme 3: Communication and Social Participation

Students shared that they often felt isolated or reluctant to participate verbally in class due to shyness, anxiety or fear of being judged:

“I feel nervous when I speak. I feel less confident to speak in English for fear of making mistakes. I just want to pass and go.” (S7, hearing impaired)

“I don’t want to be seen as different. So I don’t talk much in class.” (S4, learning disability)

“Sometimes I feel nervous about making mistakes or speaking in front of others. I worry that others might judge me.” (S15)

“Sometimes I want to ask questions but am afraid of being laughed at or misunderstood.” (S5)

Instructors perceived this silence but often lacked insight into its underlying causes:

“They don’t speak up much... maybe low confidence?” (T5)

“Some students want to appear ‘normal’, so they hide their disabilities. I only knew after asking.” (T2)

These responses highlights a critical affective dimension of disability that impacts language learning, often misunderstood by instructors.

Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Support System

Students demonstrated resilience through various coping strategies: using assistive technologies and relying on friends.

“I listen to the lecture recording again and again.” (S2)

“I use Grammarly and Google Translate to write better.” (S1)

“Tools like speech-to-text apps and captioning software help me to follow the lectures.” (S6)

“JAWS Screen Reading Software and NVDA screen reader help blind people to click either online or elsewhere.” (S9, visually impaired)

“I use Google Translate, Quillbot, Grammarly and ChatGPT... Grammarly helps me check grammar and spelling, while Google Translate helps me understand unknown words.” (S7)

“I rely on Google Translate, grammar checkers and language apps to communicate more effectively and improve my language skills.” (S10, speech impaired)

“I usually ask my friends to explain again after class, or I search YouTube for easier explanations.” (S11)

Instructors described their own efforts to support students informally:

“I prepared PowerPoints with bigger font. Some students also bring caretakers.” (T3)

“We rearranged seating so the student could see the whiteboard.” (T2)

“When I knew I had students with impairments, I made sure materials were ready in advance, but it required extra time and coordination.” (T1)

“Sometimes I help by giving the students extra time or letting them record the lessons, but it’s not always easy to be consistent.” (T4)

These triangulated responses show students’ proactive adaptation and instructors’ willingness to support—though typically without formal guidance or systemic support.

Theme 5: Inclusive Pedagogy and Lecturer Support

Students voiced the need for more awareness among staff, clearer guidelines and better lecturer support:

“Some lecturers have been very supportive, providing accessible documents in advance... others have been less accommodating, often due to a lack of awareness.” (S3)

Students expressed a need for staff development:

“Lecturers should receive training... to understand how partial blindness affects visual perception.” (S3)

“Lecturers need to be exposed to the challenges faced by disabled students, including hearing, vision, or learning problems.” (S7)

Students also desired more equitable curriculum adaptations:

“Consider being less strict in marking presentations, especially for students facing pronunciation challenges due to disabilities.” (S6)

Nevertheless, there are students who provided an encouraging perspective:

“My lecturers and friends are always supportive and understand the needs of each student... they ensure that everyone can participate and learn comfortably.” (S10)

Instructors themselves recognised these limitations:

“I’ve never received formal training. I just learn by doing.” (T5)

“We need a disability support centre or focal point. There’s no policy.” (T3)

“I haven’t had any training in inclusive teaching. I try to help based on my own experience, but there’s no official framework.” (T4)

The convergence here suggests an institutional gap: both students and instructors identify the same weaknesses in training, support and inclusive policy, reinforcing the need for systemic reform.

Summary of Triangulation

Integrating student and instructor perspectives deepens the thematic interpretation and supports the validity of findings. While students provide lived experiences, instructors offer insight into pedagogical challenges and ad hoc solutions. This dual perspective reveals not only alignment (e.g. environmental and instructional barriers) but also critical disjunctions (e.g. affective needs often overlooked). These findings point to the need for institutional-level planning that aligns facilities, pedagogy and training within an inclusive education framework.

The findings from the thematic analysis are interpreted in relation to the research questions and situated within existing literature on inclusive education, disability support and English language learning. The integration of student and instructor responses using triangulation offers a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and support systems in place for students with disabilities enrolled in English language courses.

Discussion

Physical and Environmental Barriers

Student responses highlighted significant challenges related to campus and classroom accessibility. Visually impaired and mobility-challenged students noted issues such as broken lifts, uneven terrain and poorly lit classrooms. These barriers were not only physically demanding but also psychologically taxing, as they affected students’ sense of independence and inclusion.

Instructor accounts corroborated these observations. Several lecturers reported similar frustrations with inaccessible environments. T2 recalled having to carry a wheelchair user up the stairs due to lift failures, while T4 had to change classrooms to accommodate a student with a mobility aid. T5 and T3 noted the limited classroom space, especially when students used assistive tools such as Braille typewriters.

This convergence between student and instructor data illustrates that physical barriers are recognised by both groups but are often managed through impromptu, individual solutions. These findings reinforce calls in the literature for institutional commitment to Universal Design for Learning and accessible campus infrastructure (Rose & Dalton, 2009; Moríña, 2016).

Learning and Instructional Challenges

Students described struggling with fast-paced instruction, inaccessible teaching materials and classroom activities that did not accommodate their specific needs. For example, students with hearing impairments found it difficult to follow oral instructions or listening tasks, while those with visual impairments could not access standard printed materials or digital content with small fonts.

These issues were confirmed by instructors, who reported that standardised course materials such as iTools and textbooks were not compatible with assistive technologies. T3, for instance, described how a blind student needed to rely on a caretaker to access lesson content. T5 explained difficulties in adapting listening tasks for students with hearing impairments, often resorting to transcripts as a workaround.

Such findings underscore the gap between curriculum design and learner diversity. They align with earlier studies suggesting that without flexible and inclusive teaching materials, students with disabilities remain marginalised in language classrooms (Al-Azawei et al., 2016; Almalky & Qaysi, 2025; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022).

Communication and Social Participation

Students frequently reported feeling isolated or reluctant to speak in class due to fear of stigma or language difficulty. Some admitted hiding their disability from peers or instructors to avoid being treated differently. This form of self-concealment can limit access to support and exacerbate academic challenges.

Instructors perceived this silence but often misinterpreted its cause. T5 noted that “students seldom speak up,” attributing it to low confidence, while T2 observed that some students “prefer not to ask for help” or choose indirect forms of communication, such as using caretakers or friends to convey messages.

This triangulated theme highlights a critical area of disconnect—students’ emotional hesitancy is not always visible or understood by instructors. Prior research confirms that social anxiety and self-stigma among students with invisible or non-apparent disabilities can hinder engagement and language learning outcomes (Denhart, 2008; May & Stone, 2010; Lee et al., 2024).

Coping Strategies and Support Systems

Despite facing systemic barriers, students adopted a range of coping strategies, including the use of screen readers, Google Translate and self-monitoring tools such as Grammarly. Many relied on friends for clarification and preferred working independently to reduce the risk of exposure or embarrassment.

Instructors acknowledged and supported these strategies in various informal ways. T3 and T4 shared that they prepared materials in advance, collaborated with caretakers and allowed students to use personal technology during class. Peer support was also encouraged, with some lecturers intentionally seating helpful classmates next to students with disabilities.

While these findings reflect commendable efforts by students and instructors, they also point to the absence of formal institutional frameworks to guide inclusive practices. Literature in this field notes that ad hoc strategies, though beneficial, are insufficient in the long term without systemic pedagogical planning (Fichten et al., 2014; Al-Azawei et al., 2017).

The students' use of AI tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT reflects the growing role of digital assistive technologies in supporting learners with disabilities. These tools provide personalised help with writing and language tasks, enhancing students' autonomy and addressing challenges posed by inaccessible materials or limited instructor support (Song & Song, 2025). Such technologies can significantly improve learning outcomes when used effectively.

However, access to AI-based tools is not equal for all students. Differences in digital literacy, infrastructure, and socioeconomic factors may create disparities, risking further inequities in educational opportunities (Eurofound, 2025). Without institutional support to ensure equitable access and proper training, the benefits of AI tools may be limited to a subset of learners.

Inclusive Pedagogy and Lecturer Support

Students expressed mixed experiences with instructor support. Some reported accommodating lecturers, while others felt unsupported or misunderstood. They emphasised the need for consistent inclusive teaching practices, disability awareness and flexibility in assessments.

Instructor responses echoed this need. Most lecturers admitted having received no formal training in inclusive education. T5 and T3 highlighted the lack of institutional guidance, while T1—who had prior training—emphasised the challenges of implementing inclusion within rigid course structures. Many instructors requested professional development workshops and a centralised disability support system.

This convergence highlights a systemic gap in higher education: while some lecturers are willing to help, the absence of training, policy and resources limits their ability to do so effectively. These findings are consistent with prior research advocating for targeted faculty development and institutional policies that support inclusive education (Lombardi et al., 2011; Fuller et al., 2004; Holloway, 2001).

Integration with Theory and Implications

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Both student and instructor perspectives confirm that traditional “one-size-fits-all” course design excludes learners with disabilities. UDL offers a valuable framework for proactively designing courses that accommodate diverse learner needs from the outset (Rose & Dalton, 2009; Black et al., 2014).

Lecturer Capacity and Policy Alignment

Instructor feedback shows that intentions alone are not enough—policy, training and institutional infrastructure must align. Professional development in inclusive pedagogy is essential to bridge the gap between educator goodwill and actual implementation (Lombardi et al., 2011; Al-Azawei et al., 2017).

Emotional and Social Dimensions

The triangulated findings underscore that emotional safety and social inclusion are as important as academic accommodations. Language anxiety, self-concealment and fear of judgment are prevalent among students and must be addressed through inclusive classroom culture and mentorship (Lee et al., 2024).

Practical Recommendations

Based on the study’s findings, four actionable recommendations are suggested to enhance inclusive practices in English language teaching at the tertiary level.

- 1. Adopt UDL-based design:** Redesign classrooms and adapt learning materials to support diverse modalities.
- 2. Invest in assistive technology:** Provide access to text-to-speech software, screen readers and AI-based tools within curriculum.
- 3. Train teaching staff:** Offer professional development programs, such as the In-Service Programme for English Language Teachers (IPELT), to enhance inclusive instructional practices among English educators.
- 4. Develop inclusive assessments:** Design flexible formats, allow adjusted timelines, and accommodate variations in pronunciation or output format.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges, learning needs and coping strategies of students with disabilities enrolled in English language courses at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, using data triangulated from both students and their instructors. Through a thematic analysis of structured open-ended questionnaire responses, five interrelated themes were identified: (1) Physical and Environmental Barriers, (2) Learning and Instructional Challenges, (3) Communication and Social Participation, (4) Coping Strategies and Support Systems and (5) Inclusive Pedagogy and Lecturer Support.

Findings revealed that students with disabilities encounter a range of physical, instructional and social challenges that directly affect their participation and performance in English courses. Students with mobility, visual and learning impairments highlighted inaccessible classroom spaces, overly standardised learning materials and limited peer or teacher understanding as key barriers. From the instructors' perspective, while there was a clear willingness to support

students, most lacked formal training in inclusive teaching practices and felt constrained by institutional systems and inflexible curricula.

The triangulation of both perspectives confirms that inclusive education within higher education remains inconsistent and dependent on individual initiative rather than systemic support. Students employed various coping strategies, including assistive tools, help from peers and self-advocacy. Some instructors offered accommodations, such as extended time or alternative formats, but without formal guidelines, these supports varied widely in availability and effectiveness.

This study reinforces the importance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in promoting inclusive education but also reveals limitations in its current implementation within Malaysian higher education. Beyond flexible curriculum design, our findings highlight the need to extend UDL frameworks to address institutional factors such as policy support, faculty training, and infrastructure improvements. Additionally, the emotional and social challenges experienced by students suggest that UDL should more explicitly incorporate affective engagement and peer support as core elements of accessibility. By foregrounding these broader institutional and socio-emotional dimensions, this study contributes to advancing UDL theory towards a more holistic and context-responsive model of inclusion.

Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for institutional reforms, including inclusive teaching training for staff, policy frameworks for accessibility and infrastructural upgrades. A coordinated, policy-driven response is essential to move beyond individual goodwill and toward a genuinely inclusive English language learning environment in Malaysian public universities.

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