

Teaching English Vocabulary Through Picture Cards to Students with Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract. Teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities remains challenging because they need concrete visual support, repeated exposure, and teacher guidance to understand and remember new words. Picture cards are often used as visual instructional media, but their pedagogical value depends on how teachers implement them in classroom practice. This study aims to identify and describe the classroom processes that characterize the teacher's use of picture cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities. This research used a qualitative case study design involving one English teacher and one eighth-grade classroom at a special junior high school in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Data were collected through non-participant observation, semi-structured interview, document analysis of two lesson plans, and were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that picture cards supported meaning-making, attention building, guided practice, differentiated support, and repeated vocabulary use. The study concludes that picture cards functioned not merely as visual aids, but as flexible pedagogical tools for organizing meaningful, structured, and adaptive vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: Picture cards, Vocabulary teaching, Intellectual disabilities, Special education

1. INTRODUCTION

English is widely used as a global language in education, work, and access to information [1] This condition also shapes English as a Foreign Language instruction in Indonesia, including in special schools. Inclusive education frameworks emphasize that learners with disabilities have the same right to meaningful learning opportunities as other learners [2]. In special junior high schools (Sekolah Luar Biasa/ SLB), English learning is expected to support basic communication and functional language use. Vocabulary becomes a practical entry point because it provides the basic units for understanding and producing meaning [3]-[5]. Nation explains that vocabulary knowledge includes form, meaning, and use, while highlights the importance of systematic exposure [6]. These principles suggest that vocabulary instruction must be accessible and adapted to learners with special educational needs [7].

Students with intellectual disabilities face learning characteristics that directly affect vocabulary acquisition. According to the DSM-5, intellectual disability involves limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior in conceptual, social, and practical domains [8]. In classroom contexts, these limitations often appear as slow information processing, restricted short-term memory, and difficulty retaining new language forms. As a result, students may struggle to connect English words with meanings and to recall them after instruction. Many EFL vocabulary items are also abstract and unfamiliar to students' daily experience, which increases cognitive demands. For teachers in SLB settings, this condition creates a pedagogical challenge. Vocabulary instruction must present meaning in a concrete form, provide repeated exposure, and maintain students' attention during learning activities.

Visual learning media are commonly recommended to address these challenges because they reduce students' dependence on verbal explanation. In this study, picture cards refer to single-sided visual cards dominated by images and supported by written words, which were used by the teacher to introduce, explain, reinforce, and review vocabulary in manageable units. The previous studies were about students' perspective for visual game for enhancing the students' comprehension [9]-[11]. the other studies for certain material in ELT and its challenges [12]-[14]. Playing cards also supported visual comprehension and teacher-led scaffolding before students moved to further vocabulary practice. Dual Coding Theory

explains that learning can improve when verbal information is paired with visual input that supports meaning [15], while Mayer’s multimedia learning principles suggest that relevant visuals can reduce cognitive load and support comprehension [16], [17]. In special education contexts, visual supports help learners focus on key information and strengthen meaning making [18]. Previous studies also report that picture cards, flashcards, and picture mnemonics can support vocabulary learning for students with intellectual disabilities when instruction is structured and teacher guided [19]-[21]. Examples of the picture cards used in vocabulary teaching are illustrated in Figure 1.



Animal vocabulary
(Source: Research documentation)



Daily staple food vocabulary

Figure 1. Picture cards used in vocabulary instruction

Despite these reported benefits, previous studies still show an important limitation. Many studies have focused on learning outcomes, such as vocabulary scores, vocabulary recognition, or students’ vocabulary improvement. However, they provide limited explanation of the classroom processes behind the use of picture cards. Teaching steps are often presented as part of researcher-designed treatments, where the procedures are already planned and controlled by the researcher. As a result, these studies do not fully explain how teachers naturally use picture cards in everyday classroom practice, how they guide students’ responses, how they give prompts, or how they adapt support when students have difficulties [22], [23]. The dominance of experimental and single-subject designs also limits understanding of teacher decision-making in natural classroom settings [24], [25]. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on the classroom processes that characterize the teacher’s use of picture cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities. This study does not measure the effectiveness of picture cards, but explains how picture cards function as teacher-mediated pedagogical tools through classroom routines, scaffolding, differentiated support, and repeated vocabulary use in an SLB context.

This study aims to identify and describe the classroom processes that characterize the teacher’s use of picture cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities in a special school context. Specifically, this study focuses on how the teacher organizes picture-card-based instruction, guides students’ vocabulary responses, gives support based on students’ learning needs, and extends vocabulary use through classroom activities. This study is guided by the following research question: What classroom processes characterize the teacher’s use of picture cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities? Using a qualitative case study design, this study examines picture-card-based vocabulary instruction in a natural classroom setting. By focusing on classroom processes rather than learning outcomes, this research aims to provide a clear understanding of how picture cards function as teacher-mediated pedagogical tools in vocabulary teaching for students with intellectual disabilities in special schools.

Teaching Vocabulary in EFL Classrooms

Teaching vocabulary is a central component of English as a Foreign Language instruction because vocabulary provides the foundation for understanding and producing meaning. The vocabulary knowledge involves form, meaning, and use, which must be taught in an integrated manner [3]. It emphasizes that vocabulary learning requires systematic exposure and meaningful practice rather than isolated memorization [6]. In EFL classrooms, vocabulary instruction supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and enables learners to participate in basic communication. Previous studies show that vocabulary learning becomes more effective when teachers provide clear

meaning presentation and repeated practice opportunities [26]. However, vocabulary teaching in EFL contexts is not uniform across learner groups. For students with learning difficulties or disabilities, instructional approaches must be adapted to learners' cognitive characteristics and classroom needs [18]. This perspective suggests that vocabulary teaching should focus not only on learning outcomes, but also on how instructional practices support learners' access to meaning during classroom interaction [27]-[29].

Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Students with intellectual disabilities are learners who experience limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that affect conceptual, social, and practical skills [8]. In educational settings, these limitations often appear as slow information processing, restricted short-term memory, and difficulty retaining new information. These characteristics directly influence how students learn a foreign language, particularly vocabulary, which requires repeated exposure and stable word meaning connections. Previous studies report that students with intellectual disabilities face challenges in acquiring and recalling new vocabulary, especially when words are abstract or presented only through verbal explanation [20], [24]. As a result, vocabulary instruction for these learners needs to emphasize concrete representation, repetition, and teacher guidance. Research in special education contexts shows that structured instruction supported by visual media can help students focus on meaning and reduce cognitive demands during learning activities [19], [21]. This perspective highlights the importance of aligning vocabulary teaching practices with the learning characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities.

Picture Cards as Teacher-Mediated Vocabulary Tools

Picture cards are visual teaching aids that combine images with written words to support vocabulary learning. In language classrooms, picture cards are commonly used to present concrete representations of objects, actions, or simple concepts, which helps learners connect word forms with meaning. Visual support is particularly important for learners who experience difficulty processing verbal input alone. Dual Coding Theory explains that learning becomes more effective when verbal information is supported by relevant visual input, because both channels contribute to memory formation [15]. [17] also argues that visual materials enhance learning when they are aligned with instructional goals and reduce unnecessary cognitive load. Previous studies report that picture cards can increase learners' attention, support recall, and facilitate interaction during vocabulary activities [22], [26], [30]. These theoretical perspectives provide general principles for using visual media, but they do not prescribe fixed teaching procedures. The effectiveness of picture cards depends on how teachers adapt visual support to classroom context and learners' needs.

Teaching Vocabulary to Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Developing the use of picture cards as visual aids, teaching vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities requires pedagogical principles that are appropriate to the cognitive characteristics of students. Vocabulary learning requires understanding meaning, remembering form, and applying words in context [31]. For students with intellectual disabilities, effective teaching emphasizes clarity, repetition, visual supports, and active teacher modeling. [32] explain that systematic teaching supports students with intellectual disabilities through clear modeling and repeated practice. Visual supports help students focus on meaning and reduce reliance on verbal explanations, which are often challenging for students with learning difficulties [18], [33]-[35]. Teacher mediation is also essential for directing attention, providing cues, and adjusting support based on student responses. Studies on picture cards and flashcard-based instruction show that vocabulary learning improves when teachers actively organize and mediate learning activities for students with intellectual disabilities [19]-[21]. These principles function as analytical guidance rather than fixed instructional steps.

2. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to identify and describe the classroom processes that characterized the teacher's use of picture cards in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities. A case study is appropriate for examining a pedagogical phenomenon in depth within its real-life context [36]. This study did not aim to test the effectiveness of picture cards quantitatively. Instead, it focused on how picture-card-based vocabulary instruction was organized, guided, adapted, and extended by the teacher during classroom activities. The unit of analysis in this study was the classroom process of picture-card use, including teacher actions, instructional routines,

student responses, differentiated support, and follow-up vocabulary activities. Since classroom teaching is influenced by teacher actions, instructional media, student characteristics, and classroom situations, direct observation was needed to understand how picture cards functioned in actual teaching practice. As some notes, qualitative inquiry enables the documentation of classroom processes and participant perspectives through rich description. Therefore, this design was suitable for understanding picture cards as teacher-mediated pedagogical tools in a natural special school classroom setting [37].

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in a special junior high school (Sekolah Luar Biasa/SLB) located in North Sumatra, Indonesia, involving one eighth-grade classroom. The school was selected because it represented a special education context where English instruction is adapted to the learning characteristics of students with intellectual disabilities. This study used purposive sampling by selecting one English teacher as the participant. The teacher was chosen because she had more than three years of experience teaching English to students with intellectual disabilities and had implemented picture card-based vocabulary instruction in the classroom. The use of one participant was appropriate for this qualitative case study because the study emphasized depth and contextual understanding rather than broad generalization [36]. Purposive sampling was also suitable because the participant could provide rich and relevant information related to the research focus [37].

Data Collection

This study employed three data collection techniques to understand the classroom processes that characterized the teacher's use of picture cards in English vocabulary teaching. First, non-participant observation was conducted in two classroom sessions to document actual instructional practices, teacher-student interaction, and the use of picture cards in real time [38]. Second, a semi-structured interview with the teacher was conducted to explore pedagogical reasoning, instructional decisions, and reflections on picture-card use. Semi-structured interviews allow guided yet flexible exploration of participants' perspectives [39], [40]. Third, document analysis of two lesson plans was undertaken to examine instructional planning and the alignment between planned and implemented practices, particularly regarding the integration of picture cards in vocabulary instruction [41]. Together, these data sources enabled triangulation across classroom practice, teacher explanation, and instructional planning to identify how picture cards were organized, guided, adapted, and extended during vocabulary instruction.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns across classroom practices, teacher accounts, and instructional documents [42]. The analysis followed the main processes of familiarization, initial coding, and theme development. In the familiarization stage, the observation field notes, interview transcript, and lesson plan documents were read repeatedly to understand the classroom context and recurring practices. Meaningful data related to teacher actions, picture-card use, student responses, and classroom activities were identified and labeled through initial coding. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories and developed into themes that represented classroom processes in the teacher's use of picture cards. Data from observation, interview, and document analysis were compared to examine how each process appeared across the three data sources. The final themes were presented in narrative form and supported by evidence from observation, interview, and document analysis.

3. FINDINGS

After analyzing the observation, semi-structured interview, and document analysis data, five findings were identified in this study. The analysis identified five classroom processes that characterized the teacher's use of picture cards in vocabulary instruction: (1) introducing vocabulary through familiar meanings, (2) building attention through card routines, (3) scaffolding vocabulary practice, (4) providing differentiated support, and (5) reinforcing and extending vocabulary use. Each finding is presented below.

Introducing Vocabulary Through Familiar Meanings

The classroom data showed that the teacher introduced English vocabulary by connecting picture cards with meanings that were already familiar to the students. The teacher did not directly ask students to

produce English words at the beginning of the activity. Instead, the teacher first showed the picture cards and asked students to identify the objects in Indonesian. In the first observation session, when the teacher showed animal picture cards, students first mentioned the animal names in Indonesian, such as “ayam,” before the teacher asked for or confirmed the English word. A similar pattern also appeared in the second observation session, where students identified daily staple food items, such as “nasi,” before moving to the English vocabulary.

This finding was also supported by the teacher’s explanation in the interview. The teacher stated:

“It starts with Indonesian first and then English... not to mention English, even in Indonesian they still do not fully understand the basic concept.”

(Teacher A, Interview)

This explanation indicates that Indonesian was used to establish meaning before English naming. The teacher used Indonesian as an initial step because students still needed support in understanding the basic concept of the objects shown in the picture cards. In this case, picture cards helped students recognize the visual object first, connect it with a familiar meaning, and then move gradually to the English label.

The lesson plan data reflected the same sequence. In LP1, students were planned to mention animal names on picture cards in Indonesian before mentioning the English vocabulary. In LP2, students were also planned to mention daily staple food items on picture cards in Indonesian before moving to English words. This shows that the teacher’s classroom practice was aligned with the instructional plan, in which picture cards served as concrete visual support that helped students move from familiar Indonesian meanings to English vocabulary labels.

Building Attention Through Card Routines

Observation data indicated that picture cards were implemented through repeated classroom routines to build students’ attention and participation. In the first observation session, the teacher selected one picture card, counted “Satu... dua... tiga,” lifted the card, and turned it toward both sides of the classroom so all students could see the picture clearly. After the card was shown, students responded by naming the picture, and the activity continued with playful responses, such as imitating animal sounds and laughing. This shows that the card routine was used not only to display vocabulary, but also to create anticipation and visual focus during the lesson.

The teacher’s interview also supported this finding. The teacher explained that she wanted to create a more active atmosphere and increase students’ enthusiasm. She stated:

“My teaching cannot be monotonous. So there has to be some play, some laughter, some cheerful moments, some games, and it is also mixed with ice breaking.”

(Teacher A, Interview)

This statement indicates that the teacher intentionally used enjoyable routines to keep students involved. In the second observation session, this pattern appeared when the teacher began the lesson with tepuk semangat, showed daily staple food picture cards one by one, inserted light jokes, and gave appreciation by asking students to clap together.

A similar pattern appeared in the lesson plan data. The lesson plans included visual access to the cards by directing them to all students, teacher demonstration using picture cards, student observation of picture cards, and an ice-breaking activity. Across the three data sources, picture cards were shown to be implemented through structured and enjoyable routines to manage attention and encourage participation.

Scaffolding Vocabulary Practice

The analysis of observation, interview, and document data indicated that picture cards were implemented through teacher-guided vocabulary practice. The teacher did not expect students to answer independently without support. Instead, she used picture cards together with prompts, clues, repetition, individual questioning, whole-class responses, and answer confirmation. In the observation, the teacher pointed the cards to individual students, asked them to identify the picture, and then redirected the answer to the whole class for repetition. When students could not answer, the teacher gave clues, imitated sounds, used body movements, or provided direct assistance until students could follow or repeat the correct word.

This finding was supported by the teacher’s explanation in the interview. The teacher stated:

“If the student does not respond or responds very slowly, then I directly say it spontaneously... I do not wait too long because... time is limited.”

(Teacher A, Interview)

This explanation suggests that the teacher adjusted her support based on students’ response speed and the classroom situation. The teacher also explained that instructions needed to be simple because students

had difficulty understanding long directions. This pattern also appeared in the worksheet activity, where the teacher guided students to identify the picture, mention the Indonesian word, recall the English word, and select the correct answer together.

Document analysis further confirmed this practice. The lesson plan included questioning based on picture cards, direct assistance and answer confirmation, drill or repetition, simple follow-up questions, group repetition, and turn-taking or random individual responses. Overall, picture cards helped the teacher guide students step by step from picture recognition to English vocabulary responses.

Providing Differentiated Support

This finding indicates that picture cards were implemented flexibly to support students with different learning needs. The teacher did not use one fixed procedure for all students because their abilities, response speeds, writing skills, visual access, and readiness were varied. In the observation, some students were able to answer and follow the card activities actively, while others responded more slowly, mostly listened, or needed step-by-step help. One student also had difficulty seeing the writing on the board clearly, so the teacher needed to adjust students' visual access to both the picture cards and the written vocabulary. During writing and worksheet activities, the teacher walked around the classroom, checked students' notebooks, and gave direct assistance to students who needed help.

The teacher's interview clarified why the same support could not be given to all students:

"The students' abilities in my class are very varied. Some are able, some are not, some can do it with help, and some really need help."

(Teacher A, Interview)

The teacher's explanation indicates that differentiated support was based on the teacher's awareness of students' varied abilities. The teacher also explained that students who needed help were identified through observation, evaluation, and assessment results. In addition, support was sometimes shared through peer tutoring, where a more capable student helped classmates while the teacher assisted other students directly. This indicates that picture-card activities were supported through both teacher assistance and peer support.

This pattern was also reflected in the lesson plans. The lesson plans included visual access to picture cards, simple worksheet tasks with teacher guidance, direct assistance, answer confirmation, and supported Indonesian-to-English writing. Across the three data sources, picture cards functioned as adaptable instructional tools that allowed the teacher to adjust vocabulary activities through individual help, peer support, visual access, and guided written practice for students with varied learning readiness.

Reinforcing and Extending Vocabulary Use

The data showed that picture cards were repeatedly used after the initial vocabulary introduction to reinforce and extend students' vocabulary learning. In the first observation session, the teacher distributed picture cards randomly, asked each student about the card they held, instructed students to exchange cards, and repeated the questioning in another round. After the oral practice, the teacher wrote the vocabulary on the board, asked students to copy the words, guided them to read the words aloud, and continued the activity through a picture-based worksheet.

This finding was supported by the teacher's explanation in the interview. Referring to the card exchange activity, the teacher stated:

"The purpose of that activity is more or less the same as reflection... it becomes a way of repeating it again."

(Teacher A, Interview)

This statement shows that repeated card use was intended to help students recall the vocabulary. The teacher also explained that writing activities helped evaluate students' ability, while simple sentence practice was used to help students move from vocabulary recognition to basic expression. In the second observation session, the cards were shuffled again for recall, and selected students were guided to make simple sentences such as "I like chicken" and "I like rice."

The lesson plan data supported this repeated use of picture cards. The lesson plans included repeated card activities, random card recall, writing and reading after oral practice, guided worksheet practice, picture-card-based vocabulary assessment, and simple sentence construction with "I like" and "I don't like." Overall, picture cards were shown to be implemented across several stages of vocabulary learning, helping the teacher recycle vocabulary from recognition and recall to written practice, assessment, and basic language use.

4. DISCUSSION

In this study, picture cards functioned not only as visual aids, but also as teacher-mediated pedagogical tools in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities. The findings show five classroom processes that characterized the teacher's use of picture cards: introducing vocabulary through familiar meanings, building attention through card routines, scaffolding vocabulary practice, providing differentiated support, and reinforcing and extending vocabulary use. These processes answer the research question by showing that picture cards were not used in a simple or mechanical way. Instead, their use depended on how the teacher organized, guided, adapted, and repeated vocabulary instruction in the classroom. Therefore, the pedagogical value of picture cards came not only from the pictures themselves, but also from teacher guidance and classroom adaptation.

The first two findings highlight the role of picture cards in supporting familiar meaning introduction and attention-building routines during vocabulary instruction. The use of familiar Indonesian meanings before English naming supports [3] view that vocabulary learning involves connections between form, meaning, and use. Picture cards helped students connect visual objects, familiar meanings, and English words. This is also consistent with [15] view that visual and verbal information can support meaning and memory, and [16], [17] explanation that relevant visual input can support learning and reduce cognitive load. [18] also notes that visual support helps learners with learning difficulties focus on meaning and reduce dependence on verbal explanation. However, this study adds that students with intellectual disabilities were not immediately directed to English words. They were first guided through Indonesian meanings before English naming. Attention was also built not by pictures alone, but through teacher-led routines around the cards, such as counting, one-by-one display, humor, praise, clapping, and ice-breaking.

Scaffolding and differentiated support were central to how picture cards were implemented in the classroom. Students with intellectual disabilities may experience limitations in processing, memory, response speed, and retention [8]. Therefore, vocabulary instruction needs clear instruction, repetition, visual support, teacher modeling, and guided practice. This is consistent with [32] view that instruction for students with intellectual disabilities requires clear modeling, repetition, and guided practice, as well as [18] emphasis on adjusted teaching support. In this study, scaffolding appeared through prompts, clues, gestures, direct answers, answer confirmation, simplified instruction, individual questioning, and whole-class repetition. Differentiated support was also shown through assistance for slower responses, writing difficulties, visual access, direct help, and peer tutor support. These findings show that picture cards became useful because the teacher actively mediated and adjusted their use based on students' learning readiness.

Vocabulary reinforcement in this study shows that picture cards were used beyond initial word introduction. It explains that vocabulary knowledge includes form, meaning, and use, and emphasizes the importance of systematic exposure and repeated practice. This pattern also reflects view that vocabulary teaching should support meaningful practice and language use [3], [6], [31]. The use of simple expressions such as "I like..." and "I don't like..." shows that vocabulary was directed toward basic language use, not only word memorization. This repeated use of picture cards indicates that vocabulary learning was treated as a gradual process from recognition to recall, written reinforcement, assessment, and basic language use.

In relation to previous research, this study extends the discussion on picture cards and visual media in vocabulary instruction. Earlier studies have shown that picture cards, flashcards, and other visual media can support vocabulary learning and improve vocabulary outcomes for students with disabilities or language learning needs [19]- [25]. However, many of these studies give more attention to vocabulary improvement, recognition, or media effectiveness than to classroom processes. This study offers a different focus by explaining how the teacher used picture cards in a natural special school classroom. The contribution of this study lies in showing that picture cards do not function independently as instructional media. Their pedagogical value emerges through teacher mediation, classroom routines, scaffolding, differentiated support, and repeated vocabulary use. Therefore, this study strengthens the understanding of picture-card-based vocabulary instruction by showing how picture cards are transformed into structured and adaptive classroom processes for students with intellectual disabilities. Rather than proposing a completely new theory, this study develops existing understanding by showing that picture cards functioned as flexible pedagogical tools. In the context of students with intellectual disabilities, picture cards worked through familiar meaning introduction, attention-building card routines, scaffolded vocabulary practice, differentiated support, and vocabulary reinforcement.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that picture cards are used not only as visual aids, but also as teacher-mediated pedagogical tools in teaching English vocabulary to students with intellectual disabilities. The findings show five classroom processes that characterize the teacher's use of picture cards: introducing vocabulary through familiar meanings, building attention through card routines, scaffolding vocabulary practice, providing differentiated support, and reinforcing and extending vocabulary use. These processes show that the value of picture cards does not only depend on their visual form, but also on how the teacher organizes, guides, adapts, and repeats vocabulary instruction in the classroom. The main contribution of this study lies in showing that picture cards do not function independently as instructional media. Their pedagogical value emerges through teacher mediation, classroom routines, scaffolding, differentiated support, and repeated vocabulary practice. Therefore, this study expands the understanding of picture-card-based vocabulary instruction by explaining how picture cards are transformed into structured and adaptive classroom processes in a special education context. Picture cards can be considered practical teaching aids that support guided and adaptive vocabulary learning for students with intellectual disabilities.

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