



Factors Influencing Vocabulary Learning Difficulties Among Students in Inclusive English Classroom: An English Teacher's Perception

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-02-10 Revised: 2026-03-18 Accepted: 2026-04-02</p> <p>Keywords: EFL; inclusive classroom; teacher perception; vocabulary instruction; vocabulary learning difficulties</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideasv14i1.10258</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Tisya Amalia Putri Sitorus tisya0304222048@uinsu.ac.id English Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara</p>	<p><i>This study investigates the factors influencing students' limited vocabulary knowledge as an observable manifestation of vocabulary learning difficulties (VLD) in an inclusive English classroom. Vocabulary learning difficulties remain a significant challenge in EFL contexts, particularly in classrooms with diverse learning needs. This study aims to explore how these difficulties are perceived and addressed from the perspective of an English teacher. A qualitative descriptive case study design was employed, involving one English teacher in a Grade 7 inclusive classroom at an Islamic integrated junior high school in Medan. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview and classroom observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that vocabulary learning difficulties are shaped by the interaction between internal and external factors. Internally, students' motivation, memory, learning interest, and individual learning pace significantly affect their ability to retain and use vocabulary. Students with limited vocabulary foundations experience difficulties in memorizing, pronouncing, and expressing vocabulary, particularly in speaking and translating activities. Externally, instructional practices, classroom conditions, and exposure to English influence vocabulary development. Although the teacher applied supportive strategies such as repetition, contextualization, and direct practice, challenges such as limited use of visual media, diverse student needs, and time constraints hindered optimal vocabulary learning. The study highlights that vocabulary learning difficulties in inclusive classrooms should be understood as a contextual and interactional phenomenon rather than solely as individual deficits. These findings emphasize the importance of adaptive teaching strategies and supportive learning environments in addressing vocabulary learning difficulties.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of English language learning because it enables learners to express ideas, convey meaning, and participate effectively in classroom interactions. In EFL contexts, it is also a strong predictor of overall language proficiency and academic success (Nation, 2013). However, many students still demonstrate limited vocabulary, which becomes a major barrier to effective English learning, particularly in inclusive classrooms. In these settings, students with diverse learning characteristics learn together, making vocabulary mastery not only a linguistic issue but also a learning challenge that affects participation and engagement.

Previous research shows that students' vocabulary difficulties are shaped by multiple interrelated factors. These include internal factors such as motivation, memory, anxiety, and learning strategies, as well as external factors such as teaching methods and the learning environment (Baharudin et al., 2025; Fathurizki et al., 2025). Learners with low motivation and ineffective strategies tend to struggle more in retaining and using new words. They often rely on rote memorization without meaningful understanding, which slows vocabulary growth over time. This reflects the limited use of effective vocabulary learning strategies, which play a crucial role in determining vocabulary acquisition outcomes (Teng, 2020).

Research also indicates that students frequently face challenges in pronunciation, spelling, understanding meanings, and applying vocabulary in context (Wahyuni et al., 2021; Rohmatillah, 2017; Panjaitan et al., 2025). These difficulties are intensified by external conditions such as fear of making mistakes, lack of practice, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. In many cases, instruction that emphasizes memorization without contextualization fails to support learners who need more interactive and scaffolded experiences (Nation, 2013).

In inclusive English classrooms, these challenges become more complex. Teachers must accommodate students with varying proficiency levels, learning pace, and cognitive abilities within the same space. Studies from teachers' perspectives highlight constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy. As a result, students who require repeated exposure, visual support, and differentiated instruction are more likely to fall behind.

Despite the growing body of research on vocabulary learning difficulties in EFL contexts, most studies have been conducted in general classrooms or higher education settings (Baharudin et al., 2025; Panjaitan et al., 2025). Limited attention has been given to inclusive English classrooms at the junior high school level, particularly in Islamic integrated schools (SMP IT). In Indonesia, inclusive education has increasingly been implemented in such schools, including several SMP IT in Medan, where students with diverse learning characteristics learn

together in mainstream classrooms. However, empirical studies that specifically examine factors influencing vocabulary difficulties in this context remain scarce. More importantly, existing research tends to focus on students' achievement rather than providing in-depth, qualitative insights from teachers about real classroom challenges (Sahnan & Daulay, 2023). This highlights a clear gap in understanding how teachers perceive and respond to vocabulary learning difficulties in inclusive SMP IT settings.

In this study, inclusive education is conceptualized as an approach that accommodates learning diversity rather than focusing solely on formally diagnosed disabilities. Students who experience vocabulary learning difficulties are considered part of inclusive education because they demonstrate functional learning challenges that require instructional adaptation, even without medical diagnoses (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; UNESCO, 2017). In English learning contexts, inclusive education also emphasizes classroom practices that respond to learners' cultural and learning backgrounds, where sociocultural interaction supports participation and language development (Eun, 2016). Accordingly, this study views limited vocabulary knowledge as an observable manifestation of vocabulary learning difficulties, reflected in students' repeated challenges in understanding, retaining, and using vocabulary during learning activities.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore the factors influencing students' limited vocabulary knowledge as an observable manifestation of vocabulary learning difficulties in an inclusive English classroom at one of the SMP IT in Medan. The study is guided by the research question: What factors influence students' vocabulary difficulties in an inclusive English classroom? The objective is to identify and analyze both internal and external factors based on teacher perceptions and classroom observations. This study contributes by providing context-specific, qualitative insights into vocabulary learning difficulties from teachers' perspectives in an inclusive SMP IT classroom, an area that remains underexplored in previous research.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore factors influencing students' limited vocabulary knowledge as a manifestation of vocabulary learning difficulties (VLD) in an inclusive English classroom from the teacher's perspective. A case study approach was selected to enable an in-depth investigation of instructional practices and contextual factors within a real-life educational setting (Yin, 2018). The study focused on a single case, namely one Grade 7 inclusive English classroom at an SMP IT in Medan, to generate rich and contextualized insights into how vocabulary learning difficulties are understood and addressed in practice (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The study was conducted in an Islamic integrated junior high school (SMP IT) in Medan that implements inclusive education by accommodating students with diverse learning needs in mainstream classrooms. The primary participant was one English teacher teaching Grade 7 inclusive classes. The teacher was purposively selected as an information-rich case due to direct involvement in inclusive English instruction, experience in addressing students' vocabulary learning difficulties, and responsibility for teaching all English classes in the school. As the only English teacher in the institution, the participant had access to students across multiple classes, which allowed a broader understanding of vocabulary learning challenges.

In addition, the teacher had two years of teaching experience at the current school (2022–present) and prior experience in another inclusive SMP IT setting. This combination of sustained experience and exposure to inclusive contexts positioned the participant to provide in-depth and reflective insights into vocabulary learning difficulties.

Data Collection

Data were collected over approximately two months using method triangulation. A semi-structured interview was conducted to explore the teacher's perceptions of students' vocabulary learning difficulties and contributing factors, including instructional strategies, classroom challenges, and adaptations implemented to support students with limited vocabulary knowledge. The interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent.

In addition, non-participant classroom observations were conducted during eight English lessons in the Grade 7 inclusive classroom. The observations focused on vocabulary teaching practices, teacher–student interactions, and students' observable responses such as engagement, participation, confusion, and retention. Classroom conditions, including the learning environment and instructional resources, were also documented. Field notes were recorded systematically using an observation checklist.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and refinement to identify patterns related to factors influencing VLD. For example, segments such as “students forget vocabulary quickly” and “students rely on memorization without understanding” were initially coded as memory-related difficulties and surface learning strategies. These codes were then grouped into broader themes such as internal factors affecting vocabulary retention. The analysis emphasized interpretation from the teacher's perspective and was

supported by observational data to enhance credibility.

To ensure trustworthiness, method triangulation was applied by comparing data from teacher interviews and classroom observations. Prolonged engagement through repeated observations supported a deeper understanding of instructional practices and classroom dynamics. Peer debriefing with a fellow educator and reflexive journaling were used to enhance analytical transparency and minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical approval was obtained from the school authority prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from the participating teacher. The teacher's identity and school-related information were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The study was conducted with sensitivity to inclusive educational contexts to avoid stigmatization, and all data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

3. Results

This section presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of interview and classroom observation data. The data were analyzed to identify patterns related to students' vocabulary learning difficulties (VLD) and the factors influencing them within the classroom context. The findings are organized into five major themes: (1) the multidimensional nature of VLD, (2) internal factors shaping vocabulary learning difficulties, (3) instructional practices and vocabulary learning, (4) inclusive classroom context and instructional challenges, and (5) institutional support and learning environment. Table (1) summarizes the thematic structure and presents the triangulation of data from interview, and observation. Each theme is then elaborated in the following subsections.

Table 1. Thematic Structure of Vocabulary Learning Difficulties (VLD) and Data Triangulation

No	Theme	Core Focus	Interview Evidence	Observation Evidence
1	Multidimensional Nature of VLD	Difficulties in memorization, pronunciation, and real-time vocabulary use in speaking	"Students often have difficulties in memorizing vocabulary... they don't know how to pronounce it." / "Some students even start from zero."	Students showed hesitation, delays, pauses, and fragmented or minimal responses during speaking and translating tasks
2	Internal Factors	Motivation,	"The main	Variation in

	Shaping Vocabulary Learning Difficulties	memory, individual learning affecting vocabulary retention retrieval	and pace and	factor intention motivation..." / "Students' abilities are not the same..."	is or responded confidently, while others required prompts, additional time, and guidance
3	Instructional Practices and Vocabulary Learning	Repetition, questioning, and contextualization in vocabulary instruction	and	"I relate vocabulary to daily life..." / "Students memorize and use words in sentences."	Students repeated vocabulary and engaged in speaking activities, but some struggled to apply vocabulary; limited use of instructional media observed
4	Inclusive Classroom Context and Instructional Challenges	Instructional complexity due to diverse abilities, need for scaffolding, and limited time	and	"Sometimes I call students' names..." / "The main problem is limited time..."	Teacher frequently shifted between whole-class and individual support; some students required repeated guidance and assistance
5	Institutional Support and Learning Environment	School programs and teacher development supporting vocabulary exposure beyond classroom	and	"English Fun Day..." / "Weekly conversation activities..." / "Trainings from Cambridge..."	Not directly observed, but indicates extended opportunities for vocabulary use and practice outside classroom instruction

Multidimensional Nature of Vocabulary Learning Difficulties (VLD)

The data indicate that students experience VLD in multiple forms, particularly in memorization, pronunciation, and vocabulary use in speaking. The teacher noted that students *"have difficulties in memorizing vocabulary"* and *"do not know how to pronounce it."* In addition, some students were described as having very limited vocabulary, with a few *"starting from zero."*

Classroom observations supported these findings, students frequently hesitated, paused, or remained silent during translating and speaking tasks. Their responses were often delayed, minimal, or fragmented, indicating difficulty in retrieving and using vocabulary. These patterns indicate that VLD extends beyond limited vocabulary knowledge to include challenges in accessing and applying vocabulary during real-time communication.

Influence of Internal Factors on Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

The findings highlight several internal factors influencing VLD, including motivation, memory, and individual learning pace. The teacher emphasized that *"motivation... really affects their learning,"* indicating that students' engagement plays a central role in vocabulary development. Differences in ability were also evident, with some students progressing more slowly than others.

Observations confirmed these variations, while some students responded quickly and confidently, others required prompts, additional time, or guidance. In several instances, some students were still searching for word meanings while others had already completed tasks. These differences suggest that low motivation and slower processing limit students' ability to retain and retrieve vocabulary effectively.

Instructional Practices and Vocabulary Learning

The teacher employed strategies such as repetition, questioning, and contextualization. Vocabulary was linked to daily life, as the teacher explained that they *"relate the vocabulary to daily life"* by asking students about their experiences. Memorization was also combined with practice, where students were asked to use vocabulary in sentences.

Observations showed that students repeated vocabulary items and participated in simple speaking activities. However, some still struggled to apply vocabulary during these tasks. The limited use of visual aids or instructional media indicates reduced opportunities for deeper understanding, particularly for students who require more varied input. These findings suggest that while instruction supported exposure, it did not fully address diverse learning needs related to VLD.

Inclusive Classroom Context and Instructional Challenges

The inclusive classroom setting introduced additional challenges due to diverse student abilities. The teacher applied flexible strategies, noting that students could follow “if guided” through direct prompts and individual attention.

Observations showed that students with additional needs participated in activities but required more assistance and repeated instructions. Limited instructional time was also identified as a constraint, as the teacher stated that “the main problem is limited time,” requiring attention to be divided across students. This resulted in frequent shifts between whole-class instruction and individual support, which limits consistent scaffolding. These conditions indicate that the inclusive context increases instructional complexity and intensifies VLD.

Institutional Support and Learning Environment

The findings highlight the role of institutional support in addressing VLD. The school implemented programs such as “*English Fun Day*,” where students use simple English daily, and weekly conversation activities to practice vocabulary. These programs provide additional exposure beyond classroom instruction.

The teacher also reported participation in professional development, including training and seminars to improve teaching practices. Although these were not directly observed, they reflect institutional efforts to support vocabulary learning. This suggests that institutional support plays a complementary role in addressing VLD by extending opportunities for vocabulary use and practice.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that vocabulary learning difficulties (VLD) in an inclusive English classroom are not merely individual learning problems but are shaped by the interaction between learner characteristics, instructional practices, and contextual constraints. While previous research conceptualizes vocabulary knowledge as involving both receptive and productive dimensions (Nation, 2013), the present findings extend this understanding by showing that the relationship between these dimensions becomes more unstable in inclusive settings. The transition from recognition to active use is not linear, particularly when learners differ significantly in prior exposure and linguistic readiness. This suggests that vocabulary development is highly contingent on contextual conditions rather than solely on cognitive acquisition processes.

The inclusive classroom context intensifies VLD because it brings together learners with heterogeneous abilities under a uniform instructional structure. This reflects the principle that inclusive education is not merely about placing diverse learners in the same classroom, but about restructuring teaching practices to ensure equitable participation for all learners (Ainscow, 2020). In such conditions, differences in prior knowledge, motivation, and processing capacity are not only present but also magnified. Students who possess stronger foundational

vocabulary are able to benefit from instruction more efficiently, while those with limited exposure struggle to keep pace. This imbalance creates a cumulative effect, where gaps in vocabulary knowledge widen over time. Therefore, VLD in inclusive classrooms cannot be fully explained by internal factors alone; it is the interaction between learner variability and instructional uniformity that makes these difficulties more pronounced.

Internal factors such as motivation, memory, and learning pace remain central to vocabulary acquisition, but their effects are mediated by the classroom environment. Motivation, for instance, influences students' willingness to engage with vocabulary tasks, yet its impact is constrained when instructional opportunities are not sufficiently differentiated. Similarly, memory limitations affect retention, but repeated exposure may not occur consistently in classrooms where time must be distributed across diverse learners. This can be explained by the limited capacity of working memory, which restricts learners' ability to store and process new vocabulary simultaneously (Baddeley, 2000). This indicates that internal factors operate within structural boundaries, and their influence becomes more visible when instructional conditions fail to accommodate variability. In this sense, VLD reflects a dynamic relationship between cognitive processes and contextual limitations rather than a fixed learner deficit.

The instructional strategies observed, including repetition and contextualization, align with established pedagogical principles, yet their effectiveness appears conditional in inclusive settings. Repetition alone may lead to surface-level processing if it is not supported by deeper cognitive engagement and meaningful use of vocabulary (Boers, 2013). Repetition may support surface-level familiarity, but it does not guarantee deeper processing, especially for learners who require multiple modes of input. Contextualization, while beneficial, assumes a certain level of background knowledge that not all learners possess. Without sufficient scaffolding, these strategies may reinforce rather than reduce disparities in vocabulary learning. This finding extends previous research by suggesting that the success of instructional strategies depends not only on their theoretical validity but also on their adaptability to diverse learner profiles.

The limitations of instructional practices are further compounded by structural constraints inherent in inclusive classrooms. Time allocation emerges as a critical factor. This is consistent with previous research indicating that teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices is often constrained by structural limitations such as time, resources, and classroom demands (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). As teachers must balance the needs of the entire class with the need for individualized support. This division of attention reduces opportunities for sustained scaffolding, particularly for students who require continuous guidance. Consequently, the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogy, which emphasizes adaptation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), is constrained by practical conditions. This explains why inclusive contexts intensify VLD: the demand for differentiated

support increases, while the capacity to provide it remains limited.

Institutional support, including extracurricular programs and teacher training, provides additional opportunities for vocabulary exposure. However, this study suggests that such support functions as a supplementary rather than a primary mechanism for addressing VLD. The impact of institutional initiatives depends on their alignment with classroom practices. When these elements operate independently, their contribution to vocabulary development becomes fragmented. This finding highlights the need for coherence between institutional policies and instructional implementation, extending existing research that often treats these components separately.

Taken together, the findings indicate that VLD should be understood as an emergent phenomenon resulting from the interaction of learner, teacher, and environmental factors. Learner characteristics determine readiness and processing capacity, instructional practices shape access to learning opportunities, and classroom conditions influence the extent to which these opportunities can be realized. In inclusive settings, these factors interact more intensively, creating a complex learning environment in which difficulties are both amplified and sustained. This integrated perspective extends existing research by moving beyond single-variable explanations and emphasizing the systemic nature of vocabulary learning difficulties.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature by situating VLD within an inclusive education framework. Rather than treating vocabulary difficulties as isolated linguistic issues, it highlights how they are constructed through the interplay of cognitive, pedagogical, and contextual dimensions. This perspective bridges vocabulary acquisition theory with inclusive pedagogy, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how language learning occurs in diverse classrooms. It suggests that future research should move toward more holistic models that account for variability not only within learners but also within learning environments.

The implications of this study emphasize the need for adaptive and learner-centered instructional approaches. Effective vocabulary teaching in inclusive classrooms requires the integration of multiple strategies, including multimodal input, repeated exposure, and meaningful interaction. At the same time, instructional pacing must be flexible to accommodate differences in processing speed and learning readiness. These adjustments are essential to reduce disparities in learning outcomes and to ensure that all students have equitable access to vocabulary development.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The focus on a single teacher and one school context limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on teacher perspectives and observational data means that students' subjective experiences are not directly represented. The study also does not examine long-term vocabulary development,

which may provide further insight into how VLD evolves over time. These limitations suggest the need for future research that includes multiple participants, incorporates student perspectives, and explores longitudinal patterns of vocabulary learning in inclusive contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing students' limited vocabulary knowledge as an observable manifestation of vocabulary learning difficulties (VLD) in an inclusive English classroom. The findings indicate that VLD is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction between internal factors, such as motivation, memory, learning interest, and individual learning pace, and external factors, including instructional practices, classroom conditions, and language exposure. Students with limited vocabulary foundations experienced difficulties in memorizing, pronouncing, and expressing vocabulary, particularly in translating and speaking activities, as reflected in their hesitation and reliance on teacher support.

The study also reveals that while strategies such as repetition, contextualization, and direct practice support vocabulary learning, challenges such as limited use of visual media, diverse student needs, and time constraints affect the effectiveness of instruction in inclusive settings. A key contribution of this study is the conceptualization of VLD as a contextual and interactional phenomenon, emphasizing that vocabulary difficulties are not merely individual deficits but are shaped by the dynamic interplay between learners and instructional contexts. This perspective extends existing understandings of VLD, particularly within inclusive junior high school settings.

However, this study is limited to a single teacher and one classroom and does not include students' perspectives, which may restrict the generalizability and depth of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve multiple participants, incorporate students' perspectives, and examine instructional interventions or the use of visual and technological supports to enhance vocabulary learning in inclusive classrooms. Such studies may provide more comprehensive insights and contribute to the development of more effective and inclusive vocabulary teaching practices.

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