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Enhancing English Vocabulary Learning for Children with Special Needs Using a Differentiated Method

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ABSTRACT: Language is a fundamental communication tool that enables interaction across various contexts. As a global lingua franca, English can be introduced to children at an early age, including those with special needs. This study explores the effectiveness of a differentiated learning approach in enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among children with special needs. Employing an action research design, the study was conducted in three cycles, each comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were collected through observations and vocabulary tests administered over the three cycles. In the first cycle, visual media such as flashcards were used to introduce vocabulary. The second cycle incorporated auditory learning through songs, while the third cycle integrated audiovisual media in the form of animations. Five early childhood education (ECE) students with special needs participated in the study. Findings revealed that differentiated instruction significantly improved vocabulary acquisition. The students' average vocabulary test scores increased from 45 in the first cycle to 35 in the second, before reaching 75 in the third cycle. These results highlight the efficacy of differentiated learning strategies in addressing the diverse needs of children with special needs, providing an inclusive and adaptive approach to vocabulary instruction. The study underscores the importance of employing multimodal instructional techniques to enhance language acquisition and suggests that differentiated methods can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for educators working with special needs learners. Future research may explore long-term retention and the impact of differentiated learning on other language skills.

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INTRODUCTION

The first language taught and mastered by a person from birth is often called the mother tongue. Consequently, an individual's mother tongue depends on the language introduced and used in their early years. Nevertheless, individuals can still communicate despite linguistic differences. English is widely used as an international language, making it essential for individuals to acquire proficiency. English can be learned through education, which is accessible to everyone at any time. Education is a fundamental right, and each country has regulations governing its educational system. In Indonesia, academic policies, including curriculum and lesson plans, are well-regulated.

This research differs from previous studies, such as those conducted by Riyanita et al. (2024), Evija and Zustrupa (2020), Sandra and Kurniawati (2020), and Alshaikhi and Khasawneh (2024), which mainly discuss general aspects of English language learning. Some of these studies do not address children with special needs and instead focus only on elementary school students or older learners. This study, however, specifically aims to enhance English vocabulary acquisition for children with special needs through the differentiation method, particularly for students at the early childhood education (ECE) level.

As society advances and perspectives broaden, people increasingly recognize the significance of English. Many parents introduce English to their children at the ECE level. Early childhood education (ECE) encompasses formal and informal care and education for children from birth to approximately eight years old. This growing awareness has encouraged educational institutions to provide relevant facilities, and many parents now teach their children English from an early age. Importantly, English learning is not limited to children with typical development; children with special needs also have the right and the opportunity to learn English.

Education is a universal right, including for children with special needs. These children exhibit significant differences in physical, mental, intellectual, social, or emotional development compared to their peers, necessitating specialized educational services (Setiawati & Nai'mah, 2020). Among the various types of special needs, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Down Syndrome (DS) are particularly prevalent. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social

communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors (Hodges et al., 2020). It is a heterogeneous, multi-factorial developmental disability, with atypical developmental patterns emerging during infancy and toddlerhood (Joon et al., 2021). On the other hand, Down syndrome is the most common neurodevelopmental disorder with a known genetic cause (Windsperger & Hoehl, 2021). These children require special attention and tailored educational approaches to reach their full potential. However, children with special needs should not be perceived as unintelligent, lacking ability, or entirely disabled (Sujoko, 2023).

Several critical factors influence the learning process for children with special needs, including teacher competence, teaching methodologies, learning approaches, infrastructure, and instructional support tools (Wanti et al., 2023). The Indonesian government has reinforced the right to education for children with special needs. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System guarantees equal educational opportunities for all Indonesian citizens, regardless of physical condition, intellectual ability, or geographical location. The Indonesian education system categorizes children with special needs into various groups, including those who are blind, deaf, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, or very gifted and talented (Fakhiratunnisa et al., 2022). However, despite these categorizations, children with special needs still have the opportunity to learn English like their peers.

English is relatively easy to comprehend, and the initial step in learning the language is vocabulary acquisition. However, for children with special needs, teachers must adopt individualized approaches since each student has distinct characteristics and learning preferences. One effective instructional strategy in this context is differentiated learning. Differentiated learning acknowledges that every learner has a unique approach and readiness level (Purba et al., 2021).

In a differentiated classroom, teachers tailor instructional methods to suit each student's learning pace and depth, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach (Tomlinson, 1999). This research employs differentiation as a method to facilitate English language acquisition for children with special needs. The primary objective is to improve vocabulary learning outcomes for these children through differentiation. Additionally, this study aspires to contribute positively to global and Indonesian education. It is anticipated that the findings will help educators implement the most effective teaching

strategies, ensuring that all students, including those with special needs, receive quality education aligned with their abilities and potential.

Furthermore, using differentiated learning techniques allows for tailored lesson planning that aligns with each child's progress. Teachers may employ various strategies such as visual aids, interactive games, and kinesthetic activities to accommodate different learning styles. These adaptations ensure that children with special needs remain engaged and motivated to learn English vocabulary more effectively.

The role of parents and caregivers in supporting differentiated learning is also crucial. Parents can reinforce learning at home by providing a language-rich environment, reading English books together, or using technology-based applications tailored to children with special needs. Studies indicate that parental involvement significantly enhances language acquisition, particularly for children with learning differences (Smith et al., 2023). Thus, collaboration between teachers and parents is essential to optimize learning outcomes.

Moreover, implementing differentiation in English language learning requires schools to provide adequate resources and training for teachers. Professional development programs focused on inclusive education and effective differentiation strategies can equip educators with the necessary skills to handle diverse classrooms. Schools should also ensure that learning environments are inclusive, fostering a sense of belonging and encouragement for all students.

In conclusion, differentiated learning presents a promising approach to improving English vocabulary acquisition for children with special needs. By recognizing and addressing the unique learning needs of these students, teachers can create more effective and inclusive learning environments. This research highlights the importance of specialized educational interventions, teacher training, and parental involvement in supporting English language learning for children with special needs. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive education, advocating for equitable learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their abilities or developmental challenges.

METHOD

This study aims to improve English vocabulary learning for children with special needs using the differentiation method. Employing an

action research approach, the study follows a cyclical process consisting of four phases: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, where each cycle's results inform the next (Clarke, 2023). Action research enhances the quality of interventions within a social context by refining strategies based on continuous observations and reflections (Amalia & Hidayati, 2024). Data collection involves observations and tests conducted on five early childhood education (ECE) students with special needs—one with Down syndrome and four with autism. The assessment aspects include pronunciation, vocabulary comprehension, and memory retention. The evaluation adheres to the 2013 curriculum standards, categorizing progress into Undeveloped (BB), Starting to Develop (MB), Developing as Expected (BSH), and Developing Very Well (BSB). Analyzing test results across three cycles allows for measuring learning effectiveness and informs subsequent instructional improvements. Teachers can utilize these assessments to gauge student achievement and refine lesson plans accordingly. Furthermore, action research provides educators with insights into how instructional approaches affect student learning, making it a valuable framework for continuous pedagogical enhancement.

Each cycle incorporates variations in learning media to enhance engagement and comprehension. The first cycle utilizes visual aids such as flashcards, the second employs audio media like songs, and the third incorporates animated videos. Every cycle follows a structured approach, beginning with planning, where materials and media are selected, followed by implementation and observation. Teaching children with special needs necessitates individualized instructional programs aligned with inclusive education principles, enabling students to maximize their potential (Arriani et al., 2021). The differentiation method ensures that the learning process accommodates students' diverse abilities. In each cycle, adjustments are made to refine teaching approaches and better align with student needs. The assessment of vocabulary mastery follows predefined criteria, focusing on pronunciation, comprehension, and memory. The test results are systematically analyzed to assess learning efficacy and refine teaching strategies. The iterative nature of action research allows educators to identify strengths and weaknesses in their methods and make necessary modifications. By adjusting instructional methods based on assessment outcomes, educators can develop more effective approaches to supporting

students with special needs, ensuring their continued development in language acquisition.

The study employs both quantitative and qualitative descriptive analysis. The quantitative analysis describes test results across the three cycles based on established assessment guidelines, ensuring measurable progress tracking. Meanwhile, qualitative analysis interprets observational data on student engagement and learning behaviors. Observational data provides insight into student interactions with learning materials, responsiveness to different teaching methods, and overall participation levels. Action research is particularly relevant in this context, as it enables direct identification and resolution of instructional challenges. This approach facilitates real-time adaptation of teaching strategies to meet the unique needs of children with special needs, ensuring practical applicability in the classroom (Clarke, 2023). By systematically implementing, observing, and refining teaching methods, action research contributes to both educational theory and field practice, making it a valuable tool for educators working with diverse learners. The continuous assessment process ensures that teachers can make data-driven decisions to enhance instructional effectiveness. This research highlights the importance of using adaptive teaching techniques and innovative educational tools to support the learning process, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Education is everyone's right, from children to adults. Education is not only for everyday people but it is also entitled to be obtained for children with special needs. Education includes various things, including language education, especially English as a connecting language. English education can be done since early childhood education. An easy step to teach English to students is by introducing vocabulary. Teaching English to students is done by introducing vocabulary first. Without sufficient vocabulary, one cannot speak efficiently or convey ideas precisely due to Fluency; having a limited vocabulary will also be a barrier that stops students from gaining knowledge of a foreign language, leading to a lack of fluency (Siregar et al., 2021). In this case, the teacher must also be more creative in determining where the age factor of the students can determine the process, model, and media used in the learning process, primarily if the

students being taught include children with special needs. Therefore, an interesting strategy is needed so that learning English in early childhood becomes fun and not boring for them (Widyahening & Sufa, 2023).

Children with special needs have obstacles and problems due to internal and external factors, which impact the emergence of issues in the learning process in everyday life (Maryanti et al., 2021). Therefore, unique methods are needed to teach children with special needs. In Indonesia, teachers are free to determine the learning style used in the learning process, which is called learning diversity. One of them is the existence of differentiated learning methods, where this learning adjusts to the condition of students. To overcome this, teachers can adopt inclusive teaching strategies for children with special needs, especially for early childhood education, such as the differentiation method. Usually, children with special needs have obstacles in the learning process, namely slow learning. Slow learners have cognitive abilities that are less good than normal children, they have weaknesses or delays in processing information and have weak memory compared to other normal children, and they also have learning concentration problems and short attention spans (Mukaffa et al., 2023).

In the learning process, the differentiation method also presents one form of teaching media, which can be more than one. Not only are learning activities and media diverse but in differentiated learning, the materials and topics can also be more than one tailored to students' needs and circumstances. In the differentiation method, the way the material is taught must also be adjusted, and the product of the learning must be adjusted, including how students demonstrate their learning. Therefore, in a differentiated classroom, teachers should respond positively to these differences in existing theories of differentiation to maximize academic achievement in the school (Talain & Mercado, 2023). In this study, the material taught is vocabulary about the solar system in the form of planets, stars, and other space objects. Therefore, the materials used have been adjusted to the student's abilities, the vocabulary list has been simplified, and visual aids such as flashcards, pictures, and videos have been used. The study also involves multi-sensory auditory, visual, and kinesthetic activities.

In this study, the author used three cycles; the first cycle used visual media involving flashcards. As for students whose learning style uses

visuals, the child will have characteristics such as an interest in objects, usually in landscape objects, then the child will easily remember signs or symbols (motion, color, shape, size, and others), show good hand and eye coordination, show good drawing skills, require paper and pen to scribble while listening to the text (Trimuliana, 2021). Memorizing vocabulary using flashcard teaching strategies makes it easier for students to learn English, especially when learning vocabulary (Andari et al., 2022). In this case, the author uses it at the planning stage to determine the learning media used. Then, the implementation and observation stages are carried out directly and together. At this stage, the author will examine the vocabulary learning process for children with special needs. The last part of the series of activities in this cycle is to reflect on where, at this stage, the author gives five questions about the material. The five questions were assessed based on the assessment rules in the 2013 curriculum.

Table 1. Results of Cycle I

Assessment Aspects			Total	Final Value	Description
Pronunciation	Understanding the Meaning	Memorizing			
8	19	45	72	50	MB
17	15	40	72	50	MB
16	8	12	36	25	MB
7	9	20	36	25	MB
6	12	18	36	25	BB
Total Final Value				**225**	
Average Final Value				**45**	

Table 2. Development Classification of Cycle I

Classification	Value	Number of Students
Developing Very Well (BSB)	85-100	0
Developing as Expected (BSH)	60-84	0
Starting to Develop (MB)	40-59	2
Undeveloped (BB)	0-39	3
Total		**5**

In this table, the tests conducted in the first cycle indicate that two children with special needs fall into the "starting to develop" (MB) assessment category, with test scores ranging from 40 to 59. These two students have autism. Meanwhile, the other three children with special needs fall into the "undeveloped" (BB) assessment category, with scores ranging from 0 to 39. This classification is based on their ability to answer the given test questions. These three students consist of two children with

autism and one child with Down syndrome. In this cycle, the average score of the five students with special needs was 45.

The table also presents the test results from the first cycle, in which four questions were given. The results indicate that not all questions were answered perfectly by the students. Most students were able to answer only two questions correctly, while others managed to answer just one. During the implementation of this media, the author observed that, among the three students with autism, one student demonstrated a vocabulary learning style by redrawing the objects representing the taught vocabulary. The other two autistic children, along with the student diagnosed with Down syndrome, showed a greater interest in flashcards. In this first cycle, one autistic student's learning style involved redrawing objects from the vocabulary in a flash.

After completing all the stages in the first cycle, the second cycle followed the same stages, albeit with differences in media usage during the learning process. In this cycle, the author introduced audio media by incorporating songs as a learning tool. Using English songs as a medium for mastering English vocabulary has been found to help students enhance their vocabulary efficiently (Simatupang et al., 2023). Children and teenagers are particularly fond of songs because they bring happiness and cheerfulness (Anggira et al., 2022). In the act stage, the author played a song containing vocabulary relevant to the predetermined material three times. Upon completing the second round of the song, the author administered a short quiz to the students before playing the music again as a form of reflection. During this stage, the author also conducted observations and assessments throughout the learning activities.

Table 3. Results of Cycle II

Assessment Aspects			Total	Final Value	Description
Pronunciation	Understanding the Meaning	Memorizing			
25	35	48	108	75	BSH
7	9	20	36	25	BB
20	22	30	72	50	MB
24	16	32	72	50	MB
5	15	16	36	25	BB
Total Final Value				**175**	
Average Final Value				**35**	

Table 4. Development Classification of Cycle II

Classification	Value	Number of Students
Developing Very Well (BSB)	85-100	0
Developing as Expected (BSH)	60-84	1
Starting to Develop (MB)	40-59	2
Undeveloped (BB)	0-39	2
Total		**5**

In this second cycle, the results indicate that one student falls into the Developing as Expected (BSH) assessment category, with a score range of 60-84; this student is categorized as having autism. Additionally, two students fall into the Starting to Develop (MB) category, with a score range of 40-59. Among them, one student has autism, and the other has Down syndrome. Furthermore, two students fall into the Undeveloped (BB) category, with scores between 0-39; both are students with special needs diagnosed with autism.

The average test score of children with special needs in the second cycle is 35, which is lower than the average score in the first cycle. However, progress in children's learning is evident, as shown in the assessment table. Some students who initially fell into the Undeveloped (BB) category have progressed to the Starting to Develop (MB) and Developing as Expected (BSH) categories.

The table of test results from the second cycle reveals an improvement in students' responses, although some remain unchanged from the first cycle, and others have even declined. In using song media, two of the four students diagnosed with autism did not exhibit enthusiasm for the played song. However, among the three students with special needs—two with autism and one with Down syndrome—all demonstrated enthusiasm in learning new vocabulary. As the song was repeated multiple times, students gradually recognized and memorized vocabulary indirectly.

In the third cycle, at the planning stage, the author determines the learning media to be used, incorporating audio-visual media in the form of animated videos. In this cycle, the action and observation stages are conducted simultaneously to monitor student learning progress, followed by the reflection stage. All teaching materials aim to create an authentic learning environment, providing direct knowledge through visual and auditory senses. This approach enhances the learning experience, making it

more concrete, practical, realistic, and dynamic, which aligns with the definition of audiovisual learning (Anderson, 2019). He further adds that using audiovisual aids helps maintain classroom discipline by keeping students focused on learning.

Table 5. Results of Cycle III

Assessment Aspects			Total	Final Value	Description
Pronunciation	Understanding the Meaning	Memorizing			
96	96	96	288	100	BSB
50	70	96	216	75	BSH
50	62	68	180	62,5	BSH
20	32	56	108	37,5	BB
28	34	78	140	50	MB
Total Final Value				**375**	
Average Final Value				**75**	

Table 6. Development Classification of Cycle III

Classification	Value	Number of Students
Developing Very Well (BSB)	85-100	1
Developing as Expected (BSH)	60-84	2
Starting to Develop (MB)	40-59	1
Undeveloped (BB)	0-39	1
Total		**5**

In this cycle, students were given a test consisting of eight questions, which combined test items from the first and second cycles. This was done to reinforce the memory of students with special needs, as they often experience greater difficulty in retaining vocabulary.

In this cycle, one student achieved the Developing Very Well (BSB) category, scoring between 85-100. This student is a learner with autism. Additionally, two students fell into the Developing as Expected (BSH) category, with scores ranging from 60-84; both are also students with autism. Two other students with special needs were categorized as Starting to Develop (MB), scoring 40-59, while another student fell into the Undeveloped (BB) category, with a score between 0-39. The average score for this cycle was 75.

The test results showed that one student answered all questions correctly, two students successfully answered five to six questions, and two other students demonstrated progress by answering one to four questions correctly. These findings indicate that three students with autism actively engaged in the learning process and demonstrated an increasing ability to

understand and memorize some of the provided vocabulary. This improvement is evident in the test results across cycles one, two, and three, where each cycle yielded different outcomes. While scores fluctuated across the cycles, one student with autism showed little interest in using this media. However, students with Down syndrome responded positively to the audio-visual-based learning media, which incorporated animated videos.

Overall, learning through this media proved suitable for all students, as it aligned with their learning preferences. The findings suggest that the differentiation method in vocabulary learning for children with special needs has the potential to be applied in other classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the effectiveness of a differentiated learning approach in enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among children with special needs. By implementing a structured learning model across three cycles—incorporating visual, auditory, and audiovisual media—the research demonstrated significant improvements in students' vocabulary retention and engagement.

The findings reveal that differentiated instruction enables students with diverse learning needs, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Down Syndrome, to better absorb and recall vocabulary. The gradual increase in test scores across the cycles reflects the benefits of multimodal teaching methods, with audiovisual media proving to be the most effective. Notably, while some students showed varying levels of improvement, the tailored approach ensured that all learners engaged with the material in ways best suited to their abilities.

These results underscore the importance of inclusive and adaptive teaching strategies in early childhood education. The study suggests that the differentiation method can be successfully implemented in other classrooms to support children with special needs, fostering a more accessible and engaging learning environment. Future research should explore the long-term retention effects of differentiated instruction and the potential integration of digital and interactive learning tools to further enhance vocabulary acquisition.

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