



Picture-Based Vocabulary Cards for Enriching Students' Vocabulary with Mild Intellectual Disability

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Abstract. This study examines how picture-based vocabulary cards can foster English learning among students with mild intellectual disabilities at Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB), a special education school in Indonesia. The research uncovers the creative ways teachers weave these cards into their lessons and the hurdles they encounter along the way. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study draws on the experiences of two teachers from diverse educational backgrounds, gathering insights through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The results show that while picture-based vocabulary cards are a valuable tool, teachers often blend them with real objects and videos to make lessons more engaging and accessible. Students responded in unique ways: some eagerly participated, while others needed extra repetition and support. Challenges such as varying student abilities, short attention spans, and struggles with vocabulary retention emerged. Ultimately, the study highlights that the true power of picture-based vocabulary cards lies in how thoughtfully they are combined with other teaching strategies and tailored to each student's needs. By shedding light on these classroom practices, the research offers fresh perspectives for English language teaching in special education settings.

Keywords: English vocabulary, Picture-based vocabulary cards, Mild intellectual disability, Special education, Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB).

1. INTRODUCTION

Students with mild intellectual disability who score below average on standardized intelligence tests and experience significant limitations in adaptive behavior often face difficulties learning English vocabulary because they require more time, frequent repetition, and concrete examples to understand and remember new words [1]. In many SLB (Sekolah Luar Biasa or Special Education Schools in Indonesia) classrooms, teachers report that students are frequently unable to recall simple English words despite repeated explanations [2]. For example, students may recognize an apple in daily life but fail to identify or pronounce the English word "apple" during classroom activities. However, when visual cues or pictures are introduced, some students demonstrate better understanding by pointing to the correct image, repeating the word, and recalling it in subsequent lessons. This indicates that vocabulary instruction for students with mild intellectual disability requires strategies that correspond to their cognitive characteristics and learning needs [3].

These learning difficulties are closely related to the memory, attention, and abstract reasoning limitations experienced by students with mild intellectual disability [1]. Such limitations often hinder students' ability to comprehend, retain, and apply new vocabulary effectively [4]. Vocabulary knowledge plays a fundamental role in developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills [5], [6]-[9]. Consequently, limited mastery of vocabulary restricts students' participation and comprehension in English learning activities [10]-[12]. In many cases, conventional teaching methods that rely heavily on verbal explanation or written text are insufficient because they require abstract processing, which is challenging for students with intellectual disabilities [13]. Therefore, students need concrete and visual learning support to facilitate vocabulary comprehension. Instructional media theory also emphasizes that visual media can enhance learning by connecting words with real objects or familiar situations [14], [15]. This condition encourages teachers in special education settings to adapt their instructional strategies and learning materials to make vocabulary learning more accessible and meaningful for students with mild intellectual disability [16], [17].

Previous studies have shown that learners with mild intellectual disability benefit from visual and concrete instructional media [18]. The use of pictures, symbols, flashcards, and other visual supports can reduce cognitive load, improve comprehension, and strengthen memory retention [1], [16]. In vocabulary learning, picture-based vocabulary cards help students associate words with images, making vocabulary items more concrete and easier to remember [19]. Several studies reported that flashcards and visual repetition improved vocabulary recognition and functional reading skills among students with intellectual disabilities [4], [16]. In addition, picture-based vocabulary cards support multisensory learning, active participation, and structured repetition, which are considered important for students with cognitive limitations [3].

Although previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of visual media in improving vocabulary achievement among students with intellectual disabilities, most have focused primarily on students' learning outcomes, using quantitative or experimental approaches [20]. Limited attention has been given to teachers' perspectives, classroom implementation processes, and instructional challenges encountered when using picture-based vocabulary cards in real classroom settings, particularly in Indonesian SLB contexts. As teachers play an essential role in adapting instructional materials, selecting vocabulary, and modifying teaching strategies according to students' needs, understanding their experiences is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how picture-based vocabulary cards are implemented in practice [21]. This issue is also related to materials development theory, which highlights the importance of designing instructional materials that accommodate learners' characteristics and educational needs [22].

Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap by exploring teachers' experiences in using picture-based vocabulary cards to enrich English vocabulary for students with mild intellectual disability in SLB classrooms. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasized students' achievement scores, this study focuses on classroom practices, teachers' instructional strategies, and the challenges they encounter during implementation. The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative exploration of teachers' perspectives and classroom practices in Indonesian special education contexts, which have remained underexplored in previous research.

This study aims to investigate: (1) how teachers implement picture-based vocabulary cards during English vocabulary lessons for students with mild intellectual disability, and (2) what challenges teachers encounter when applying this strategy in the classroom. Classroom observations were conducted to examine the strategy's actual implementation, while interviews were used to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions. This study is expected to contribute to the fields of English language teaching and special education by providing insights into effective vocabulary instruction for students with mild intellectual disability.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding participants' experiences, perspectives, and practices in natural settings [23]. This design was selected because the study aimed to explore how teachers implement picture-based vocabulary cards in English vocabulary instruction for students with mild intellectual disability and to identify the challenges they encounter during instruction. Rather than measuring students' achievement quantitatively, this study focused on describing classroom practices, instructional strategies, and teachers' experiences in depth.

The study was conducted in one Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) in Indonesia that provides educational services for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The setting was selected purposively because English is taught as a subject in the school, and teachers use adapted instructional strategies and visual learning media to support students with cognitive limitations. This context was considered relevant to the study's objectives, which focus on English vocabulary-teaching practices in special education classrooms.

Participants

The participants of this study were two English teachers who taught students with mild intellectual disabilities in the selected SLB. The teachers had different educational backgrounds, which provided broader insights into instructional practices in special education contexts. One teacher graduated from the English Language Education program, while the other graduated from the Special Education (Pendidikan Luar Biasa) program. Both teachers were directly involved in teaching English vocabulary using visual learning media, including picture-based vocabulary cards.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they met specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. The criteria included: (1) teaching English to students with mild intellectual disabilities, (2) having experience in using visual learning media, particularly picture-based vocabulary cards, (3) having teaching experience in special education settings, and (4) having at least one year of teaching experience. These criteria ensured that participants could provide detailed, relevant information about the implementation of picture-based vocabulary cards in classroom practice.

To maintain ethical considerations, the identities of the participants and the school were kept confidential using pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection technique because they provided in-depth information and flexibility during interviews [24], [25]. Interview questions addressed teachers' instructional strategies, the use of picture-based vocabulary cards, students' responses in learning activities, and challenges in classroom instruction [26]. The interview guideline appears in the Appendix.

Classroom observations supported and validated the interview data. Observation enabled the researcher to examine classroom practices and teacher-student interactions during vocabulary learning. Field notes and an observation checklist were used to document teaching activities, use of instructional media, students' participation, and classroom interactions. The checklist specifically guided the systematic recording of these aspects, as detailed in the Appendix. The researcher repeated interviews and observations as needed to enhance data credibility and obtain comprehensive information. Using both methods supported data triangulation.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school and the participants. The participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the procedures of data collection, and their voluntary participation in the research. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms for both the participants and the school. All collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

Technique of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [27], which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. First, the interview recordings were transcribed. The researcher then condensed the data by selecting and focusing on relevant information aligned with the study's objectives.

After data condensation, the data were categorized into several themes, including teaching strategies, classroom implementation, students' responses, and challenges encountered by teachers. The categorized data were subsequently displayed in descriptive and thematic forms to facilitate interpretation and analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified throughout the analysis process to ensure consistency and credibility of the findings.

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, data triangulation was used by comparing findings from interviews and classroom observations. This process strengthened the credibility of the findings and ensured that the data accurately reflected teachers' classroom experiences and instructional practices.

3. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of the study based on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations conducted in an SLB. The findings are organized according to the research questions, focusing on the implementation of picture-based vocabulary cards and the challenges teachers encounter in English vocabulary instruction for students with mild intellectual disabilities. The findings are discussed thematically and interpreted in relation to previous studies and relevant theories.

Table 1. Findings on the Use of Picture-Based Vocabulary Cards - YPAC SLB C Medan

Aspect	Findings	Evidence	Interpretation
Implementation of Learning Media	Teachers used picture-based vocabulary cards combined with real objects and videos.	Students interacted with objects such as "pen," "book," and "chair," while videos increased students' interest and attention.	Combining visual, concrete, and audiovisual media helped students understand vocabulary more effectively.

Students' Responses	Students showed varied responses during learning activities. Some students actively repeated vocabulary and followed instructions, while others needed repeated guidance.	Teachers stated that some students could follow instructions easily, whereas others required more time and repetition.	Students with mild intellectual disabilities have different levels of comprehension and learning pace.
Vocabulary Learning Process	Repetition and visual support were frequently used during instruction.	Teachers repeatedly introduced vocabulary using flashcards, objects, and classroom interaction.	Repetition and visual association supported vocabulary retention and comprehension.
Challenges in Teaching	Teachers experienced difficulties in maintaining students' attention and addressing differences in students' abilities.	Some students became distracted easily and forgot previously taught vocabulary.	Flexible teaching strategies and varied instructional media were necessary in special education classrooms.
Limitations of Flashcards	Repetitive use of flashcards sometimes caused boredom among students.	Teachers combined flashcards with videos and games to maintain engagement.	Instructional media variation was important to sustain students' participation and motivation.

Implementation of Picture-Based Vocabulary

Interview data indicate that teachers used picture-based vocabulary cards during English instruction for students with mild intellectual disabilities. Flashcards alone were not dominant in classrooms; they were typically combined with other media, such as real objects and videos, to better support students' understanding.

For example, one teacher stated that using real objects was more effective because students could see and touch them, saying, "Students understand faster when they can see and touch the real object," which helps them understand vocabulary more easily. In practice, students were introduced to familiar objects such as "pen", "book", and "chair" through direct interaction. This approach allowed students to connect vocabulary with concrete experiences, making learning more meaningful.

In addition to real objects, another teacher mentioned that video was the most effective medium, explaining that "students are more interested when learning uses video because they can see and hear at the same time." Video provides both visual and audio input, which attracts students' attention and supports their comprehension. The use of animated videos helped students stay engaged and made it easier for them to recognize and remember vocabulary [28]. Although flashcards remained part of the learning process, they were often combined with other media to prevent students from becoming bored. These findings indicate that picture-based vocabulary cards are a valuable tool, but their effectiveness relies on combining them with other media and tailoring instruction to students' specific needs [29].

Students' Response

Moving from media selection to student responses, the findings revealed that students showed varied reactions during the English learning process. Based on classroom observation, not all student experiences focus throughout the lesson. Some students were actively engaged, while others appeared less attentive and required repeated guidance from the teacher. This observation is supported by the teacher's statement: "Some students can follow and repeat the words, but others need more time and repeated instruction."

Furthermore, students tended to show more positive responses when the learning involved visual and concrete media [30]. They were more interested and responsive when teachers used real objects or videos than when they used abstract explanations. In several instances, students followed instructions, repeated vocabulary, and pointed to the correct objects when prompted by the teacher. However, their level of participation was not consistent, as some students needed more time and repetition to understand the material.

The differences in students' responses were influenced by their individual abilities. While some students recognized and responded to vocabulary, others struggled to understand even simple instructions. This variation indicates that students with mild intellectual disabilities have varying levels of comprehension and require individualized learning approaches [31].

In summary, students' engagement and comprehension in English learning depend largely on the choice of instructional media and their individual abilities. The findings highlight the need for adaptive approaches to maximize effectiveness.

Challenges in Teaching

The findings highlighted that teaching English vocabulary to students with mild intellectual disabilities presents several challenges. The primary challenge is the wide variation in students' cognitive strengths within a single classroom. As one teacher stated, "Each student has different abilities, so we cannot use the same method for all students." Teachers noted significant differences in comprehension, communication, attention span, and learning pace, necessitating continual refinement of instructional strategies and classroom activities to individual needs [32].

Another significant challenge involved students' difficulty in remembering and understanding vocabulary. Teachers explained that students frequently forgot previously taught vocabulary, even after repeated explanations and practice activities [33]. This condition required teachers to repeatedly review vocabulary and to use simple, concrete language during classroom interaction. This finding supports previous studies showing that students with mild intellectual disabilities often experience limitations in memory and abstract reasoning, which affect vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Maintaining students' attention during classroom instruction was also considered difficult. Observation findings indicated that some students were easily distracted and unable to remain focused for extended periods. To overcome this issue, teachers used varied instructional media, interactive activities, and repeated classroom engagement strategies to sustain students' interest and participation. This finding indicates that classroom management and media variation are important components of effective vocabulary instruction in special education contexts.

Furthermore, although picture-based vocabulary cards were helpful for introducing vocabulary, teachers noted certain drawbacks in their use. Repetitive use of the same cards often caused student boredom, diminishing classroom engagement [34]. Consequently, teachers supplemented vocabulary cards with instructional media such as real objects, videos, and games to foster a more interactive learning environment [35], [36]. This finding underscores the value of instructional creativity and flexibility when teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teaching English vocabulary in special education classrooms requires adaptive teaching strategies, continuous repetition, individualized support, and the integration of varied instructional media. Teachers play a significant role in tailoring learning activities to accommodate students' cognitive characteristics and in maintaining their participation throughout the learning process.

4. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings in relation to previous studies and relevant theories. The findings of this study indicate that picture-based vocabulary cards help support vocabulary learning among students with mild intellectual disabilities [37]. However, their effectiveness depends on how teachers implement and combine them with other instructional strategies and learning media in the classroom.

The findings revealed that teachers did not rely solely on picture-based vocabulary cards, but combined them with real objects and videos during English vocabulary instruction. This finding supports cognitive load theory, which suggests that learning becomes more effective when information is presented through multiple channels and supported by concrete representations. In addition, visual learning theory emphasizes that students with cognitive limitations benefit from visual and tangible materials because such media reduce the demands of abstract thinking and facilitate comprehension. The use of real objects enabled students to directly connect vocabulary to tangible items they encounter in everyday life, while videos provided simultaneous visual and auditory input, which helped maintain students' attention and improve comprehension [38]. This suggests that students with mild intellectual disabilities rely heavily on concrete and multisensory learning experiences to process and retain new vocabulary more effectively.

Furthermore, the findings showed that students demonstrated varied responses during the learning process. Some students were able to actively repeat vocabulary, identify pictures, and follow instructions, while others required repeated explanations and continuous guidance from the teacher [39]. These differences indicate that students with mild intellectual disabilities possess diverse cognitive abilities, memory capacity, and attention span. This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that vocabulary acquisition among students with intellectual disabilities requires repetition, meaningful context, and appropriate instructional support [40]. Repeated exposure to vocabulary through flashcards, classroom interaction, and concrete objects appeared to strengthen students' understanding and memory retention. This also relates to second language acquisition theory, which highlights the importance of meaningful input, interaction, and repeated practice in language learning [19]. Therefore, individualized instruction becomes essential in helping students achieve better vocabulary comprehension according to their individual learning needs [41].

In addition, the study identified several challenges teachers face during the teaching process. Teachers experienced difficulties due to differences in students' abilities, limited attention spans, and difficulty remembering vocabulary. These findings support previous research indicating that students with intellectual disabilities often experience limitations in memory, concentration, and information processing [1], [29]. Consequently, teachers were required to employ flexible teaching strategies and continuously adapt classroom instruction in response to students' responses and learning characteristics. The findings also emphasize the important role of teachers in selecting and modifying instructional media to create a more engaging learning environment. The use of varied media, such as combining flashcards with real objects, videos, and interactive activities, reflects the importance of multimodal learning in maintaining students' engagement and motivation during classroom instruction [11], [12].

Moreover, although picture-based vocabulary cards were considered useful in introducing vocabulary, teachers reported that repetitive use of the same media could lead to boredom and reduced classroom participation [42]. This finding indicates that instructional media should be varied and continuously adapted to maintain students' interest throughout the learning process. Teachers, therefore, play a significant role not only as instructors but also as facilitators who adjust learning activities according to students' cognitive characteristics and classroom conditions.

Overall, this study highlights that picture-based vocabulary cards are beneficial for enriching vocabulary for students with mild intellectual disabilities, particularly when integrated with other visual, auditory, and concrete learning media. The findings reinforce the importance of flexible, multimodal instructional approaches in helping students understand, retain, and practice English vocabulary more meaningfully. In addition, the study demonstrates that effective vocabulary instruction in special education classrooms depends not only on the learning media used, but also on teachers' ability to adapt instructional strategies according to students' individual needs and learning characteristics.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the implementation of picture-based vocabulary cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with mild intellectual disabilities and identified the challenges teachers face during instruction. The findings revealed that picture-based vocabulary cards supported vocabulary learning when combined with other instructional media such as real objects and videos. Students demonstrated varied responses, with some able to recognize and repeat vocabulary more effectively than others. In addition, teachers faced several challenges, including differences in students' abilities, limited attention span, and difficulties in vocabulary retention, which required flexible teaching strategies and repeated instruction. Overall, the study highlights the importance of using varied, adaptive instructional media to support vocabulary learning among students with mild intellectual disabilities. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to apply multimodal and individualized instructional approaches, while future researchers are encouraged to conduct broader studies involving larger participant pools and different research settings.

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