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EMPOWERING NON-OPTION TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT THROUGH CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Malaysia's inclusive education policy affirms the right of all learners to quality education in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). However, implementation remains challenging when non-option teachers, general teachers without formal training in special education for hearing impairment are placed in special schools, Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) or inclusive classrooms. These teachers face pedagogical, psychological and systemic barriers such as limited sign language proficiency, low confidence and inadequate institutional support. Drawing on national and international literature, this concept paper synthesizes these challenges and proposes a three-dimensional continuous professional development (CPD) framework grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The framework focuses on three dimensions: knowledge through flexible micro-modules, skills through hands-on training, mentorship, and Virtual Reality/Augmented Reality simulations and reflective practice through professional learning communities (PLCs). By positioning CPD as a transformative mechanism, the paper highlights its potential to strengthen teacher competence, resilience and professionalism. As a result, students with hearing impairments are more likely to experience equitable, inclusive and meaningful learning opportunities.

**Keywords:**

Special Education Teachers, Non-Option Teachers, Inclusive Education, Special Education, Continuous Professional Development (CPD), Hearing Impairment

Introduction

Special education in Malaysia has developed in tandem with global aspirations to ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all learners. This commitment is mandated by the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) and aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Within the context of students with special educational needs, those with hearing impairment require specific pedagogical, communicative and support approaches. This need arises from the unique characteristics of their language, cognitive, and social development (Borders et al., 2015; Keser & Tanriverdi, 2021; Luckner, 2012; Molapisi & Phasha, 2024; Nara & Ikeda, 2024). Malaysia has established special schools, the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) and inclusive classrooms for students with hearing impairment. However, the effectiveness of this education depends largely on teacher competence in specialized pedagogy, sign language communication and curriculum adaptation for accessibility.

A significant challenge emerges when non-option teachers, general education teachers without formal training or specialization in special education but assigned to teach students with hearing impairments are placed in special schools, SEIP or inclusive classrooms. Studies indicate that non-option teachers often face pedagogical limitations due to insufficient mastery of sign language or assistive technologies. They also experience psychological burdens such as work overload, low confidence, and stress (Azmi et al., 2017; Dashwini & Ardzulyna, 2022). Teacher placement decisions are frequently based on staffing vacancies rather than professional expertise, creating a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities (Izuli et al., 2020; Seriyayuna, 2019). In mainstream inclusive classrooms, general teachers face the 'dual demands' dilemma of completing the curriculum for typical learners while simultaneously adapting pedagogy for students with hearing impairment. This challenge is compounded by the lack of consistent systemic support such as interpreters, digital resources or teaching assistants (Nazrah & Kama, 2023; Rohaizat, 2019).

Therefore, the presence of non-option teachers should not be perceived as an individual weakness but rather as a systemic challenge that presents opportunities for capacity building through continuous professional development (CPD). Recent scholarship underscores the need for focused micro-modules, intensive sign language courses, co-teaching approaches and digital technology integration to support the learning needs of students with hearing impairment (Izuli & Fathiyah, 2024; Mohd Razimi Husin et al., 2023; Norisah, 2017). This concept paper aims to synthesize the pedagogical, psychological, and systemic challenges faced by non-option teachers of students with hearing impairments in Malaysia and to propose a three-dimensional CPD framework, grounded in ZPD theory and UDL principles, to strengthen teacher competence and advance inclusive education.

Literature Review

Literature on special and inclusive education in Malaysia shows that the commitment to the principle of 'education for all' continues to face structural, pedagogical and psychosocial

challenges. Although national policies such as the Zero Reject Policy and the SDG 4 agenda have advanced the narrative of inclusivity, implementation is often constrained by limited teacher training, inadequate resources and fragmented systemic support (Chin, 2023; Shannen & Soon, 2024). For students with hearing impairment, reliance on visual communication and sign language places a significant burden on teachers (Dashwini & Ardzulyna, 2022). This is especially challenging for non-option teachers assigned to special schools and inclusive classrooms without specialized preparation. This situation is consistent with international findings in the Philippines, Indonesia and Jordan. Similar challenges are reported, including weak sign language proficiency, low pedagogical confidence and inconsistent systemic support (Al-Dababneh et al., 2016; Bajenio et al., 2023; Munawir et al., 2023).

Pedagogical Challenges

Teachers in special schools and SEIP face significant challenges in mastering consistent sign language and visual communication strategies. They often rely on traditional ‘chalk and talk’ methods that are less accessible to students with hearing impairments (Nor Shahida et al., 2023). Religious education teachers, for example, struggle with Qur’anic recitation due to the absence of standardized hand codes, underscoring the need for creative pedagogical adaptations (Izuli & Fathiyah, 2024). Teaching students with hearing impairments requires strong adaptation, given their varied abilities, heavy reliance on specialized Qur’an materials and need for consistent visual–gestural communication (Syar Meeze & Nurnisa Raihana, 2025). In inclusive classrooms, general teachers must balance the needs of both typical learners and students with special needs. However, limited exposure to differentiated instruction often results in uniform teaching that does not adequately address diverse learning styles (Mohamad Taha, 2023; Norfatimah & Syar Meeze, 2022). Teachers struggle to adapt lessons as cochlear implant students cannot follow general instructions and require constant repetition and visual aids (Zarina, 2019). Similar issues are reported internationally. Teachers in the Philippines face challenges in delivering mathematics due to limited sign language skills and reliance on multimedia (Bajenio et al., 2023). In Indonesia, weak linguistic methodologies hinder vocabulary development for students with hearing impairment (Munawir et al., 2023). These parallel challenges underscore the broader international gaps in specialized pedagogy for students with hearing impairment.

Psychological Challenges

From a psychological perspective, many non-option teachers report feelings of inadequacy and low confidence when teaching students with hearing impairment. These challenges stem largely from the absence of specialized training and the need to ‘self-learn’ (Dashwini & Ardzulyna, 2022; Izuli et al., 2020). Emotional strain intensifies when students show limited responses, which can lead to burnout or declining motivation (Gunasegaran et al., 2021; Syar Meeze & Nurnisa Raihana, 2025). In inclusive settings, general teachers experience stress from the ‘dual demands’ of completing the curriculum while supporting students with disabilities (Norfatimah & Syar Meeze, 2022). These students may appear passive or socially withdrawn, adding to the teachers’ emotional burden (Nazrah & Kama, 2023; Zarina, 2019). Such psychological burdens not only affect teachers’ well-being but also risk leaving students feeling excluded and inferior (Zarina, 2019). Internationally, comparable challenges are evident. Teachers in Eswatini and Jordan report low self-efficacy or misplaced confidence (Al-Dababneh et al., 2016; Ntinda et al., 2019). In Indonesia, the lack of formal training undermines teachers’ emotional stability and pedagogical confidence (Dewi et al., 2019).

Systemic Challenges

The most prominent systemic challenge lies in the gap between policy aspirations and actual support in practice. Research highlights that structured training opportunities for special education teachers remain limited (Syar Meeze & Nurnisa Raihana, 2025). In addition, curriculum guidelines are often overly general and lack contextual specificity (Suhartika & Rosadah, 2020; Syar Meeze & Nurnisa Raihana, 2025). In inclusive schools, the general teachers faced limited formal training, heavy workload, lack of resource teachers and curricula misaligned with SEN needs (Norfatimah & Syar Meeze, 2022). The absence of interpreters and consistent teaching aids, coupled with large class sizes, further undermines effective learning for students with disabilities (Mohd Razimi Husin et al., 2023). Weak administrative monitoring often forces teachers to rely on personal initiative. This situation raises critical concerns about whether inclusivity reflects genuine pedagogical support or merely physical placement (Chin, 2023; Khairul Farhah et al., 2018; Zarina, 2019). Similar systemic gaps are reported internationally. Teachers in the Philippines face limited in-service training and underutilized assistive technologies (Bajenio et al., 2023). In Saudi Arabia, misaligned curricula and weak supervision persist (Khasawneh, 2021), while in Eswatini the lack of standardized sign language and minimal parental involvement threaten to reduce inclusive education to symbolic rhetoric (Ntinda et al., 2019).

A synthesis of national and international literature indicates that the core issue is not merely a lack of teacher competence, but rather systemic in nature. Pre-service and in-service training are often misaligned with the actual needs of students with hearing impairment. At the same time, emotional and professional support for teachers remains limited. The pedagogical, psychological and systemic challenges faced by non-option teachers in Malaysia also mirror global patterns.

The Role of Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

In the context of special education, particularly for students with hearing impairment, CPD is not merely supplementary but a fundamental requirement to ensure teachers remain relevant and effective. Although Malaysia's inclusive education policy emphasizes the right of all learners to quality education, a clear gap persists between policy aspirations and classroom realities (Chin, 2023). This gap is particularly evident when non-option teachers without specialized training are assigned to students with special needs. CPD serves as a vital mechanism to bridge this gap by providing ongoing learning opportunities that are modular, practical and responsive to the actual needs of teachers ((Azarul Razimin et al., 2023).

Knowledge: Modular and Contextual Access

Effective CPD must emphasize both foundational and contemporary knowledge that directly supports teachers' needs in practice. Strategies such as micro-modules which are small, focused and flexible units enable teachers to acquire targeted competencies. These include basic sign language, principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the use of captioning technologies within a short and practical timeframe (Cheng et al., 2024). When offered digitally, micro-modules enable teachers to adapt their learning to demanding schedules without depending on lengthy or rigid courses. CPD designed from actual teacher needs ensures that modules are not only relevant and accessible but also readily applicable in classrooms.

This aligns with Azarul et al. (2023), who stressed that teacher professional development must be continuous, relevant and systematically supported to strengthen competence in pedagogy, classroom management and technology integration (Azarul Razimin et al., 2023). The modular and staged approach also reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this framework, teachers receive scaffolding before achieving independent application of new strategies (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, micro-module based CPD enhances the preparedness of non-option teachers in addressing pedagogical challenges and strengthens their capacity to meet the needs of students with hearing impairment in both special and inclusive contexts (Rodríguez-Oramas et al., 2021).

Skills: Hands-on and Collaborative

Beyond knowledge, practical skills represent a critical element of CPD. Approaches such as co-teaching with specialist teachers, mentorship from special education experts and Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) based simulations of inclusive environments can enhance teachers' capacity to manage real-life situations (Toson & Weisling, 2020, 2022). Such hands-on experiences are vital in bridging the gap between theory and practice while strengthening the confidence of non-option teachers. Furthermore, interactive forms of CPD enable teachers to build professional networks, thereby reducing feelings of isolation within the school community (J. Q. Chen & McCray, 2012; Z. Chen, 2024; Nwosu et al., 2025).

This is further supported by Azarul et al. (2023), who emphasize that professional development should not be purely theoretical but must provide opportunities for teachers to apply their knowledge and skills in real classroom contexts (Azarul Razimin et al., 2023). With systemic support and access to practical training, teachers are better prepared to enhance classroom management, integrate technology, and communicate effectively with students. Hence, hands-on and collaborative CPD approaches not only strengthen teacher competence but also promote professional growth. They further ensure more consistent teaching quality in alignment with the aspirations of the Malaysian Teacher Standard (SGM) and the CPD agenda outlined by the Ministry of Education.

Teaching Practice: Community and Reflection

Effective teaching practice must be rooted in continuous learning rather than one-off courses. CPD can be integrated through professional learning communities (PLCs). Thus, they provide space for ongoing reflection, the sharing of best practices, and collective pedagogical development (Mohammadi & Moradi, 2017; Rock et al., 2016). Within this PLC based CPD framework, teachers not only enhance individual competencies but also contribute to building an inclusive and progressive school culture (Johansson & Herrebrøden, 2025). This aligns with the view that professional teachers are a key determinant of quality education, as their effectiveness directly translates into improved student learning outcomes (Syifa et al., 2023).

CPD should not be perceived as an additional burden on teachers but as a catalyst for professional transformation and educational quality improvement (Talwelkar et al., 2024). With needs-based training modules, digital flexibility, and practical approaches, CPD can effectively support teacher growth. When integrated into school culture, it has the potential to make non-option teachers more resilient, reflective and progressive. The impact extends beyond career development, ensuring fairer, more meaningful and effective learning opportunities for students with hearing impairment.

A Conceptual Framework of CPD for Non-Option Teachers of Students with Hearing Impairment

This concept paper proposes a conceptual framework of CPD for non-option teachers. The framework outlines their transformation from facing challenges to achieving competence and professional resilience. The proposed conceptual framework is outlined in a simplified flow, emphasizing the stages of teacher transformation. It begins with the actual situation of teachers namely their placement in special schools or SEIP and inclusive classrooms without formal training related to hearing impairment. This situation generates multiple challenges across three dimensions, which are pedagogical (lack of sign language proficiency and visual communication strategies), psychological (work overload and feelings of isolation) and systemic (limited support resources and non-contextual placement policies).

To address these challenges, a conceptual framework of CPD is proposed. The framework emphasizes knowledge, skills and practice. Knowledge is developed through modular and contextual access delivered via flexible micro-modules such as digital micro-modules. Skills are strengthened through hands-on training, mentorship and collaboration, including simulations using VR and AR. Practice is enhanced through PLCs that foster reflection and collaborative growth. This process is expected to produce competent and resilient teachers who are not only more confident and prepared to teach but also capable of creating a positive impact on students with hearing impairment. Ultimately, the conceptual framework underscores that the true measure of CPD effectiveness lies in the benefits experienced by students, particularly their opportunity to access education that is inclusive, meaningful and equitable.

The proposed conceptual framework of CPD for non-option teachers of students with hearing impairment is structured to illustrate their transformation from confronting challenges to achieving professional competence and resilience. This framework is visually represented in Figure 1, highlighting the sequential flow from situational challenges to teacher outcomes and student benefits.

Situation → **Challenges** (Pedagogical, Psychological, Systemic) → **CPD Intervention** (Knowledge, Skills, Practice) → **Teacher Outcome** (Competent & Resilient Teachers) → **Student Benefits**

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of CPD for Non-Option Teachers of Students with Hearing Impairment

The conceptual framework starts with the placement of non-option teachers in special or inclusive settings, leading to pedagogical challenges (limited sign language and visual strategies), psychological challenges (work overload and low self-esteem) and systemic challenges (lack of interpreters and formal training) (Dashwini & Ardzulyna, 2022; Izuli et al., 2020; Nazrah & Kama, 2023). To address these challenges, the conceptual framework of CPD focuses on three dimensions. Knowledge via flexible digital micro-modules (Cheng et al., 2024), skills through hands-on training, mentorship and VR/AR simulations (Toson & Weisling, 2020, 2022) and teaching practices through PLCs that foster reflection and collaboration (Azarul Razimin et al., 2023; Rock et al., 2016).

These interventions are projected to produce more competent, reflective, and resilient teachers. This aligns with the role of professional teachers as key determinants of educational quality (Syifa et al., 2023). Ultimately, the most significant impact lies in ensuring that students with hearing impairment benefit from more meaningful, inclusive and equitable teaching and learning (Hughes et al., 2016; Spencer & Marschark, 2010).

Conclusion

Non-option teachers placed in special schools, SEIP or inclusive classrooms face evident pedagogical, psychological and systemic challenges. While Malaysia's inclusive education policy aligns with global aspirations such as SDG 4, classroom realities reveal a persistent gap between policy and practice. In this context, teachers without specialized training are often perceived as being misplaced outside their original option, yet they hold the potential to become change agents if provided with contextual and continuous support. Therefore, CPD must be viewed not as an auxiliary activity but as a transformative mechanism that delivers knowledge, hones skills and fosters a reflective culture within school communities.

Practically, the proposed CPD framework through micro-modules, hands-on training, mentorship, VR/AR simulations and PLCs offers a clear pathway for empowering non-option teachers. With the right skills and confidence, these teachers can foster inclusive and equitable learning environments while advancing their own professional growth. This concept paper concludes that flexible, progressive, and integrated CPD can transform non-option teachers into competent, reflective and resilient professionals who contribute meaningfully to the realization of Malaysia's inclusive education agenda. Future research should empirically test the proposed CPD framework through pilot studies in special and inclusive schools. The findings could provide evidence of its effectiveness and guide policy directions not only in Malaysia but also in comparable educational contexts across Southeast Asia.

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