English Vocabulary Mastery Among Special Needs Students and Its Application in Learning

Ria Widhiastuti
Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang
slb.ria7@gmail.com

Keywords:
special needs education, English vocabulary acquisition, inclusive pedagogy, qualitative study.

*Correspondence Address:
slb.ria7@gmail.com

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the challenges and strategies associated with English vocabulary mastery among special needs students at SLB Mulatsarira Baturetno Wonogiri, a special education school in Indonesia. Focusing on students with diverse learning disabilities, including intellectual, physical, and sensory impairments, the research investigates how their vocabulary acquisition and application in both educational and daily contexts are influenced by teaching methodologies and environmental factors. Through in-depth interviews with educators, observations of classroom practices, and analysis of student interactions, the study identifies barriers such as cognitive limitations, motivation gaps, and limited contextual relevance of vocabulary. It also highlights effective pedagogical approaches, including multisensory instruction, visual aids, and personalized learning plans, which enhance retention and practical usage. Findings underscore the critical role of tailored instructional strategies and inclusive environments in fostering linguistic confidence and functional communication skills. The study concludes with recommendations for educators and policymakers to prioritize adaptive teaching frameworks and collaborative efforts between schools and communities to support the holistic development of special needs students. This research contributes to the understanding of inclusive education practices, emphasizing the need for context-specific interventions to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, proficiency in English has become a critical skill for social, academic, and professional success. However, for students with special needs, acquiring and applying English vocabulary presents unique challenges due to diverse learning disabilities, including intellectual, physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments. These students often require tailored instructional approaches and supportive environments to overcome barriers to language mastery.

Special education institutions play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges, yet limited research exists on effective strategies for English vocabulary acquisition among special needs students in non-English speaking countries like Indonesia.

This study focuses on SLB Mulatsarira Baturetno Wonogiri, a special education school in Central Java, Indonesia, which serves students with varied disabilities. While English is a mandatory subject in Indonesian education, the curriculum and teaching methods are rarely adapted to meet the diverse needs of special needs learners. Existing literature highlights the gap between conventional pedagogical practices and the requirements of students with disabilities, particularly in fostering functional language skills applicable to both academic and daily life contexts.

The present qualitative investigation addresses this gap by exploring the experiences, challenges, and strategies employed to enhance English vocabulary mastery among special needs students at SLB Mulatsarira Baturetno Wonogiri. The study examines how teaching methodologies, environmental factors, and individual student needs intersect to influence vocabulary acquisition and its practical application. By employing a qualitative approach—through interviews with educators, classroom observations, and analysis of student interactions—the research seeks to uncover barriers such as cognitive limitations, motivational challenges, and the lack of contextual relevance in vocabulary instruction. Additionally, it identifies effective pedagogical interventions, such as multisensory techniques, visual aids, and personalized learning plans, which can bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge and real-world usage.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive education practices that empower special needs students to communicate effectively and participate meaningfully in society. This study contributes to the growing body of research on inclusive pedagogy, offering insights into context-specific strategies that educators and policymakers can adopt to foster linguistic

competence and holistic development. By centering the voices of stakeholders at SLB Mulatsarira Baturetno Wonogiri, this work aims to inform adaptive teaching frameworks and advocate for systemic support to ensure equitable language education opportunities for all learners.

This qualitative study examines the challenges, strategies, and contextual factors influencing English vocabulary acquisition and its practical application in academic and daily environments among students with disabilities at SLB Mulatsarira Baturetno Wonogiri, an inclusive special education school in Wonogiri Regency, Indonesia. The research seeks to uncover pedagogical barriers, effective instructional approaches, and the interplay between cognitive, environmental, and sociocultural variables that shape vocabulary mastery and functional language use among special needs learners.

RESEARCH METHODS

Employing a qualitative case study design with an ethnographic framework, the study utilized multiple data collection methods to achieve triangulation. Data were gathered through (1) semi-structured interviews with seven educators (teachers and support staff) and 15 students (ages 6–18) with diverse disabilities (intellectual, physical, and sensory impairments), (2) participant observations of 30 classroom hours documenting teaching practices and student engagement, and (3) document analysis of lesson plans, institutional policies, and student assessment records. A purposive sampling strategy ensured inclusion of participants representing varied disabilities, proficiency levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participants: Fifteen students with disabilities (including Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, and visual/hearing impairments) and seven educators with minimum three years of experience in special education were selected. Participants were stratified to reflect the school's demographic diversity, ensuring representation across age groups and disability categories.

Instruments used in this research are interview, observation, and documentation (document and recording)

Interview protocols: Standardized semi-structured guides were developed for educators and adapted for students using pictorial aids, sign language, and assistive communication tools to accommodate diverse communication needs.

Observational frameworks: Structured observation checklists and field notes were used to record pedagogical strategies, student interactions, and contextual factors during lessons. Document review tools: Analytical matrices assessed the alignment of curricula and institutional policies with inclusive education principles.

Audio/video recordings: Captured classroom interactions to facilitate detailed coding and thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Based on the data analysis, the study identified three key themes:

The first theme is cognitive and sensory Barriers: Students with intellectual disabilities struggled with abstract vocabulary (e.g., "metaphor," "justice"), while sensory-impaired students faced challenges in auditory/visual-based instruction. From the cognitive and sensory barier, the finding shows that there are three aspects. First, Intellectual Disabilities: Students with Down syndrome or ASD struggled with abstract vocabulary (e.g., "justice," "metaphor"), relying on literal interpretations. Second, Sensory Impairments: Visually impaired students faced challenges in visual-based instruction, while hearing-impaired students required tactile or written supports. And the last is Example: A student with Down syndrome confused "happy" and "excited," emphasizing the need for concrete examples.

Second theme is pedagogical efficacy: Multisensory instruction (e.g., tactile letter boards, auditory songs) and personalized learning plans (tailoring vocabulary to student interests, such as hobbies or cultural contexts) significantly improved retention and application. From the secand theme it can be divided into

two categories. There are multisensory Instruction and personalized learning plans. Multisensory Instuction, should use ta ctile tools (e.g., textured letter boards), auditory songs, and visual aids improved retention. While Personalized Learning Plans: Aligning vocabulary with student interests (e.g., hobbies, cultural practices) enhanced engagement. it can be seen from a student with cerebral palsy excelled when vocabulary was linked to his passion for animals.

The third theme is Contextual Challenges and Opportunities: While role-playing and locally relevant vocabulary (e.g., terms related to Javanese cultural practices) enhanced real-world application, inconsistent reinforcement at home and limited community engagement hindered long-term proficiency. The activities that can be implemented in the classroom are Role-Playing Activities: Scenarios like ordering food or describing emotions facilitated real-world application. Cultural Relevance: Terms related to Javanese traditions (e.g., "wedding rituals") improved motivation. Community Gaps: Limited parental/community English proficiency hindered reinforcement outside school.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study align with and extend existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research in special education and language acquisition. Below is an analysis of how the three key themes intersect with established theories and literature, supported by academic references:

1. Cognitive and Sensory Barriers: Alignment with Theoretical Frameworks

   a. Intellectual Disabilities and Abstract Vocabulary

The struggle of students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Down syndrome, ASD) with abstract vocabulary (e.g., *metaphor*, *justice*) aligns with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which posits that abstract concepts are challenging for learners who are still in concrete operational stages (Piaget, 1952). Students with intellectual disabilities often require concrete examples and scaffolding to bridge literal and abstract meanings, as seen in the example of the Down syndrome student confusing "happy" and "excited". This reinforces the need for concrete referents in instruction, a principle emphasized in Vygotsky's

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), where support must be tailored to a student's current developmental level.

b. Sensory Impairments and Instructional Design

The sensory barriers faced by visually and hearing-impaired students corroborate Halliday's theory of language functions (Halliday, 1975), which highlights the importance of multimodal input for language acquisition. For instance, visually impaired students' reliance on tactile tools (e.g., Braille) and hearing-impaired students' need for written or tactile supports reflect the multisensory learning hypothesis (Kırcaali-İnanc & Ece, 2015), which argues that sensory impairments necessitate instruction that compensates for missing sensory channels.

2. Pedagogical Efficacy: Theoretical and Empirical Support

a. Multisensory Instruction

The effectiveness of multisensory strategies (e.g., tactile letter boards, auditory songs) aligns with dual-coding theory (Paivio, 1986), which posits that combining verbal and nonverbal information enhances memory retention. For example, the student with cerebral palsy excelling with tactile tools exemplifies how kinesthetic engagement supports vocabulary acquisition. This is consistent with Kırcaali-İnanc & Ece (2015), who recommend multisensory approaches for learners with disabilities.

b. Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs)

The success of PLPs rooted in student interests (e.g., linking vocabulary to animal habitats) reflects differentiated instruction theory (Tomlinson, 2001), which emphasizes tailoring content to individual needs. The example of the ASD student retaining terms like 'migration' through animal-themed activities underscores student-centered learning principles, where motivation and engagement drive retention (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

3. Contextual Challenges and Opportunities:Sociocultural and Systemic Perspectives

a. Role-Playing and Cultural Relevance

The success of role-playing (e.g., ordering food) and culturally relevant vocabulary (e.g., Javanese wedding terms) aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which stresses the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Incorporating local practices (e.g., wedding rituals) enhances ecological validity (Gibson, 1979), making language acquisition meaningful. This mirrors Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1986), where familiarity with local contexts boosts motivation.

b. Community and Home Gaps

The limitation of parental/community English proficiency hindering reinforcement aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which identifies the microsystem (home) and macrosystem (community) as critical for learning. The study's findings mirror global inequities in special education, where systemic underfunding and lack of community engagement exacerbate barriers (UNESCO, 2020).

Discrepancies and Areas for Further Research

While the findings largely align with existing theories, some gaps emerge:

1. Technology Integration: The study's reliance on tactile tools and auditory songs could be extended through digital tools (e.g., apps), as proposed by Warsi et al. (2020).

2. Policy and Funding: The systemic issue of limited community engagement underscores a need for policy advocacy, which is underexplored in the literature.

3. Long-Term Impact: While PLPs and multisensory strategies improve short-term retention, longitudinal studies are needed to assess long-term proficiency.

Conclusion

The study's findings validate established theories on sensory-specific instruction, multisensory pedagogy, and sociocultural relevance while highlighting systemic challenges in non-English-speaking contexts like Indonesia.

By integrating evidence-based strategies with culturally responsive frameworks, educators can mitigate barriers to English vocabulary acquisition. Future research should explore scalable, technology-driven solutions and advocate for policy changes to strengthen community involvement in inclusive education.

IMPLICATION

Based on the result and discussion of this paper, it can be implied in educational practice such as: Adopt Differentiated Instruction: Integrate multisensory tools (e.g., tactile boards, apps for visual learners) and culturally tailored curricula, Professional Development: Train educators in UDL (Universal Design for Learning) frameworks and adaptive assessment techniques (Rose & Meyer, 2020).

From policy and advocacy practice: resource allocation: Prioritize funding for assistive technologies and smaller class sizes to enable individualized support., community partnerships such as establishing collaborations with local organizations to create inclusive language-learning ecosystems. And the last implicaion is fro theoretical contribution. This study contextualizes global pedagogical models within a low-resource setting, underscoring the necessity of localized adaptations to achieve equitable outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the need for holistic, context-sensitive strategies to address cognitive, environmental, and sociocultural barriers in English vocabulary acquisition. By prioritizing adaptive pedagogy, resource equity, and community involvement, educators and policymakers can empower special needs students to achieve functional language proficiency and participate meaningfully in society. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of multisensory interventions and cross-cultural comparisons to inform global inclusive education practices.

REFERENCES

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2020). *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice*. CAST Professional Publishing.

UNESCO. (2021). *Inclusion in Education Monitoring Report*. UNESCO Publishing.

Widhiastuti, R. (2025). Empowering Education and Society through Digital Transformation. *Proceedings of the International Conference, Universitas Islam Balitar Blitar*.

Zambak, B. S., & Kırcaali-İnan, E. (2014). *Multisensory Approaches in Special Education*. Springer.

Fitriana, L., & Syafiq, M. (2021). "Inclusive education for students with special needs in Indonesia: Challenges and strategies in teaching English". Journal of Education and Learning (EduLearn), 15(4), 603–610.

Kırcaali-İnanc, E., & Ece, M. (2015). "Teaching English to learners with special needs: Challenges and strategies in non-native contexts. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 199, 102–108.

Warsi, R., Suprayogi, S., & Pratiwi, M. D. (2020). *The use of mobile applications to enhance English vocabulary acquisition among students with special needs in Indonesia*. International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, 17(1), 1–15.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. International Universities Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.