



Teachers' Multi-Experiences in Teaching Vocabulary for Students with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-07-18 Revised: 2026-08-17 Accepted: 2026-08-17 Keywords: <i>kindergarten, students with special educational needs (SEN), teachers' experience, vocabulary teaching, young learners</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11860 Corresponding Author: Nur Ayu Dwi Hartini ayudwi0333244004@uinsu.ac.id State Islamic University of North Sumatra	<i>This research examines the experiences of teachers in teaching vocabulary for students with special needs in early childhood education, focusing on the challenges faced and strategies used by teachers. This research was conducted in one of private schools that focuses on early childhood education in North Sumatra, Medan. Participants consisted of 2 teachers who have at least one year of experience in teaching early childhood students with special needs. A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how teachers interpret and navigate their experiences. The findings revealed four main challenges: (a) language and communication barriers, (b) behavioral and emotional challenges, (c) lack of skills and experience, and (d) limited parental involvement. In terms of strategies, teachers employed (a) verbal methods, (b) gestural techniques, (c) visual aids, and (d) active parental involvement. These findings highlight the need for teacher training and stronger collaboration with parents to improve vocabulary acquisition for students with special needs.</i>

1. Introduction

Vocabulary development is crucial for effective language acquisition and communication, serving as the foundation for literacy, reading, writing, and speaking skills. As Wilkins (1972) emphasizes, vocabulary is essential for conveying meaning, without it, communication is impossible. Vocabulary development also plays a key role in early literacy programs in helping young children build reading and writing abilities. In schools, vocabulary is used daily in conversations, classroom activities, and academic tasks. A strong vocabulary enhances cognitive skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity (Joyce, 2011). Therefore, vocabulary should be taught early, particularly since in the early childhood education, as it supports cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Collins, 2010). Strong vocabulary helps children with pre-reading skills, understanding subjects, building self-esteem, and improving academic performance. Children with a rich vocabulary are more likely to succeed in school, while those with limited vocabulary knowledge may struggle academically (Stanovich, 1986).

With the rise of English language as foreign language in early childhood settings, it presents several challenges, particularly as English becomes a foreign language for young learners. One major difficulty is that vocabulary learning involves memorizing unfamiliar words and spelling (Hazar, 2020). Additionally, teaching English vocabulary differs from teaching in students' native languages and is more complex for kindergarten students, who have shorter attention spans and may struggle to stay engaged (McGee & Feldhusen, 2000). Young learners also face language interference, relying on their native language, which can hinder English vocabulary acquisition.

These challenges are intensified when teaching demographic of students called as students with special needs, such as those with cognitive, physical, or learning disabilities (Chhetri, 2015). Ruddy, 2019 stated that teachers of students with special needs face dual responsibilities—teaching the subject and providing special education support—but often lack adequate training, resources, and professional development opportunities. While all young children are in the process of developing language skills, children with language-based disabilities have significant difficulties and struggle in learning and remember basic vocabulary (Joyce, 2011).

A 2023 report from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF underscores the widespread prevalence of developmental disabilities among children and young people globally. It calls for urgent action to address disparities in healthcare access, health outcomes, and the impact of factors such as poverty on their well-being. The report estimates that, in 2019, 317 million children and young people were affected by health conditions contributing to developmental disabilities, many of whom experience stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. Furthermore, these individuals often face challenges in accessing healthcare and tend to receive lower-quality care compared to their peers. In addition, a 2021 UNICEF report reveals that approximately 1 in 10 children worldwide—around 240 million—live with disabilities.

This report highlights that children with disabilities face significantly greater disadvantages than their non-disabled peers across various indicators of child well-being. the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that 80% of people with disabilities reside in developing countries. In Indonesia, a developing country, 26.657 children with special needs are enrolled in early childhood education programs, making up 0,39% of total enrollment (Data Pokok Pendidikan, 2023). Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (2023) states that to ensure students with special needs are not left behind in comparison to their peers, many schools in Indonesia have implemented inclusive education services.

This educational model mandates that children with special needs attend the nearest educational institution and participate in regular classrooms alongside their age-appropriate peers. It is anticipated that this approach will motivate all stakeholders to realize the importance of providing quality education, thereby ensuring that every child is granted their right to educational stimulation, the right to play, and the right to protection, in accordance with the established minimum service standards for education.

With the increasing number of students with special needs and the growing demand for education that can accommodate their needs, research on the education of children with special needs worldwide has been steadily expanding. Yusra, Mariyana, and Djohaeni (2019) found that while inclusive education has been introduced in regular schools in Indonesia, many schools are still inadequately equipped to support students with special educational needs. This aligns with Ruddy's (2019) findings that English teachers in middle and high schools in one of school in England often feel overwhelmed by their dual roles as subject experts and educators for students with special needs. Despite lacking specialized training, teachers strive to meet curriculum standards while addressing diverse student needs. In light of these challenges, Joyce (2011) offers a potential solution by integrating songs with picture books, which helps young children, including those with language-based disabilities, effectively acquire and retain vocabulary.

However, despite the previous studies have explored various aspects of inclusive education and the challenges teachers face in supporting students with special needs, there remains a gap in understanding both the challenges and the specific teaching strategies teachers encounter in addressing the unique needs of these students, particularly in early childhood settings. This is why this research is essential. It aims to look at the experiences of these teachers, focusing on the challenges they face and strategies they implement.

By focusing on the unique experiences of teachers, this research seeks to contribute valuable insights and literature on effective English language teaching for young children, specifically in teaching vocabulary for early childhood education students with special needs. As the guidelines of the research, the followings are the research questions: (1) what are the challenges faced by teachers in teaching vocabulary to students with special needs in the early childhood education? (2) what strategies are employed by teachers in teaching vocabulary to students with special needs in the early childhood education?

2. Method

Research Design

This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English vocabulary to early childhood education students with special educational needs, as well as the strategies they implement in the classroom to meet the specific needs of this student population. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach as it is suitable for studying a group of people or individuals who have firsthand experience with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Research Methodology

For this study, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the methodological approach in order to investigate how individuals interpret their experiences within their environment and focuses on cognitive processes, specifically exploring participants' beliefs and thoughts about the topic inquiry (Smith et al, 2012).

Participant

According to Smith et al. (2012), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research often uses a sample of participants who are able to discuss the research issue in

depth. This study used a convenient, non-random and purposeful sample of two teachers at one of private schools that focuses on the early childhood education in the North Sumatra, Medan. The participants were selected based on the criteria of having more than 1 year teaching English in an early childhood education. For ethical reasons, the researcher first sought the participants' consent and provided them with relevant information before their involvement in the study. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The table below presents the demographic details of the participants.

Table 1. Participants Background

Participant	Gender	Age	Years at the School
ASG (T1)	Female	22	2 years
FC (T2)	Female	34	4 years

Instrument

This study utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the challenges and strategies faced by teachers in teaching English vocabulary to early childhood education students with special needs. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offer flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore a range of relevant topics while maintaining focus on the main objectives of the study. This approach enables the researcher to gain deeper insights into the teachers' perspectives, understand the difficulties they encounter, and learn about the creative strategies they use to support language acquisition in students with special needs.

Data Collection

The data will be gathered through semi-structured interview including open-ended questions. The questions were administrated to be answered by the participants to explore their experience in teaching vocabulary for their students with special needs. During the interviews, the primary focus of the researcher was to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges face by the participants and the strategies they employ. Throughout the interviews, the researcher heavily relied on direct quotes from the participants to ensure the validity of the findings. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and copies of the transcripts were provided to all participants to verify their accuracy.

Data Analysis

In general, qualitative research in data analysis often employs the analytical model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which is commonly referred to as the interactive data analysis method. The data obtained through interviews were then analyzed thematically using content analysis. The interview transcripts were prepared by the researcher for the purpose of analysis. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the researcher relied on direct quotations from participants during the interviews. Participant trust in the transcribed data was maintained by sharing and clarifying the transcripts with the participants.

The coding process began immediately after the data were transcribed. Subsequently, the transcribed data were grouped according to categories created based on the research questions. The responses from participants were organized into themes related to teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies, followed by an interpretation of the data. Finally, emerging issues were analyzed in reference to relevant concepts and previous research.

3. Result and Discussion

The results of this study answered two research questions related to teachers' experiences in teaching vocabulary for students with special needs in the early childhood education (1) the challenges faced by teachers in teaching vocabulary to students with special needs in the early childhood education, (2) the strategies teachers employ in teaching vocabulary to students with special educational needs in the early childhood education. These results offer valuable insights into two distinct areas of inquiry.

1. The challenges faced by teachers in teaching vocabulary to students with special educational needs in the early childhood education.

After collecting data through interviews, the researcher found that the challenges faced by teachers lie in creating vocabulary learning that can facilitate and meet the needs of students with special needs. Four themes were identified by the researcher as follows (a) language and communication barriers, (b) behavioral and emotional challenges, (c) lack of resources, (d) parents involvement.

(a) Language and communication barriers

Both teachers shared that one of the most significant challenges faced by many students with special needs is language and communication barriers, particularly when these students experience speech and language delays. Speech and language delays refer to a condition where a child's ability to understand and/or produce speech is significantly delayed compared to their peers. These delays can manifest in various ways, including difficulties with articulation (such as pronouncing words correctly), language comprehension (understanding both spoken and written language), and expressive language (using language to express thoughts, ideas, and needs). teachers experienced that children with speech and language delays often encounter considerable obstacles in acquiring new vocabulary. The process of developing language skills is frequently slow and can be especially challenging.

Teacher 1 explained:

"One of my biggest challenges is that my students with special needs have an obstacle in communicating because they still struggle to speak or pronounce words due to their speech delays. They also often do not understand what I am saying, frequently do not respond to me."

This challenge is compounded when students struggle to both understand and produce language in meaningful ways. Teacher 2 also noted that when introducing new vocabulary, students with language and communication barriers may comprehend the meaning of words but face difficulties in verbally expressing them.

"They may be able to recognize the word "book" and point to a book in a picture, but find it difficult to pronounce the word or use it in a sentence."

Despite this, teachers must continue to actively encourage students to pronounce the vocabulary correctly and use it in conversation, which can be a daunting task. Moreover, the frustration intensifies when students with speech delays and communication barriers are unable to pronounce even simple words as stated by T1. This situation becomes increasingly challenging for teachers, as the lack of verbal communication not only hinders

the students' academic progress but also affects their ability to engage meaningfully in everyday interactions. These persistent language and communication difficulties create a significant emotional and psychological strain on both the students and teachers.

(b) Behavioral and emotional challenges

According to the experience of participants, students with special needs often face significant difficulties in managing their emotions and controlling their impulses, leading to behavioral and emotional challenges that can disrupt the learning environment. These students may exhibit a range of disruptive behaviors, such as tantrums, aggression, or social withdrawal, particularly when they experience frustration, stress, or have difficulty expressing their feelings and needs. Emotional outbursts are frequently triggered by unmet needs, overwhelming environments, or communication barriers, making it difficult for these students to regulate their emotional responses.

Teacher 1 (T1) shared that managing students with emotional issues is particularly challenging, as their emotional states are often unstable and unpredictable. She explained:

"Their mood can change very easily. They might hit their peers, teachers, or even themselves, or have outbursts/ tantrums if their needs are not met."

This type of behavior not only disrupts the classroom environment but also impedes the students' ability to engage in learning activities. According to T1, much of her time is spent trying to calm these students down and manage their emotional states, rather than focusing on teaching the curriculum. She described the experience as overwhelming, as it requires a great deal of emotional energy and patience to handle such situations.

Teacher 2 (T2) shared similar experiences, confirming that these emotional and behavioral challenges are a common issue when working with students who have special needs.

"It can be very challenging because their emotions are often unstable. One moment they might be fine, and the next moment they're throwing tantrums or lashing out at others—whether it's their friends, teachers, or even themselves. This usually happens when they are feeling overwhelmed or unable to express what they need. When this occurs, I find that I spend a significant amount of time just trying to calm them down instead of teaching the lesson."

Both teachers highlighted that the emotional instability of these students can severely impact instructional time, disrupting the learning environment and making it challenging to maintain a consistent and productive classroom atmosphere. In such situations, teachers frequently find themselves balancing their duties as educators with the role of providing emotional support, which can be both draining and, at times, discouraging. This dual responsibility emphasizes the need for enhanced resources and training to equip educators with the tools necessary to effectively address and manage the behavioral and emotional challenges of students with special needs.

(c) Lack of skills and experience

Teachers acknowledged that having a lack of adequate skill and experience in managing this situations becomes a big challenge. Two of them emphasized that they are not specialized teachers trained specifically for working with children with special needs,

rather, they are general English language teachers for young children who, by necessity, are also required to teach children with special needs. Despite their commitment, they are often unprepared for the diverse demands that come with teaching this group of students.

Both teachers also revealed that they have never participated in formal training or professional development programs specifically focused on working with students with special needs. Without this specialized training, they feel ill-equipped to address the complex needs of these students. As T1 stated:

"So far, I have never received any training or professional development specifically on teaching vocabulary to students with special needs. As a result, I realize that I still lack knowledge and expertise in teaching children with special needs, particularly in vocabulary instruction."

T1 experiences that the lack of formal training leaves her feeling uncertain and underprepared, which impacts her confidence in her ability to teach effectively. She is forced to rely on informal support systems within the school, such as seeking encouragement and advice from their colleagues and the school principal.

A similar experience was shared by Teacher 2. She believes that if she had expertise in teaching children with special needs, she could create more effective lessons for these students. Although she frequently receives motivation and support from her workmates and school, she feels that this alone is not enough.

"If I had more expertise and experience, perhaps I could teach using more effective strategies than those currently being applied. While I do receive support from other teachers and the school in the form of feedback and motivation, I feel that this alone is insufficient to meet the needs of the students effectively."

From the statements of teachers above, researcher found that supporting each other through shared experiences and motivation, although helpful, is insufficient to fully address the challenges they face. As a result, they sometimes feel as though they are failing to meet the needs of their students special needs. They emphasized the urgent need for formal training and professional development to improve their instructional skills and better support the learning of children with special needs. This lack of skill and expertise is a significant barrier to the teachers' ability to provide effective, tailored instruction for these students, particularly in areas like vocabulary development, which requires specialized approaches.

(d) Parents involvement

Support for a child's development shouldn't come solely from the school. Parental involvement is just as crucial. Given that children spend much more time at home than in school, the role of parents is important. Teachers often collaborate with parents to provide consistent support for the child's growth in both environments. However, this collaboration can present its own set of challenges.

A major challenge teachers encounter is working with parents who are hesitant to acknowledge or accept that their child has not made significant progress, especially in areas like vocabulary development. Many parents have high expectations for their child's progress but may struggle to understand why improvements are slow. In these cases, both teachers need to approach the situation with sensitivity and patience, as it can be difficult for parents to accept that their child may have additional learning needs or developmental delays.

Teacher 1 (T1) shared her experience:

"I've had situations where parents just couldn't accept that their child wasn't making the progress they expected. They get upset or frustrated, and sometimes it felt like they didn't believe that their child was struggling. It's tough because I can see the challenges their child is facing, but convincing parents that their child's vocabulary development is progressing at their own pace becomes hard for me."

Similar to T1, T2 also had a comparable experience in collaborating with the students' parents. Here, T2 also highlighted an additional challenge as she mentioned:

"I experience that not all parents are open to collaboration, even though the goal is to support the development of their child. Some parents still allow their children to watch TV or use gadgets for hours, despite recommendations from their therapist to reduce or stop this habit."

Researcher noted that the strategies she implements at school are not always consistently reinforced by the parents at home. For example is a case shared from the statement of T2 above where a child has been advised by their therapist to avoid watching TV or using gadgets for extended periods of time. The teacher has consistently implemented this rule at school to support the child's development, but the parents have not been consistent in applying it at home. This inconsistency creates a gap in the child's learning experience, which can ultimately hinder their progress over time.

(2) The strategies teachers employ in teaching vocabulary to students with special needs in the early childhood education

Several strategies have been implemented by the participants, and these have had a positive impact on the students, including: (a) verbal method, (b) gestural method, (c) incorporating visual aids, and (d) parental involvement.

(a) Verbal method

Based on the experiences of both teachers, the verbal method is the most frequently used approach in teaching vocabulary, not only for students with special needs but also for other students. This method involves delivering explanations through verbal communication, such as providing information or instructions. Teacher 1 (T1) explained that the vocabulary introduced to students is generally composed of basic and simple words that are relevant to their daily lives. These words include terms for animals, fruits, colors, and objects found in the classroom. This approach is in line with the school's curriculum guidelines. To introduce new vocabulary, she usually pronounces the words one by one. Students are encouraged to follow after her. They repeat this process multiple times and this repetition by students with special needs is carried out more frequently compared to teaching other students who are not.

"I pronounce the words one by one clearly for them. Then, I encourage them to repeat after me. This repetition is really important, especially for students with special needs. I repeat the process many times with them, more frequently than I do with other students."

Teacher 2 (T2) reported using a similar verbal method in her classroom. She emphasized the importance of regular review sessions to support retention. T2 explained:

"I review and ask the students about the vocabulary we have learned in the previous days. I do this regularly on a daily basis especially before going home."

Through this daily review, T2 helps ensure that the vocabulary students have previously learned is reinforced, aiding in better retention and recall. This consistent review process highlights the importance of repetition in helping students with special needs retain vocabulary over time.

(b) Gestural method

Both teachers apply this method by providing explanations through hand gestures and facial expressions. T1 shared that when teaching vocabulary, such as the word "duck," she not only pronounces the word but also mimics the motion of a duck which allowing students to visually associate the word with its corresponding action. This helps reinforce the meaning of the word in a more engaging and sensory way. As T1 mentioned:

"After pronouncing the word 'duck,' I also act out the motion of a duck so the students can see it."

This visual and kinaesthetic representation of the word strengthens the students' understanding and retention. Similarly, T2 also employs the gestural method in her teaching. She uses gestures, such as mimicking actions or facial expressions, to introduce new vocabulary, especially when verbal explanations alone are not enough for students with special needs. For example, when a verbal approach fails to produce the expected outcome, T2 may resort to using expressive body language or exaggerated gestures to make the lesson more accessible to the students. She experiences that this strategy allows the children to engage with the content in a multi-sensory way and making learning more interactive.

"I use the gestural method in my teaching, especially when verbal explanations aren't enough. I use gestures, like mimicking actions or facial expressions, to help introduce new vocabulary. If the verbal approach doesn't work, I rely on exaggerated body language to make the lesson more interactive and accessible. This multi-sensory approach helps the children engage better with the content."

(c) Incorporating visual aids

Both teachers utilize visual aids, such as pictures, flashcards, and videos, to support students with special needs. Visual aids are invaluable in helping students connect words with their visual context, which greatly aids vocabulary acquisition. Teachers have observed that children with special needs often process visual information more easily than verbal instructions. When vocabulary is presented solely through spoken words, these children tend to lose focus and are less likely to engage. This experience described by T1:

"If I only pronounce the vocabulary, my students with special needs will surely not pay attention to me. They will focus on other things instead. However, when using visual aids, these students are usually more willing to pay attention to me."

This statement also strengthens by T2:

"I usually use flashcards and show them to the students while pronouncing the vocabulary. For example, when I introduce the word 'book', I also show the picture of a book."

In addition to flashcards, both teachers also make use of a TV and laptop provided by the school, to display images and videos related to the vocabulary being taught. These videos not only allow children to see the word but also to hear it, making it more engaging. Typically, children with special needs are more focused and involved when these tools are incorporated in teaching and learning vocabulary.

(d) Parental involvement

Teachers emphasized the crucial role of parents in supporting the vocabulary development of students with special needs. They agreed that classroom learning alone is insufficient, as vocabulary acquisition tends to be a slower and more challenging process for these students. Therefore, it is essential that learning continues outside the classroom. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 observed that some students showed significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition when parents actively helped the children review vocabulary at home. Repetition and consistency are key to reinforcing new words, and students often require additional time and stimulation to fully internalize them. Given the limited time spent in school, teachers recognized that parents must play an active role in reinforcing vocabulary learning at home.

Teacher 1 (T1) described her strategy to involve parents in the process:

"I involve parents in supporting the vocabulary development of students with special needs. I usually update parents on their child's progress and discuss any challenges children might be facing. I ask for their support in repeatedly reviewing the vocabulary at home, as I believe that repetition is essential for retention and practice."

T1 explained that consistent communication with parents is a key strategy for ensuring that students with special needs have the ongoing support they need. She makes a point of updating parents regularly on their child's development, including what specific vocabulary the child has mastered and what areas still need attention. This helps parents understand their child's progress and challenges, which allows them to provide the appropriate support at home.

T2 also emphasized:

"I keep parents updated on their child's vocabulary progress and ask them to review words at home, as repetition is key. Parents also share feedback on effective strategies, which helps me adjust my teaching."

4. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of English teachers in teaching vocabulary to students with special needs in early childhood education, addressing both the challenges faced and the strategies employed. While the findings provide valuable insights, they are limited by the fact that all participants share a similar background, specifically in lacking specialized skills for teaching children with special needs. As a result, these findings may not fully represent the broader experiences of teachers.

It is hoped that further research, involving teachers with more diverse experiences and backgrounds, will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and effective strategies in teaching vocabulary to children with special needs. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the best practices for supporting these children at the early childhood education level. and backgrounds will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and solutions in teaching vocabulary to children with special educational needs.

5. Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to express her sincere gratitude to the teachers who participated in this study. Their willingness to share their experiences, challenges, and insights into teaching English vocabulary to students with special educational needs in early childhood education has been invaluable. The transparency with which they discussed both their successes and the difficulties they encounter has greatly enriched this research. Their dedication and contribution not only strengthened the study but also provide valuable perspectives for future educators working with young learners with special needs. This research would not have been possible without their support and involvement.

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