Effective Teaching Strategies for Students with Disabilities in Vocational Settings: A Narrative Review of Evidence Based and Inclusive Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review synthesizes current research on effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational education settings. The review aims to identify core instructional approaches, contextual challenges, and gaps in the literature to inform inclusive practice and guide future research. Students with disabilities in vocational pathways often face barriers related to communication, skill mastery, workplace readiness, and transition to employment. However, many also demonstrate strengths in practical learning, persistence, and task engagement when instruction is appropriately structured and individualized. These varying learner profiles highlight the need for teaching approaches that are both evidences based and responsive to the demands of vocational training environments. A structured search across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar yielded 50 high quality studies meeting predefined criteria. The included literature spans experimental, qualitative, mixed method, and review designs focusing on learners with intellectual, developmental, physical, and sensory disabilities. Findings consistently support systematic instructional strategies such as task analysis, response prompting, and video modelling, particularly for skill acquisition in hands on vocational tasks. Inclusive frameworks including Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, and co teaching further enhance accessibility and participation. Technology enhanced tools, such as mobile learning and augmented reality, show promising potential but remain underexplored in terms of scalability and long-term outcomes. The review also underscores the importance of teacher preparedness, professional learning, and institutional support as critical conditions for effective implementation. Persistent gaps include limited culturally responsive practices, minimal research on learners with physical and sensory disabilities, and challenges integrating individualized and whole class inclusive models. This review contributes by consolidating evidence-based strategies and outlining context sensitive recommendations to strengthen inclusive vocational education.

Keywords: vocational education, students with disabilities, teaching strategies, inclusive pedagogy, systematic instruction, Universal Design for Learning, assistive technology.

INTRODUCTION

The need to identify and implement effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational settings has become increasingly important as global education systems move toward more inclusive, skills based, and employment-oriented models. Within the broader field of vocational education and training VET, the question of how best to support diverse learners particularly those with intellectual, developmental, physical, and sensory disabilities has gained significant attention due to shifting workforce demands, rapid technological advancement, and strengthened policy commitments to equitable access. Although the field has developed a substantial evidence base, ongoing debates remain regarding the scalability of interventions, the cultural adaptability of instructional models, and the gaps between research and real-world implementation. These

challenges highlight the need for a comprehensive synthesis of strategies that are both empirically supported and practically feasible for teachers, vocational trainers, and institutions.

Effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational settings are multifaceted, combining evidence based instructional methods, inclusive pedagogical frameworks, and adaptive technologies. Research consistently highlights the importance of systematic instruction, individualized supports, and community-based learning to promote skill acquisition and workplace readiness for students with intellectual, developmental, physical, and sensory disabilities (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2022; Damyanov, 2024; Jobir, 2024; Suyitno et al., 2024). Key strategies include direct instruction, task analysis, response prompting such as the system of least prompts, video modelling, Universal Design for Learning UDL, co-teaching, and the integration of assistive technologies (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2022; Rao & Meo, 2016; Cook & Rao, 2018; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; King-Sears et al., 2021). The literature also emphasizes the need for reflective practice, teacher training, and systemic support to address barriers and ensure the sustainability of inclusive vocational education (Dahalan & Toran, 2023; Mabeza & Villacruz, 2025; Jobir, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). While no single strategy is universally best, a combination of individualized, evidence based, and contextually adapted approaches yields the most positive outcomes for learners with disabilities in vocational settings (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2022; Damyanov, 2024; Jobir, 2024; Rao & Meo, 2016; Cook & Rao, 2018; King-Sears et al., 2021).

For clarity, this review uses the term vocational settings to refer to school based vocational programs, technical education centres, and community or industry-based training environments where learners acquire job related skills. Specialized terms such as system of least prompts, task analysis, video modelling, and Universal Design for Learning UDL are defined and contextualized in the subsequent sections to support reader understanding. Given the evolving landscape of inclusive VET, marked by emerging digital tools, shifting policies, and growing expectations for workforce participation among individuals with disabilities, this narrative review aims to synthesize current evidence on what constitutes the most effective teaching strategies in these contexts. The review will discuss instructional approaches, collaborative frameworks, technological supports, and system level factors shaping successful implementation. By mapping these interconnected domains, the paper provides a timely and comprehensive overview that can guide educators, program designers, and policymakers seeking to strengthen inclusion and improve outcomes in vocational education.

METHOD

This narrative review synthesizes the existing body of knowledge on teaching strategies for students with disabilities within vocational education settings. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar, to ensure broad and rigorous coverage of empirical studies, conceptual papers, and systematic reviews relevant to the topic. To enhance completeness, the reference lists of key publications and review articles were also manually screened to identify additional studies not captured through database searches. The search strategy involved 21 unique queries targeting foundational theories, subgroup specific strategies, inclusive pedagogy, critiques, interdisciplinary approaches, and adjacent topics. These searches employed combinations of keywords and Boolean operators such as “vocational education,” “students with disabilities,” “special education strategies,” “inclusive teaching,” “evidence based instruction,” “assistive technology,” “UDL,” “systematic instruction,” “task analysis,” “co teaching,” and “video modeling.” Additional terms were introduced to capture population specific needs (for example, “intellectual disability,” “autism,” “physical disability,” “sensory impairment”) and vocational context terms (“technical training,” “workplace readiness,” “skills development”). Searches were limited to articles published in English, with no lower publication date restriction to allow inclusion of foundational work, while ensuring representation of current developments in the field.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria

1. Relevance to vocational settings including school based vocational programs, technical and vocational education and training TVET institutions, workplace based training, or transition to employment contexts.

2. Focus on learners with disabilities encompassing intellectual, developmental, physical, and sensory disabilities.

3. Discussion of teaching strategies including instructional models, pedagogical frameworks, assistive technologies, or inclusive support practices.

4. Empirical or conceptual contribution such as experimental studies, quasi experimental designs, qualitative investigations, systematic reviews, or theoretical papers that advance understanding of teaching strategies in VET.

Exclusion criteria included

1. Studies unrelated to vocational or skills-based education settings.

2. Papers exclusively addressing medical, therapeutic, or clinical interventions without instructional relevance.

3. Articles lacking accessible abstracts or insufficient methodological detail.

A total of 1,052 records were initially retrieved from database searches. After removing duplicates and entries without accessible abstracts, 781 studies remained for title and abstract screening. During this stage, 179 papers were excluded due to limited relevance to vocational education or disability-related instructional strategies, leaving 602 studies for full-text assessment. Each article was then evaluated for conceptual alignment, methodological adequacy, and contextual suitability to the review's scope. Following this detailed screening, 552 studies were excluded for reasons such as insufficient focus on teaching strategies, examination of unrelated populations, or inadequate methodological rigour. Ultimately, 50 articles met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the review. These selected studies included experimental designs, qualitative investigations, mixed-method studies, and review papers, providing a comprehensive evidence base for the synthesis presented (see Figure 1).

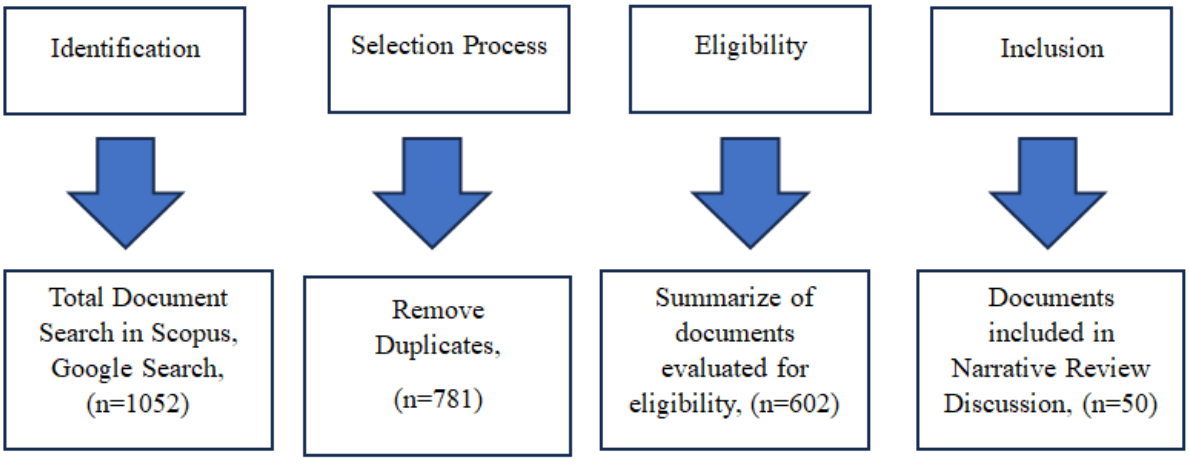

Figure 1. PRISMA-based Flow Diagram of Document Selection Process for Narrative Review

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This narrative review draws together evidence from diverse methodological traditions to examine effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational education. The literature collectively highlights the need to understand not only *what* works but *why* certain approaches function across varied disability profiles and vocational contexts. Research increasingly emphasises instructional approaches that balance structure with

flexibility, reflecting the practice-oriented nature of vocational learning (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; King-Sears et al., 2021). Studies also show that effective teaching arises from the interplay of systematic instruction, inclusive frameworks, and technology-mediated supports (Damyanov, 2024; Rao & Meo, 2016; Almumen, 2020). Despite these strengths, the literature also points to ongoing challenges, including gaps in teacher preparedness, inconsistent implementation, and limited institutional support, all of which influence the sustainability of evidence-based practices (Dahalan & Toran, 2023; Assanbayev & Makoelle, 2024; Mabeza & Villacruz, 2025). These complexities highlight the need for contextually grounded interpretations of instructional effectiveness. The subsequent sections therefore organise the findings into key thematic areas that capture major patterns, points of divergence, and emerging directions within the field, providing a coherent foundation for understanding current knowledge and remaining gaps.

Synthesis Analysis

Overall Patterns in Effective Teaching Strategies

The research demonstrates that no single teaching strategy is universally optimal; rather, the most effective approaches are individualized, evidence based, and contextually adapted to the needs of students and the vocational setting (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; Damyanov, 2024; Jobir, 2024; Rao & Meo, 2016; Cook & Rao, 2018; King Sears et al., 2021). Across the literature, a consistent pattern emerges in which instructional clarity, structured learning environments, and repeated practice serve as core pillars of successful teaching for learners with disabilities. This reflects broad agreement that vocational learning requires not only skill acquisition but also opportunities for generalization to authentic work contexts. However, within these general patterns, researchers highlight substantial variability in how strategies are implemented across settings, subject areas, and disability subgroups. This variability underscores the field's shift toward flexible, adaptive models rather than rigid prescriptions.

Systematic Instruction and Skills Based Approaches

Systematic instruction methods including task analysis, response prompting, and structured practice continue to receive the strongest empirical support, particularly for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Gilson et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2021; Shepley et al., 2019; Stabnow et al., 2023; Brock et al., 2016). These strategies are grounded in behavioral theory and emphasize consistent, scaffolded instruction with clear performance criteria. Evidence also demonstrates that video modeling and technology enhanced strategies support both initial skill acquisition and long term maintenance or generalization (Gilson et al., 2017; Shepley et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2022; Gallegos, 2019; Kellems et al., 2019). Although scholars widely support these approaches, some debate exists regarding their adaptability to highly complex or dynamic vocational tasks in rapidly evolving industries. Critics argue that systematic instruction may over emphasize procedural fluency at the expense of problem solving and flexible thinking. This indicates a gap in the literature: the need for hybrid approaches that balance structure with opportunities for autonomy and authentic decision making.

Inclusive Frameworks: UDL, Differentiation, and Co Teaching

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction frameworks are consistently positioned as foundational to inclusive vocational teaching because they proactively design learning environments to accommodate learner variability (Damyanov, 2024; Cumming Rose, 2021; Rao & Meo, 2016; Cook & Rao, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024; Almumen, 2020). These frameworks shift the emphasis from retrofitting supports to embedding accessibility from the outset, which aligns well with diverse vocational classrooms. Co teaching models, where general and special educators collaborate, also show moderate positive effects on academic engagement and inclusive participation (Iacono et al., 2021; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016; King Sears et al., 2021). Yet the literature reveals mixed findings. Successful co teaching depends heavily on role clarity, teacher preparation, and administrative support. When implemented poorly, co teaching can result in fragmented instruction or unequal distribution of responsibilities. This highlights an ongoing challenge in the field: translating conceptual frameworks like UDL or co teaching into high fidelity classroom practice.

Technology Enhanced and Assistive Approaches

The integration of assistive technologies such as screen readers, adaptive keyboards, and mobile learning platforms enhances access and participation for students with physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities (Damyanov, 2024; Ismaili Ibrahimi, 2017; Almumen, 2020). These tools provide alternative means for engagement, expression, and material access, thereby complementing UDL based approaches.

Emerging technologies including augmented reality and metaverse based learning environments offer innovative possibilities for vocational preparation (Lee et al., 2023; Kellems et al., 2019). These approaches simulate authentic job tasks and create immersive training scenarios that may be especially beneficial for learners who require repeated exposure before engaging in real world environments. Despite their potential, these newer technologies remain under researched. Questions persist regarding cost, scalability, accessibility, and long term learning outcomes. More rigorous evaluation is needed before such tools can be considered reliably evidence based.

Teacher Capacity, Professional Learning, and Systemic Barriers

Across the literature, teacher preparedness emerges as a critical determinant of successful implementation for all strategies discussed. Studies emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development, reflective practice, and institutional support to ensure effectiveness (Dahalan Toran, 2023; Naseem et al., 2025; Mabeza & Villacruz, 2025; Assanbayev Makoelle, 2024; Jobir, 2024).

However, many vocational settings continue to face barriers such as insufficient training, limited resources, and systemic constraints that impede consistent application (Mabeza & Villacruz, 2025; Assanbayev Makoelle, 2024; Jobir, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). These challenges create disparities between recommended practices and what teachers are able to implement realistically.

As a result, the literature calls for comprehensive reforms including targeted professional learning, stronger policy mechanisms, and institutional investment in assistive technology infrastructure (Damyanov, 2024; Mabeza &Villacruz, 2025; Jobir, 2024; Ismaili Ibrahimi, 2017; Zhang et al., 2024). Without systemic alignment, even high-quality teaching strategies cannot achieve their intended impact.

Cultural Adaptability and Contextual Challenges

Studies from various countries reveal that cultural context significantly shapes the implementation of inclusive vocational education. Teachers in the Philippines and Kazakhstan, for example, face challenges such as inadequate resources, limited training, and the need for curriculum adaptation to local realities. Coping strategies include individualized instruction, peer teaching, and the use of ICT, but systemic support and culturally relevant materials are often lacking (Mabeza & Villacruz,, 2025; Assanbayev & Makoelle, 2024). In South Africa, teachers' low awareness of multicultural and age-diverse needs underscores the necessity for ongoing professional development in cultural competence (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024).

Culturally responsive pedagogy is essential for effective inclusion. Teachers must understand students' cultural backgrounds, values, and languages, and adapt teaching methods accordingly. This includes flexible curriculum design, differentiated instruction, and the integration of culturally relevant content. Collaborative teaching, family involvement, and reflective practice further enhance adaptability and inclusivity (Singh, 2023; Moriña, 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2023; Misador & Cangayao, 2025).

Global reviews emphasize that policy support, resource allocation, and teacher training are critical for equitable vocational education. However, disparities in resource distribution and policy enforcement persist, affecting the cultural applicability of strategies. Interdisciplinary collaboration and technological advancements are recommended to bridge these gaps and ensure strategies are contextually relevant (Wang, 2025; Miller et al., 2025; Posso-Pacheco et al., 2025).

Gaps, Contradictions, and Future Directions

Although systematic instruction and UDL hold strong empirical support, unresolved issues persist. The long-term effectiveness and scalability of emerging approaches such as metaverse based learning and augmented reality remain unclear (Lee et al., 2023; Kellems et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). Additionally, there is limited research on culturally responsive practices within vocational settings, the role of peer mediated approaches, and strategies tailored to specific vocational sectors.

A recurring contradiction in the literature involves the tension between individualized instruction and whole class inclusive frameworks. While both are supported, studies rarely examine how they can be integrated coherently in practice. Furthermore, most research focuses on students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, leaving gaps regarding learners with physical, sensory, or multiple disabilities. These gaps present opportunities for future research to develop more comprehensive models of vocational inclusion.

Limitations

This narrative review, while comprehensive in scope, is subject to several methodological and conceptual limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. First, the review relies heavily on available literature indexed in major scholarly databases. Although these sources encompass extensive coverage, they may omit relevant studies published in local journals, non-indexed repositories, or practitioner-oriented outlets. As a result, teaching strategies that are widely implemented in specific vocational contexts or cultural settings may be underrepresented. The inclusion of studies only available in English also introduces a potential language bias that may limit insights from non-English speaking regions where vocational education systems serve large populations of students with disabilities.

Second, the evidence base itself is uneven across disability categories and instructional approaches. Research on intellectual and developmental disabilities is relatively robust, yet studies examining effective strategies for learners with physical, sensory, or multiple disabilities in vocational settings remain comparatively scarce. This imbalance may skew the synthesis toward strategies suited to certain disability groups while underemphasizing the needs of others. Additionally, many studies employ small sample sizes, single subject designs, or short term interventions, making it difficult to assess the generalizability and long term sustainability of the strategies reviewed.

Third, narrative reviews inherently introduce subjectivity in study selection, interpretation, and synthesis. Although a structured search and screening process was applied, decisions about relevance and thematic organization may reflect reviewer judgment rather than fully objective criteria. The absence of formal meta-analytic procedures also limits the ability to quantify effect sizes or compare the relative strength of different instructional strategies. Furthermore, the diversity of study designs, outcome measures, and vocational contexts presented challenges in synthesizing findings consistently across sources. Differences in terminology and conceptual frameworks across disciplines further complicate comparisons and increase the risk of interpretive bias.

Finally, the rapid emergence of innovative technologies, such as augmented reality and metaverse based vocational training tools, poses a limitation for any review that synthesizes a field undergoing fast paced evolution. Much of the literature on these tools is exploratory or theoretical, resulting in an evidence base that has not yet matured sufficiently to support strong conclusions. Future research should therefore prioritize longitudinal designs, cross disability studies, culturally diverse samples, and mixed methods approaches that capture the complexity of vocational learning environments. Expanding global representation, employing systematic or scoping review methods, and incorporating practitioner-based evidence would also strengthen future syntheses and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the best teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational settings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this narrative review demonstrates that the best teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational settings are those that are individualized, evidence based, and adapted to the unique demands of

both learners and training environments, aligning directly with the review's objective to identify effective, scalable, and inclusive instructional approaches. Systematic instruction, UDL based frameworks, differentiated pedagogy, co teaching, and assistive technologies consistently emerged as key strategies that support skill acquisition, engagement, and workplace readiness, addressing the initial gap concerning which methods hold the strongest empirical grounding. At the same time, the synthesis revealed persistent challenges including uneven teacher preparation, limited resources, and the underrepresentation of students with physical, sensory, or multiple disabilities in current research. These gaps underscore the need for future studies that examine long term outcomes, evaluate emerging technologies such as augmented reality and metaverse based training, and develop integrative models that combine individualized instruction with inclusive classroom practices. Advancing research in these areas will strengthen the evidence base, enhance the practical implementation of inclusive vocational pedagogy, and support more equitable pathways into employment for learners with disabilities.

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Contribution/Originality

This review synthesizes fragmented evidence on teaching strategies for students with disabilities in vocational education, offering a clearer understanding of effective practices and highlighting key gaps that require further investigation.

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