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TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF USING PICTURE-BASED MEDIA TO SUPPORT READING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Reading instruction in inclusive classrooms is challenged by wide differences in students' reading ability and learning needs. Picture-based media such as picture cards and contextual images can offer visual support for vocabulary and meaning, yet most previous studies have examined student learning outcomes in regular classrooms rather than teachers' perceptions in inclusive settings. This study aimed to describe how an English teacher perceives the use of picture-based media to support students' reading skills in an inclusive classroom and to identify the challenges encountered in implementing it. A descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological approach was applied at MTs Taman Pendidikan Islam, an inclusive Islamic junior high school. Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview with the English teacher, non-participant classroom observation, and documentation, and were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing). The findings show that the teacher holds a positive perception of picture-based media, viewing it as a learning scaffold, a driver of motivation and participation, a support for comprehension and vocabulary through a predict–read–verify sequence, and a medium that can be adapted to diverse learners. The teacher also reported four challenges: differences in reading ability, limited preparation time, inadequate technical facilities, and difficulty in selecting pictures suitable for all students. These were addressed through adaptive strategies and collaboration with a special assistance teacher. The study suggests that effective use of picture-based media depends on both teachers' adaptability and institutional support.

Keywords: *picture-based media, teacher's perceptions, reading skills, inclusive classroom, slow learners*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is the foundation of academic learning and, in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, one of the main routes through which students acquire vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and knowledge of the world. Reading is not merely the mechanical pronunciation of written symbols. It is an interactive process in which readers use prior knowledge to build a coherent mental representation of the text (Anderson et al., 1985). EFL readers carry a double cognitive load, because they must process a linguistic system that differs from their first language while simultaneously constructing meaning from content. Researchers commonly describe reading as comprising decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Tindal & Nisbet, 2010). Developing all of these components at the same time is demanding in any classroom, and it becomes more demanding when students differ widely in ability.

Such diversity is the everyday reality of inclusive schools. The Salamanca Statement set out the principle that all children should learn together wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have (UNESCO, 1994), and the thirtieth anniversary of the statement reaffirmed that inclusion concerns not only where children sit but how each

child is valued (UNESCO, 2024). In Indonesia, however, inclusive education still requires strengthening, particularly in teacher training and in learning practices that respond to the needs of students with special needs (Kusmaryono, 2023; Nabiela & Ulfatin, 2023). An English teacher in an inclusive classroom may therefore teach typical students alongside students with special needs, including slow learners. Slow learners are children whose learning ability falls below the average for their age but who are not classified as having an intellectual disability (Hermawan & Suparmi, 2025; Mahastuti, 2011). Cobb (1961) emphasised that these children are not "stupid" in the clinical sense but learn at a slower rate, so that they need more time, repetition, and different approaches to reach the same level of mastery. When educational services are adjusted to their characteristics, slow learners can still develop their potential (Una et al., 2023).

One way of responding to this diversity is the use of picture-based media. The term refers to educational media that use visual elements such as pictures, photographs, picture cards, picture books, illustrated story cards, and infographics as the main means of conveying information and building concepts. The theoretical rationale is well established. Dual-coding theory proposes that information presented through verbal and visual channels at the same time is processed by two interconnected systems and is therefore understood and remembered better than information presented through one channel alone (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Paivio, 1986). The multimedia learning literature makes a similar argument for combining words and pictures (Mayer, 2009). From a constructivist perspective, visual media also invite students to take an active part in connecting a text with meaning. In addition, research on picture-based activities suggests that they make learning more interactive for children and can support reading comprehension (Al-Barakat & Alali, 2024), and the multimodal character of pictures makes them open to children regardless of language proficiency (Farrar et al., 2024).

Empirical studies in Indonesia point in the same direction. Sulistiyowati et al. (2025) reported that picture cards had a significant impact on elementary school students' reading, particularly in word recognition and fluency, while Nurhayati et al. (2024) found that picture storybooks improved comprehension, learning interest, and engagement. Jannah and Artiningsih (2025) observed an increase in early reading achievement from 22.2% before the intervention to 83.75% after two cycles of using picture word cards, and Rahmatullah Achmad (2024) examined flashcards for slow learners in an inclusive primary school. Silvia and Ishartiwi (2025) investigated contextual visual media for students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia, in relation to cognitive load and information processing. Internationally, Yunus et al. (2013) found that teachers regarded visual aids as useful for motivating students to read literary texts and for working with different proficiency levels, Kuo (2020) showed how visual media can support language and literacy through picture-book storytelling, and Sánchez-Cantero and López-Morales (2025) reported gains in EFL students' multimodal literacy through infographics.

Despite this growing evidence, two gaps remain. First, most studies concentrate on student learning outcomes, often through quantitative designs and in regular classrooms, so they say little about how teachers interpret, evaluate, and adapt visual media in the complex setting of an inclusive classroom. Second, teachers' perceptions are not a side issue. Perception acts as a cognitive filter that influences whether a medium is judged beneficial, appropriate, and feasible, and therefore whether it is used consistently. Teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes are closely connected with how they approach inclusive practice (Almalky & Alwahbi, 2023; Jury et al., 2023; Yada et al., 2022), and teachers' perceptions of technology and media have been examined in Indonesian EFL classrooms (Bachtiar et al., 2024; Sonia et al., 2024) and in inclusive primary schools (Pratiwi & Sukartono, 2025). To the authors' knowledge, however, few studies bring together teachers' perceptions, picture-

based media, reading skills, and the inclusive classroom in a single qualitative inquiry. This is the novelty and the contribution of the present study.

The study is limited to a teacher's perceptions of using picture-based media to develop the reading skills of students with special needs, especially slow learners, in an inclusive school. It does not measure student learning outcomes; its focus is the teacher's experience and interpretation during the learning process. Two research questions guided the inquiry: (1) how does the teacher perceive the use of picture-based media in supporting students' reading skills in an inclusive school, and (2) what challenges does the teacher face in using picture-based media for this purpose? Accordingly, the study aimed to understand and describe the teacher's perceptions and to identify the challenges encountered. Theoretically, it is expected to enrich research on inclusive literacy by placing teachers' perceptions at the centre. Practically, it is expected to inform teachers who design adaptive reading instruction, schools and administrators who provide learning resources and training, and policymakers who strengthen reading literacy in inclusive schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. A qualitative approach was chosen because the data consisted of narratives, descriptions, and interpretations rather than numbers, and because the aim was to explore the meanings that an individual ascribes to a social phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological orientation was adopted because teachers' perceptions are subjective and contextual, and the study sought the essence of the teacher's lived experience of using picture-based media in reading lessons (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Moustakas, 1994).

The research was conducted at MTs Taman Pendidikan Islam, an Islamic junior high school that implements inclusive education. The school was selected because it is a real-world setting in which students with diverse learning needs study in the same classroom, because its teachers have first-hand experience of the phenomenon under study, and because it was accessible to the researcher, which Creswell (2014) regards as an important consideration for obtaining authentic data. The participant was the school's English teacher, who had taught English at the school for about five years and was therefore familiar with students of different abilities, including students with special needs. The teacher was treated as the key informant because of this direct experience with picture-based media in reading instruction.

Primary data came from the interview, the classroom observation, and documentation of the learning activities. Secondary data came from academic literature, research articles, and other documents relevant to the topic, which were used to support and enrich the interpretation of the primary data (Bowen, 2009). The researcher served as the primary instrument, supported by a semi-structured interview guide, an observation sheet, field notes, audio recording, and visual documentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interview guide contained thirteen questions organised into four themes: the participant's background, the use of picture-based media in reading lessons, the challenges of using it, and closing reflections on how its use could be improved. The interview was conducted face to face in the teacher's classroom on 22 July 2026 and lasted approximately fifteen minutes. It was recorded with the participant's consent, transcribed verbatim in Indonesian, and translated into English for reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Non-participant observation was carried out so that the lesson could unfold naturally without intervention by the researcher (Hadi, 2013), and documentation consisted of notes and photographs of learning activities (Arikunto, 2012).

The data were analysed with the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During condensation, the transcript, field notes, and documents were coded and grouped into

themes related to the teacher's perceptions and the challenges encountered. The condensed data were then displayed as descriptive narratives supported by direct quotations, and conclusions were drawn and verified by moving repeatedly between the data and the emerging interpretations. To meet the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the study used methodological triangulation of interview, observation, and documentation data (Patton, 2002), member checking in which the transcript was returned to the participant (Creswell & Miller, 2000), and referential adequacy through the retention of recordings, transcripts, field notes, and photographs as an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study is limited to one teacher in one school, so its findings are intended to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented together with their interpretation. They are organised around the two research questions: the teacher's perceptions of picture-based media, and the challenges encountered in using it. The interview, observation, and documentation data converged on one overall picture. The teacher held a positive perception of picture-based media in reading instruction and considered it beneficial for both regular students and students with special needs. This perception was expressed in four aspects, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher's perceptions of picture-based media and their theoretical links

Aspect of perception	Evidence from interview and observation	Theoretical link
Learning scaffold	Pictures give an initial guide before reading; low-ability and special-needs students were more focused and answered simple questions.	Dual-coding theory; pictures as schema activators (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Paivio, 1986)
Motivation and engagement	Livelier class atmosphere; passive students began to answer questions; students with special needs concentrated better.	Visual aids as motivational tools (Yunus et al., 2013; Prihantini & Fauziyyah, 2023)
Comprehension and vocabulary	Predict–read–verify sequence; easier recall of new words through visual representation.	Prediction and verification; constructivist meaning-making; multimedia learning (Mayer, 2009)
Adaptability to diverse learners	Simple and clear pictures, more time, simpler sentences, and collaboration with the special assistance teacher.	Differentiated instruction and UDL (Tomlinson, 2001; CAST, 2018)

The first aspect is that the teacher viewed pictures as a learning scaffold. According to the teacher, pictures work as a bridge between students' initial knowledge and the new information in a text, so that students build a visual understanding of the topic before facing a text that may be difficult. The teacher explained:

> *"Sebelum siswa membaca teks, mereka sudah mendapat gambaran dulu dari gambar yang ditampilkan. Jadi mereka lebih mudah menebak isi bacaan, memahami kosakata, bahkan lebih tertarik untuk membaca. Terutama untuk siswa yang kemampuan membacanya masih rendah atau siswa berkebutuhan khusus, gambar itu benar-benar membantu sebagai petunjuk awal sebelum masuk ke teks."*
> ("Before students read the text, they already get a picture from the images displayed. So they find it easier to guess the content, understand vocabulary, and even become more interested in reading. Especially for students with low reading ability or students with special needs, pictures really help as an initial guide before they engage with the text.")

The classroom observation supported this statement. When the teacher displayed pictures at the beginning of the lesson, students who usually struggled to follow the lesson appeared more focused and were able to answer simple questions. They seemed to have a preview of what they were about to read. In sessions without pictures, the same students appeared confused and had difficulty guessing the content of the reading. This scaffolding function is consistent with the view that pictures act as schema activators, meaning anchors, and inference guides in text comprehension, and with dual-coding theory, which explains why a visual representation prepares the ground for verbal processing (Clark & Paivio, 1991; Paivio, 1986).

The second aspect concerns motivation and engagement. The teacher perceived pictures as a useful means of raising students' interest and participation, which matters in a class where students differ in confidence and attention. The teacher reported:

> *"Saat melihat gambar mereka langsung mulai memberikan pendapat atau menebak isi bacaan. Suasana kelas terasa lebih aktif dibandingkan kalau saya langsung memberikan teks tanpa gambar. Siswa berkebutuhan khusus juga terlihat lebih tertarik dan lebih fokus dibandingkan kalau hanya diberikan tulisan."*
> ("When they see pictures, they immediately start giving opinions or guessing the content. The classroom atmosphere feels more active compared to when I directly give a text without pictures. Students with special needs also appear more interested and more focused compared to when they are only given text.")

The observation confirmed a clear increase in participation when pictures were used. Students who were usually passive began to dare to answer questions, interaction among students became livelier as they discussed the displayed pictures, and students with special needs who normally found it hard to concentrate followed the lesson more attentively. In the interview, the teacher added that regular students are "antusias" (enthusiastic) and more spirited when pictures are present, while students with special needs are more focused and more confident in answering simple questions. These findings agree with Yunus et al. (2013), whose participants perceived visual aids as useful tools for engaging students with literary texts and for supporting students of different proficiency levels. They also resonate with Prihantini and Fauziyyah (2023), who found that elementary school students showed high reading interest in picture storybooks, including enjoyment of reading and emotional involvement with the storyline, and with Nurhayati et al. (2024), who reported better learning interest and engagement with picture storybooks.

The third aspect is the role of pictures in comprehension and vocabulary learning. The teacher did not use pictures as decoration but as part of a systematic instructional sequence, which is shown in Figure 1. The teacher described it as follows:

> *"Saya mulai dengan menunjukkan gambar, meminta siswa mengamati, lalu bertanya seperti 'Menurut kalian ini gambar tentang apa?' Setelah itu kami membaca teks bersama. Setelah selesai membaca, kami kembali melihat gambar untuk memastikan apakah isi bacaan sesuai dengan dugaan mereka. Cara seperti itu biasanya membuat mereka lebih mudah memahami isi teks."*
> ("I start by showing pictures, asking students to observe, then asking questions like 'What do you think this picture is about?' After that, we read the text together. After finishing reading, we look back at the picture to check whether the content matches their predictions. That approach usually makes it easier for them to understand the content of the text.")

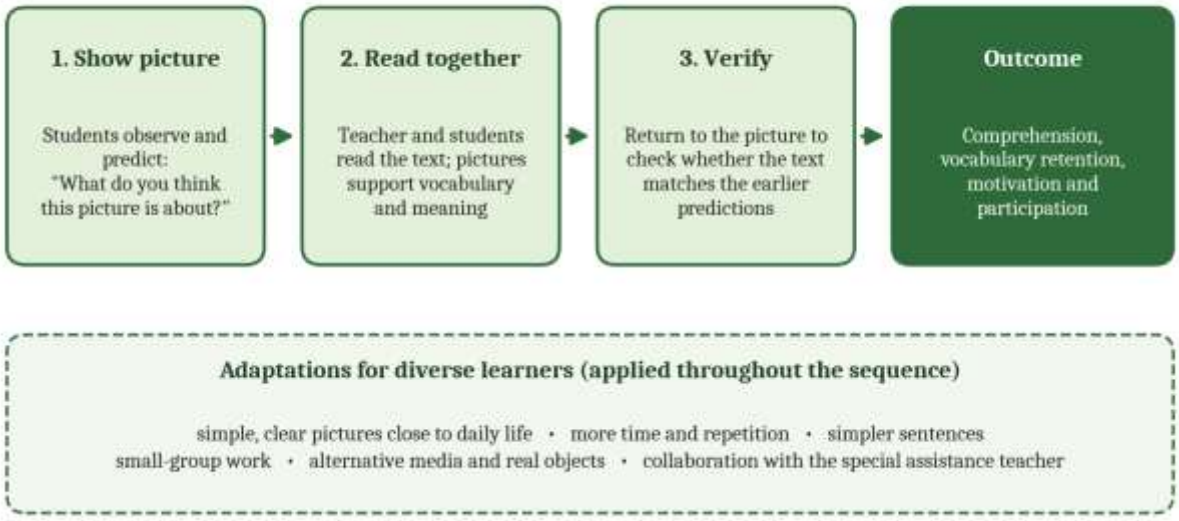


Figure 1. The predict–read–verify sequence and the adaptations reported by the teacher

This sequence activates two skills that are central to reading comprehension: prediction and verification. Students first predict the content from the picture, then check their predictions against the text, so they do not receive information passively but actively connect visual information with written language. The teacher's question, "What do you think this picture is about?", draws out prior knowledge and invites students to link their visual experience with the text, which reflects a constructivist view of learning in which meaning is built through the learner's own experience. The teacher also said that pictures help vocabulary learning because students remember new words more easily when they can associate them with a visual representation. This is in line with the claim that pictures serve as meaning anchors for unfamiliar words, and with studies in which picture word cards and flashcards were used to improve word recognition, vocabulary, and early reading (Jannah & Artiningsih, 2025; Rahmatullah Achmad, 2024; Sulistiyowati et al., 2025). It is also consistent with Ardhian et al. (2025), who described teachers using visual approaches that integrate text and images to support deaf students' literacy at a special school.

The fourth aspect is adaptability. The teacher recognised that every student in an inclusive classroom has different needs and that the same method cannot be applied to everyone. In response to the interview question on adjusting the medium, the teacher stated:

> *"Saya memilih gambar yang sederhana, jelas, dan dekat dengan kehidupan sehari-hari. Untuk siswa berkebutuhan khusus, saya memberikan waktu lebih banyak, menggunakan kalimat yang lebih sederhana, dan bekerja sama dengan guru pendamping."*
> ("I choose pictures that are simple, clear, and close to everyday life. For students with special needs, I give more time, use simpler sentences, and collaborate with the special assistance teacher.")

The teacher thus adjusted the pace, the language, and the form of assistance according to students' needs. This is a practical expression of differentiated instruction, which adapts methods and materials to individual learners (Tomlinson, 2001). It also fits the logic of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), in which the use of pictures alongside verbal explanation is one way of providing multiple means of representation (CAST, 2018). The adjustments are especially suitable for slow learners, who need more time, repetition, and different approaches rather than a different curriculum (Cobb, 1961; Una et al., 2023). The findings also indicated that the quality of the visual material matters. Pictures that are

sufficiently large, clear, and relevant help students identify information and follow the sequence of events, which is important for students who need concrete and accessible representations. For this reason, the selection and design of picture-based media should consider not only content but also size, clarity, relevance, and accessibility.

Overall, the teacher's positive perception was grounded in classroom experience rather than in general belief. It is worth noting that the teacher did not describe pictures as a complete solution. In answer to whether picture-based media is the right choice for inclusive reading, the teacher answered that it is very appropriate because it helps students understand the text, but that it still needs to be combined with other media. This balanced view is important because it shows that a positive perception does not imply uncritical enthusiasm. It also supports the argument that teachers' perceptions function as a filter that shapes how a medium is integrated into practice (Yada et al., 2022), and that teachers who feel capable of managing inclusive classes tend to hold more positive views of adaptive strategies (Almalky & Alwahbi, 2023; Jury et al., 2023).

Turning to the second research question, the teacher reported four main challenges in implementing picture-based media. They are summarised in Table 2 together with the strategies that the teacher used to cope with them.

Table 2. Challenges in using picture-based media and the teacher's coping strategies

Challenge	Teacher's description	Coping strategy
Differences in reading ability	Students understand at different speeds; making one medium that all can understand is the hardest part.	Repeating explanations, simpler sentences, small groups, and support from the special assistance teacher
Limited preparation time	Preparing media, including adapted versions, takes considerable time.	Planning alternative materials; calls for school support and shared resources
Inadequate technical facilities	Facilities are sometimes limited; a malfunctioning projector and power outages disrupted display.	Alternative media and real objects that do not depend on electricity
Selecting suitable pictures	Pictures must be clear, relevant, and accessible to students with different abilities.	Choosing simple pictures close to daily life and adapting them to students' needs

The most prominent challenge was the substantial difference in students' reading ability. In the teacher's words, the most challenging part was creating one medium that all students can understand. In an inclusive class, some students grasp the material quickly while others need longer guidance, so the teacher must be patient and creative in choosing methods and media. This situation reflects the broader difficulty of developing decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension simultaneously in a class with a very wide range of abilities (Tindal & Nisbet, 2010). It also resembles the situation described by Ardhian et al. (2025), in which teachers working with students with specific needs had to consider those needs and rely on visual approaches to support literacy.

The second challenge was limited time. The teacher explained that preparing media takes time, particularly when different versions or adaptations have to be made for students with different learning needs. This indicates that inclusive teaching asks teachers to invest additional effort in planning, adapting, and preparing materials. Without institutional support, such as time allocation and shared resources, this burden may fall on individual teachers and may limit how consistently picture-based media can be used.

The third challenge was inadequate technical facilities. The teacher noted that facilities are sometimes limited, and problems such as a malfunctioning projector and power outages prevented the prepared media from being displayed optimally. When teachers depend on

electronic devices to show pictures, such limitations directly affect visual instruction. The teacher's response was to prepare alternative media and to use real objects, which is a practical way of keeping the lesson going when technology fails and which also provides a more concrete representation for students who need it.

The fourth challenge was the difficulty of selecting pictures that are appropriate for all students. Selection must take into account students' abilities, the learning objective, and the clarity and accessibility of the image. Pictures that are too small, unclear, overly complex, or unrelated to the content can make understanding harder instead of easier. This challenge links the finding about adaptability with the finding about media quality: because students differ, a single picture rarely fits everyone, and teachers need both the competence and the time to choose and adapt visuals carefully. The need for teacher training in inclusive practice has also been highlighted in the Indonesian context (Kusmaryono, 2023; Nabiela & Ulfatin, 2023).

In spite of these challenges, the teacher showed considerable adaptability. The strategies mentioned included preparing alternative media, using real objects, repeating explanations, forming small groups, and collaborating with the special assistance teacher. When asked about the factors that support success, the teacher named teacher readiness, classroom conditions, school support, and cooperation between teachers and parents, and when asked what should be improved, the teacher pointed to the need for more media, teacher training, and cooperation among all parties. Collaboration between regular and special education teachers is particularly valuable because it allows responsibilities to be shared and complementary support to be provided. Small-group work and repeated explanations can also be seen as ways of reducing barriers to learning and widening students' access to content, as encouraged by the UDL principles of multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2018).

The findings carry several implications. For practice, picture-based media appears to be a suitable medium for reading instruction in an inclusive classroom when it is used within a purposeful sequence such as predict–read–verify, when pictures are simple, clear, and close to students' daily lives, and when the teacher is prepared to adjust the pace and the language. For schools, successful implementation should not depend on a teacher's individual effort alone. Adequate facilities, sufficient preparation time, appropriate learning resources, opportunities for collaboration, and professional development are needed so that the benefits perceived by the teacher can be sustained. For research, the study adds a teacher-centred, qualitative perspective to a literature that has mainly examined student outcomes (Sulistiyowati et al., 2025; Sánchez-Cantero & López-Morales, 2025), and it suggests that teachers' interpretations deserve attention alongside test scores.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a single English teacher in one inclusive junior high school, and the interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes, so the findings cannot be generalised to other teachers or schools. The study also did not measure student learning outcomes, which means that the benefits described here are the teacher's perceptions supported by classroom observation, not evidence of measured gains in reading achievement. Some of the interview data were also provided in brief statements, so the interpretation relies on the consistency among interview, observation, and documentation. Even so, the convergence of the three data sources and the member checking offer reasonable support for the credibility of the findings. Future studies could involve more participants, include students' and special assistance teachers' voices, and combine perception data with measures of reading outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the English teacher at MTs Taman Pendidikan Islam holds a positive perception of picture-based media for developing students' reading skills in an inclusive classroom. The teacher regards the medium as a scaffold that prepares students for the text, as a driver of motivation and participation, as a support for comprehension and vocabulary through a predict–read–verify sequence, and as a medium that can be adapted by choosing simple pictures, using simpler language, giving more time, and collaborating with the special assistance teacher. These views were supported by classroom observation and documentation.

The teacher also faces four challenges: differences in students' reading ability, limited preparation time, inadequate technical facilities, and difficulty in selecting pictures suitable for all students. The teacher addresses them through alternative media, real objects, repeated explanations, small groups, and collaboration. The main contribution of the study is to show that the usefulness of picture-based media in inclusive reading instruction is shaped not only by the medium itself but also by the teacher's perceptions, the teacher's ability to adapt, and the support provided by the school. Teachers are therefore encouraged to combine picture-based media with interactive methods such as discussion, educational games, and shared reading, schools are encouraged to provide facilities, time, and training, and future researchers are encouraged to involve more participants and school contexts and to examine specific reading outcomes such as fluency, vocabulary mastery, and deeper comprehension.

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