



Strategies and Models for Teaching English Speaking to Students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRAK:

Background/purpose. Students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) experience cognitive limitations that significantly affect their English speaking performance, particularly in working memory, processing speed, and language organization. Although speaking is a crucial skill in EFL contexts, evidence-based instructional strategies specifically designed for students with BIF remain limited. This study aimed to systematically review and synthesize empirical evidence regarding effective instructional strategies, pedagogical approaches, and implementation challenges in teaching English speaking skills to students with BIF and related populations.

Materials/methods. This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following PRISMA guidelines. Searches were conducted across multiple academic databases, covering publications between 2010 and 2026. After identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and deduplication, nine empirical studies met the inclusion criteria. Data were extracted using a structured form and analyzed through thematic narrative synthesis.

Results. The findings revealed that structured direct instruction with visual support, multimedia-assisted language learning, communicative speaking activities, and instructional adaptation were the most effective strategies. Pedagogical approaches such as Direct Instruction, Communicative Language Teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and adaptive-eclectic models were identified as appropriate for learners with BIF. However, implementation barriers included heterogeneous abilities, linguistic limitations, limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and time constraints in assessment.

Conclusion. Structured, scaffolded, and technology-supported instructional models are essential for improving speaking competence among students with BIF. Future research should focus on developing and empirically testing comprehensive inclusive speaking instruction models in EFL contexts.

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1. Introduction

Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) is a cognitive condition situated between typical intellectual functioning and mild intellectual disability, characterized by an IQ range of 70–85 (American Psychiatric Association., 2013; Salvador-Carulla et al., 2013).. Students with BIF are estimated to represent approximately 12–14% of the school population, making them a significant yet often overlooked group within educational systems (Wieland & Zitman, 2016). These students face distinct academic challenges, including difficulties in processing complex information, limited working memory capacity, and weak generalization abilities, all of which negatively affect their learning performance (Alloway, 2010).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, speaking is considered one of the most complex language skills, as it requires the simultaneous integration of linguistic and cognitive processes, including vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence in social communication (Bygate, 1987; Levelt, 1989; Nation & Newton, 2009). This complexity is further amplified for

students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF), who typically exhibit limitations in working memory, processing speed, and executive functioning—cognitive components essential for oral language production (Alloway, 2010; Orío-Aparicio et al., 2026). Consequently, students with BIF often experience difficulties in organizing ideas, accessing vocabulary efficiently, and maintaining confidence and active participation in verbal communication, which ultimately affects their speaking performance in the target language (Henry et al., 2015; Schalock et al., 2021) (Schalock et al., 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of English speaking skills as a crucial competency in the era of globalization and international communication, evidence-based instructional strategies specifically designed for students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) remain limited in the language education literature (Alhassan & Osei, 2022). Most studies in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching focus primarily on typically developing learners, while research involving students with special educational needs tends to emphasize populations with more severe intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, or other developmental conditions. As a result, relatively few studies have specifically examined the unique characteristics and instructional needs of students with BIF (Salvador-Carulla et al., 2013; Wieland & Zitman, 2016). Consequently, teachers often encounter challenges in adapting speaking instruction to align with the cognitive and linguistic profiles of students with BIF due to the lack of clear, evidence-based pedagogical guidelines in inclusive foreign language classrooms (Rezabala & Holguín, 2019; Saini et al., 2024).

Students with BIF often face unique academic challenges, including difficulties with language processing, limited working memory, and social communication skills (Abbeduto & Boudreau, 2004; Shaw, 2008). Structured and modified instructional approaches, such as direct instruction, the integration of visual aids, and the utilization of technology, have shown promise in enhancing speaking skills among these learners (Shaw, 2008; Fitria, 2025); For instance, the incorporation of multimedia tools can significantly enrich the learning experience, making it more accessible and engaging for students with diverse needs (Ahmad, 2013)

Current pedagogical practices suggest that employing visual supports—such as pictures, videos, and interactive activities—can facilitate better comprehension and retention of English language concepts among students with BIF (Amawi, 2024). Furthermore, research indicates that engaging students through technology not only aids in skill acquisition but also serves to motivate and encourage participation, which can be crucial for this demographic (Sun, 2023; Hunt et al., 2025).

The existing literature often focuses on students with more severe intellectual disabilities or specific disorders like autism, which neglects the specific needs and educational strategies for students with BIF (Abbeduto & Boudreau, 2004; Shaw, 2008). Consequently, this demographic remains underserved in educational settings. Structured interventions tailored to students with BIF require more empirical investigation to evaluate their effectiveness thoroughly.

Utilizing the PRISMA guidelines in systematic literature reviews can yield valuable insights into the best practices for teaching this vulnerable demographic. By synthesizing findings across studies, researchers can elucidate patterns, identify gaps, and provide evidence-based recommendations (Fitria, 2025; Hunt et al., 2025). This rigorous framework encourages transparency and replicability in research, advancing the understanding of effective pedagogical techniques for students with BIF.

Research Questions

Based on the background described above, this study formulates the following research questions: Pendekatan pedagogis apa yang paling sesuai untuk mengajar berbicara bahasa Inggris kepada siswa dengan BIF?

1. What instructional strategies and methods have been proven effective in improving English speaking skills among students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) and mild intellectual disabilities?
2. What pedagogical approaches are most appropriate for teaching English speaking skills to students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF)?
3. What barriers and challenges are encountered in the implementation of instructional strategies for teaching speaking skills to students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF)?

2. Methodology

Desain Penelitian

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) design following the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Systematic literature review is a

structured, transparent, and replicable method used to identify, evaluate, and synthesize existing research evidence. This approach was selected to provide a comprehensive synthesis of empirical studies, identify research gaps, and offer evidence-based recommendations for teaching English speaking skills to students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) and related populations.

The review followed the four main PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, ensuring methodological rigor and transparency throughout the review process

Strategi Pencarian

A systematic search was conducted across five electronic databases covering education, psychology, and health sciences: SciSpace Basic, SciSpace Full Text, Google Scholar, ArXiv, and PubMed. These databases were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of multidisciplinary and open-access research.

Three search strategies were used to identify relevant studies:

1. Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF):
("borderline intellectual functioning" OR "BIF") AND
("English speaking" OR "oral communication" OR "speaking skills") AND
("teaching" OR "instruction" OR "intervention" OR "strategy")
2. Mild Intellectual Disability:
("mild intellectual disability" OR "mild ID") AND
("English language" OR "EFL" OR "ESL") AND
("speaking" OR "oral skills" OR "communication")
3. Slow Learners:
("slow learners" OR "learning difficulties" OR "low achievers") AND
("English speaking" OR "oral proficiency") AND
("teaching methods" OR "pedagogical approaches" OR "instructional strategies")

The search was conducted in [insert date] and included publications from 2010 to 2026. No language restrictions were applied during the initial search; however, only studies published in English and Indonesian were included in the final review.

Inclusion and Wxclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Participants were students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (IQ 70–85), mild intellectual disability, or slow learners at primary or secondary education levels.
2. The study examined instructional strategies or interventions aimed at improving English speaking or oral communication skills.
3. The study reported outcomes related to speaking proficiency, oral communication, or language development.
4. The study used an empirical design (experimental, quasi-experimental, case study, observational, or intervention study).
5. The study was published between 2010 and 2026.
6. The study was published in English or Indonesian.

Studies were excluded if they:

Studies were excluded if they involved populations with severe intellectual disability (IQ < 70), did not focus on English speaking skills, lacked empirical data, or were published before 2010.

Studi Selection Proses

The study selection followed PRISMA 2020 procedures. First, search results from all databases were combined, and duplicates were removed, resulting in 261 unique records. Second, titles and abstracts were screened by two independent reviewers, and 16 articles were selected for full-text review. Third, full texts were assessed based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 10 studies met the eligibility requirements. Finally, after removing remaining duplicates, 9 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Each stage of the selection process was documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

1. Tahap 1: Identification and Merging. Search results from the five databases were combined, and duplicates were removed using reference management software. A total of 261 unique records were identified after duplicate removal.
2. Tahap 2: Abstract Screening. Two independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of the 261 records to assess their relevance based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. An inclusive approach was applied at this stage to ensure broad coverage of potentially relevant studies. As a result, 16 articles were selected for full-text review, while 245 articles were excluded due to not meeting the population, intervention, or outcome criteria.
3. Tahap 3: Full-Text Screening. Full texts of the 16 selected articles were obtained and evaluated in detail according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For articles identified through Google Scholar, six PDF files were successfully retrieved for full-text assessment. Of the 16 articles reviewed, 10 met all inclusion criteria.
4. Tahap 4: Final Deduplication A final deduplication process was conducted to ensure that no duplicate studies were included from different databases. This resulted in nine unique studies that met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

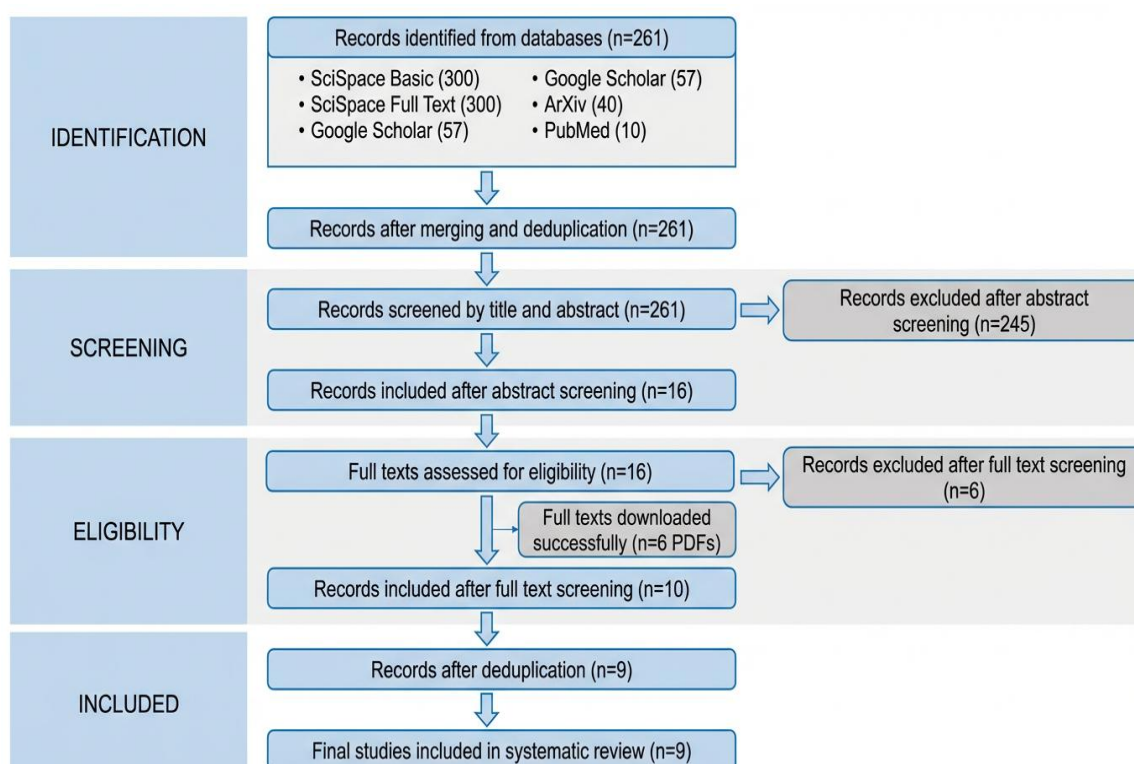
Setiap tahap seleksi didokumentasikan dengan alasan eksklusi untuk memastikan transparansi dan reproduktibilitas proses review. Each stage of the selection process was documented, including reasons for exclusion, to ensure transparency and reproducibility of the review process.

Data Extraction

Data from the nine included studies were systematically extracted using a predefined data extraction form. The extraction form included the following categories:

1. Bibliographic Information: Author(s), year of publication, title, journal, and DOI.
2. Study Design: Type of research design (e.g., experimental, quasi-experimental, case study).
3. Participant Characteristics: Number of participants, age range, IQ range or cognitive level, and grade level.
4. Instructional Strategy/Method: Detailed description of the instructional strategy or teaching method used.
5. Pedagogical Approach: Theoretical framework or pedagogical approach underlying the intervention.
6. Assessment Methods: Instruments or procedures used to measure outcomes.
7. Key Findings: Main findings related to the effectiveness of the intervention.
8. Limitations: Limitations reported by the study authors.
9. Practical Implications: Recommendations or implications for educational practice.

Data extraction was conducted by one reviewer and verified by a second reviewer to ensure accuracy and completeness.



Analysis and Synthesis

The extracted data were analyzed using a thematic narrative synthesis approach. Due to heterogeneity in study design, population, and intervention, quantitative meta-analyses were not performed. Instead, thematic analysis is used to identify consistent patterns, themes, and findings across studies.

The analysis process includes:

1. **Initial Coding:** The data from each study is coded based on the data extraction category.
2. **Theme Identification:** Similar codes are grouped to identify key themes related to teaching strategies, pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, the role of technology, and barriers.
3. **Cross-Study Synthesis:** Findings from various studies are synthesized to identify convergences, divergences, and gaps in evidence.
4. **Interpretation:** Findings are interpreted in the context of research questions and the broader literature on language teaching for students with special needs.

The results of the thematic analysis are presented in the Results section and discussed in the context of theoretical and practical implications in the Discussion section.

Design. This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) design following PRISMA-style stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Search strategy. Searches were conducted for 2019–2025 publications in open databases and platforms (DOAJ, ERIC, PubMed Central, Frontiers, MDPI, and open OJS journals). Search strings combined terms such as: (“borderline intellectual functioning” OR “mild intellectual disability” OR “intellectual and developmental disability” OR “slow learner” OR “special educational needs”) AND (“EFL” OR “ESL” OR “foreign language”) AND (“speaking” OR “oral communication” OR “dialogue” OR “interaction”) AND (“inclusive” OR “special school”).

Eligibility criteria. Included studies were: (a) peer-reviewed open-access journal articles, (b) 2019–2025, (c) focused on foreign/second language teaching where speaking or oral interaction was a target outcome or a central classroom practice, and (d) involved learners with BIF/IDD/SEN or teachers working with these learners. Exclusion criteria included non-open-access articles, studies without pedagogical implications, and non-empirical opinion pieces.

Selection and extraction. The initial search retrieved 612 records; 64 duplicates were removed. Titles/abstracts of 548 records were screened, excluding 462. Full texts of 86 articles were assessed, excluding 66 for not meeting criteria (e.g., not language-focused or not open access). Twenty studies remained for synthesis. Data extraction captured: context, participant profile, design, strategy/model, speaking-related measures, and key results.

Synthesis. A narrative thematic synthesis was conducted by grouping strategies into recurrent clusters and mapping outcomes and implementation requirements.

3. Result/Findings

Nine studies included in this review showed variations in research design, population, and geographical context. Table 1 presents a summary of the main characteristics of these studies.

Table 1. List of Inclusion Articles

No	Author(s) & Year	Context & Population	Methodology	Instructional Strategy / Focus	Key Findings	Gap Research	Relevance to This Research
1	Gökdağ & Ünlü (2023)	Students with intellectual disabilities in special education	Single-subject experimental design	Digital dialogue cards for teaching English introductory phrases	Digital dialogue cards improved students' speaking ability, functional communication, and participation through visual and structured support	Focus limited to introductory phrases; does not examine broader speaking competence or pedagogical framework	Supports the use of structured visual dialogue-based speaking instruction for students with cognitive limitations
2	Yulian et al. (2022)	30 university slow learners (EFL)	Mixed-method (pre-post test, questionnaire, interviews)	Authentic Multimedia Assisted Language Learning (AMALL)	Multimedia significantly improved speaking performance, confidence, motivation, and vocabulary	Focus on higher education slow learners; not specific to BIF or inclusive school contexts	Supports multimedia-assisted speaking instruction and confirms effectiveness of visual and interactive learning
3	Dalilan et al. (2021)	Teachers of students with intellectual disabilities in special school	Qualitative case study	Vocabulary teaching, repetition, visual aids, teacher-centered instruction	Students faced difficulties in speaking, pronunciation, listening, and sentence construction; visual aids and repetition were helpful	Does not evaluate effectiveness of specific speaking interventions or pedagogical models	Confirms speaking challenges in students with intellectual limitations and need for adapted pedagogical models
4	Nemes (2024)	Students with mild intellectual disabilities in Hungary	Case study	Structured and scaffolded language instruction	Structured and repetitive instruction improved language acquisition and speaking participation	Lack of specific instructional model or empirical measurement of speaking outcomes	Supports importance of scaffolding and structured instruction for learners with cognitive limitations
5	Rojas et al. (2020)	Children with intellectual disabilities learning English	Design-based research	Technology-supported language learning platform	Technology improved student engagement, communication skills, and speaking practice	Focus on platform development rather than pedagogical framework	Supports integration of digital technology for speaking instruction in inclusive contexts

No	Author(s) & Year	Context & Population	Methodology	Instructional Strategy / Focus	Key Findings	Gap Research	Relevance to This Research
6	Siagian & Lubis	Slow learners in primary school	Qualitative descriptive study	Identification of speaking barriers	Students faced low confidence, vocabulary limitations, and pronunciation difficulties	Does not propose or test instructional solutions	Confirms psychological and linguistic barriers affecting speaking performance
7	Kalgotra & Warwal (2019)	Children with intellectual disabilities	Experimental intervention study	Structured listening and speaking intervention	Intervention significantly improved speaking and listening skills	Does not identify pedagogical framework or instructional model components	Supports effectiveness of structured speaking intervention for students with intellectual disabilities
8	Medina Sánchez (2017)	Students with mild intellectual disabilities	Case study	Instructional adaptations and individualized teaching	Visual aids and instructional adaptation improved language comprehension and speaking	Focus on adaptation strategies without structured speaking model	Supports need for adapted instruction aligned with cognitive ability
9	Putri et al. (2019)	EFL students	Qualitative study	Alternative speaking assessment	Performance-based assessment improved speaking evaluation accuracy	Does not focus on instructional strategies or intellectual disability learners	Supports importance of authentic speaking assessment aligned with communicative competence

4. Discussion

A. Effective Instructional Strategies for Teaching Speaking Skills

The thematic analysis of the nine included studies identified several instructional strategies that have been proven effective in improving English speaking skills among students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) and mild intellectual disabilities. These strategies include structured direct instruction, multimedia-assisted learning, communicative activities, and instructional adaptation.

Structured Direct Instruction with Visual Support

Structured direct instruction emerged as one of the most effective instructional strategies. Gökdağ et al. (2023) demonstrated that the use of direct instruction combined with digital visual dialogue cards significantly improved students' ability to use English introductory phrases and reciprocal dialogues. Using a single-subject multiple-probe design, the study found that all participants showed measurable improvement in target speaking behaviors, were able to generalize learned skills across different contexts, and retained the acquired skills after 2, 4, and 6 weeks.

This finding indicates that structured instruction supported by visual aids enhances not only initial speaking skill acquisition but also long-term retention and generalization. Visual support reduces cognitive load and facilitates comprehension, making it particularly effective for learners with BIF who often experience working memory and processing limitations.

Authentic Multimedia-Assisted Language Learning

Multimedia-assisted instruction was also identified as an effective strategy. Yulian et al. (2022) reported that Authentic Multimedia Assisted Language Learning (AMALL) significantly improved speaking performance among slow learners. Students showed measurable improvement in speaking fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and confidence, as reflected in higher post-test scores.

Multimedia tools provide contextualized input, interactive learning opportunities, and repeated practice, which are essential for students with BIF. Technology-assisted learning also increases motivation, engagement, and self-directed learning, which contribute to improved speaking performance.

Communicative Speaking Activities

Communicative activities such as role-play, guided dialogue, and conversational practice were reported as effective strategies for developing speaking skills. Dalilan et al. (2021) found that structured communicative activities enabled students with intellectual disabilities to actively participate in speaking practice. Similarly, Kalgotra et al. (2019) demonstrated that structured communication-based interventions improved students' oral communication abilities.

These activities align with communicative language teaching principles, emphasizing meaningful interaction and functional language use. Communicative activities provide authentic speaking practice and help students develop confidence and communicative competence.

Instructional Adaptation and Differentiation

Instructional adaptation was identified as a critical strategy for supporting students with cognitive limitations. Sánchez et al. (2017) reported that adapting instructional materials through simplification, visual support, and adjusted instructional pacing improved students' language comprehension and speaking participation.

Adapted instruction ensures accessibility and allows students to learn at an appropriate cognitive level, thereby improving learning effectiveness

B. Pedagogical Approaches for Teaching Speaking Skills

The analysis identified several pedagogical approaches that are most appropriate for teaching English speaking skills to students with BIF.

Direct Instruction

Direct instruction was identified as a highly effective pedagogical approach. This approach provides explicit, structured, and systematic teaching with modeling, guided practice, and independent practice. Direct instruction reduces ambiguity and supports cognitive processing, making it particularly suitable for students with BIF.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes meaningful communication rather than isolated language structures. When adapted with structured support and scaffolding, CLT provides opportunities for functional speaking practice and helps develop communicative competence among students with BIF.

Technology-Assisted Instruction

Technology-assisted instruction provides visual support, interactive learning environments, and opportunities for repeated practice. Studies such as Yulian et al. (2022) and Rojas et al. (2020) demonstrated that technology improves student motivation, engagement, and speaking performance.

Technology allows individualized learning pace, reduces anxiety, and enhances speaking opportunities.

Adaptive and Eclectic Pedagogical Approach

An adaptive and eclectic approach combining multiple instructional strategies was identified as effective. Nemes (2024) and Sánchez et al. (2017) found that combining structured instruction, communicative activities, and visual support improved learning outcomes.

This flexible approach allows teachers to address diverse cognitive and linguistic needs of students with BIF.

C. Barriers and Challenges in Implementing Speaking Instruction

Despite the effectiveness of the identified instructional strategies, several barriers and challenges were reported.

Heterogeneity of Student Ability

Students with BIF demonstrate diverse cognitive and linguistic abilities, making it difficult to design instruction suitable for all learners (Siagian et al.). This requires extensive instructional differentiation.

Linguistic Limitations

Students with BIF often have limited vocabulary, weak grammar, and pronunciation difficulties, which reduce speaking confidence and participation (Dalilan et al., 2021; Siagian et al.).

These linguistic limitations create a cycle of reduced practice and slower language development.

Limited Instructional Resources

Limited availability of adapted teaching materials, technology, and specialized instructional tools restricts the implementation of effective speaking instruction (Sánchez et al., 2017; Dalilan et al., 2021).

In addition, teachers often lack sufficient training in instructional strategies for students with special educational needs.

Time Constraints in Assessment and Feedback

Putri et al. (2019) reported that limited instructional time prevents teachers from conducting comprehensive speaking assessments and providing individualized feedback.

Speaking assessment requires evaluating multiple aspects such as fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and communicative competence, which is time-intensive.

As a result, students with BIF may not receive sufficient feedback necessary to improve speaking performance.

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review identified several effective instructional strategies for improving English speaking skills among students with Borderline Intellectual Functioning (BIF) and mild intellectual disabilities. The findings indicate that structured instructional approaches, including direct instruction, visual support, multimedia-assisted learning, and communicative speaking activities, significantly contribute to the development of speaking competence. These strategies support students' cognitive processing, enhance engagement, and provide meaningful opportunities for language use.

The review also highlights that pedagogical approaches such as Direct Instruction, Communicative Language Teaching, technology-assisted instruction, and adaptive teaching are particularly appropriate for students with BIF. These approaches provide structured learning environments, scaffolded support, and opportunities for repeated and meaningful interaction, which are essential for learners with cognitive and linguistic limitations. The integration of visual and technological support further enhances comprehension, motivation, and speaking performance.

However, the implementation of effective speaking instruction faces several challenges, including students' linguistic limitations, heterogeneous classroom abilities, limited instructional resources, insufficient teacher training, and time

constraints in assessment and feedback. These barriers limit teachers' ability to provide individualized support and reduce the overall effectiveness of speaking instruction in inclusive classrooms.

Overall, these findings emphasize the need for structured, scaffolded, and inclusive instructional models that integrate linguistic theory and evidence-based pedagogy. Such models can support the development of communicative competence and address the cognitive and linguistic needs of students with BIF. Future research should focus on developing and empirically testing comprehensive instructional models to improve speaking outcomes in inclusive EFL contexts.

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