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TEACHER'S EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO DEAF SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore teacher's experiences in teaching English vocabulary to seventh-grade deaf students, including the challenges the teacher face and the strategies the teacher employs. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation at a special education school in Medan, North Sumatra. The results indicate that despite lacking a background in English education, the teacher was able to develop pedagogical competencies independently and collaboratively over nearly two decades of teaching. Key challenges included the teacher's limited academic proficiency in English, discrepancies between spelling and pronunciation, students' poor retention of new vocabulary, and the diversity of students' conditions. Teacher developed six adaptive strategies: the use of layered visual media and real objects, innovations in local phonetic spelling, SIBI/BISINDO sign language, systematic drills and repetition, individualized approaches, and creative project-based assessments. The innovation of local phonetic spelling is the most significant finding that has not been documented in previous literature and enriches the study of vocabulary teaching for deaf students in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Teacher Experience, English Vocabulary, Deaf Students, Teaching Strategies, Special Education School*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of English language learning that is inseparable from overall language proficiency. Schmitt (2000, in Gu, 2003) states that lexical knowledge is at the core of communicative competence and plays a crucial role in second language acquisition; thus, without adequate vocabulary mastery, learners will struggle to communicate effectively. This statement indicates that vocabulary can be viewed as the building blocks of language that enable communication. Furthermore, vocabulary also serves as the foundation for the development of the four language skills. Nation (2011, in Alqahtani, 2015) explains that in learning English as a foreign or second language, vocabulary plays a very important role in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus, the more vocabulary students master, the easier it is for them to understand learning materials and express ideas in English. This is further emphasized by Dakhi and Fitria (2019), who state that nothing can be done without vocabulary, as vocabulary is the foundation of communication. Consequently, limited vocabulary can hinder the communication process because students struggle to choose the right words to convey their intended meaning (Rashid et al., 2022).

English language instruction, including vocabulary acquisition, should be provided to all students without exception, including students with special needs. In Indonesia, education for students with special needs is provided through Special Education Schools (SLB), as mandated by Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. One group requiring special attention in language learning is deaf students. Moores (1982, in Azis, 2023) explains that deafness is the loss of hearing to such an extent that a person cannot understand speech through hearing alone, with or without hearing aids. This condition prevents deaf students from acquiring vocabulary incidentally through daily exposure to spoken language. Consequently, they can only rely on visual inputs such as text, images, and sign language in the learning process. This limitation makes teaching English vocabulary to deaf students a unique challenge that requires different approaches and strategies from general learning.

The characteristic of deaf students as visually dominant individuals has important implications for effective learning strategies. Arnida et al. (2024) note that deaf children are often referred to as visual learners due to the dominant role of their sense of sight in their daily activities. Kurniawan et al. (2022) emphasize that learning that prioritizes visual media is more suitable for helping deaf students understand the material optimally. Rosyida and Fatimah (2025) emphasize that unlike typical students who learn through auditory input, deaf students require visual aids, sign language, written instructions, and interactive materials, as well as individualized attention and tailored learning plans. This situation places teachers in a highly strategic yet challenging position, as the success of vocabulary learning for deaf students is largely determined by the quality of the teacher's pedagogical strategies and decisions in each learning session.

Several previous studies have examined strategies for teaching English vocabulary to deaf students in Indonesia. Kalora, Erlina, and Husnaini (2022) identified the strategies used by teachers at SLB-B Karya Ibu in Palembang and found that the use of visual aids, word games, and demonstration methods were the primary strategies. Mahmuda, Weda, and Sakkir (2024) explored teachers' strategies at UPT SLB Negeri 1 Bulukumba and found the importance of sign language and visual media in vocabulary learning. Rosyida and Fatimah (2025) documented teachers' strategies in teaching English vocabulary to deaf students at the elementary school level. However, all of these studies involved teachers with academic backgrounds in English language education or special education. Meanwhile, the reality on the ground shows that in many special education schools in Indonesia, English is actually taught by classroom teachers who have absolutely no background in English education. The gap between the ideal assumptions in previous research and the existing contextual reality creates a significant knowledge gap that has not been widely documented in the scientific literature.

Grade 7 marks the initial stage of English language learning for deaf students at the junior high school level for the deaf, making the teacher's experience in teaching at this level a crucial foundation for the continuity of learning in subsequent grades. A deep understanding of how teacher teaches vocabulary at this introductory stage, including the real challenges faced and adaptive strategies developed from experience, is essential to provide meaningful empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of special education in Indonesia. Based on this background, this study aims to explore in depth teachers' experiences in teaching English vocabulary to seventh-grade deaf students, the challenges the teacher faces, and the strategies teacher has developed to overcome these challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' own perspectives, particularly regarding teachers' experiences, perceptions, and practices in teaching English vocabulary to deaf students (Creswell, 2009). According to Patton (2015), a qualitative approach is particularly well-suited for exploring the meanings individuals ascribe to their life experiences, including a teacher's professional experiences. A descriptive design was chosen because this study does not aim to test hypotheses or manipulate variables, but rather to describe and explain the phenomenon in detail and systematically as it exists in the field.

The study was conducted at a special education school located on Jalan Kabupaten Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. This location was chosen because the school actively provides English language instruction to deaf students at the junior high school level. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves intentionally selecting participants based on the consideration that they can provide the most relevant and rich information regarding the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). The selection criterion for the participant was a teacher who actively teaches English to seventh-grade deaf students. They must have at least one academic year of teaching experience at the SLB and be willing to participate and provide the necessary information. Based on these criteria, the participant in this study is a classroom teacher who has been teaching at the SLB since 2007. The teacher has a background in Educational Administration and holds no formal qualifications in English language education or special education.

Data were collected using three complementary main techniques. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in one main session and several follow-up sessions, each lasting 30–45 minutes. The interview guidelines were developed based on three main focuses: teachers' experiences in teaching English vocabulary, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they used. The semi-structured nature allowed the researcher to explore topics that arose spontaneously during the interview process. Second, non-participant observation was conducted during a full learning session allocated 2 x 40 minutes on the topic "Vocabulary: Objects in the Classroom," which covered seven vocabulary words in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum Phase D teaching module. The researcher used an observation guide to document the teacher's activities, teacher-student interactions, the media used, and student responses to various teaching strategies. Third, documentation was collected in the form of official teaching modules, photographs of learning activities, and learning media developed by the teacher.

Data analysis followed the qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of three components that occur simultaneously and interactively. The first component is data condensation, which is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the raw data collected in the field. At this stage, the researcher performs open coding on all interview transcripts and observation notes to identify relevant units of meaning. The second component is the presentation of data in tabular and descriptive forms, supplemented with direct quotes from interviews and observations to support each finding. The third component is drawing and verifying conclusions, which involves making decisions regarding the meaning of the data that has been presented. Data reliability is ensured through methodological triangulation by comparing and verifying the consistency of data

obtained from three different sources: interviews, observations, and documentation (Patton, 2015).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on a comprehensive analysis of data from in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, the research findings are organized around three predefined research questions: teacher's experiences, challenges faced, and strategies employed. Table 1 presents a condensed summary of the data, including codes, themes, and data sources for all research findings.

Table 1. Summary of Findings: Codes, Themes, and Data Sources

No.	Code	Theme	Data Source
1	TE1	Student enthusiasm as a memorable positive experience	Interviews, Observations
2	TE2	Development of teaching competencies through independent and collaborative efforts	Interviews, Observations
3	TE3	Development of teaching methods and media over time Interviews, Observations	Interviews, Observations
4	CH1	Teachers' academic limitations in English	Interviews
5	CH2	The gap between spelling and pronunciation in English	Interviews, Observations
6	CH3	Students' weak retention of new vocabulary	Interviews, Observations
7	CH4	The diversity of students' conditions and abilities within a single class	Interviews, Observations
8	ST1-ST6	Six Adaptive Strategies: 1. Layered Visual Media 2. Local Phonetic Spelling 3. Gestures, 4. Drills 5. Individual Instruction, Creative Assessment)	Interviews, Observations, Documentation

Teacher's Experiences in Teaching English Vocabulary

Teacher's experiences in teaching English vocabulary to seventh-grade deaf students encompass diverse and multifaceted dimensions, including affective, cognitive, and professional aspects. One of the most memorable experiences reported by the teacher was the students' high level of enthusiasm and curiosity toward English as a subject they had never studied in elementary school. For most students, this was their first formal encounter with English. This situation created a novelty effect that psychologically boosted students' intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm for learning, leading the teacher to perceive a more lively and responsive classroom dynamic compared to other subjects. This finding aligns with the emphasis by Rosyida and Fatimah (2025) on the importance of creating a meaningful and engaging learning context for deaf students, as high motivation can partially compensate for the barriers caused by hearing impairments.

Without formal training in English or special education, the teacher developed her teaching competencies through two main, complementary pathways. First, through intensive self-directed learning using various online resources, particularly Google and YouTube, as well as instructional guides for deaf students. Second, through informal collaboration and consultation with fellow teachers at the school, including teacher of other subjects who have a deeper understanding of the learning characteristics of deaf students. This competency development pattern reflects a process of professional identity formation that evolves dynamically through continuous interaction between acquired knowledge, held values, lived experiences, and critical reflection on classroom practices, as conceptualized by Sahara, Riyadi, and Maulidah (2025).

Nearly two decades of teaching experience have also cultivated a deep pedagogical understanding of the learning needs of deaf students, an understanding that cannot be gained solely through formal training. The teacher describes this teaching journey as a process filled with continuous learning, adaptation, and innovation, in which each school year presents new challenges as well as opportunities to develop more effective approaches. The most significant change reported is the transformation in the use of media, from simply drawing on a chalkboard to utilizing interactive flat-panel displays provided by the government. This finding aligns with Chew and Cerbin (2020), who state that experienced teachers develop the most effective strategies for the students they teach through a continuous adaptation process based on feedback from real-world classroom experiences. Furthermore, Mardali and Siyyari (2019) found that teachers with longer teaching experience tend to have a richer repertoire of vocabulary teaching strategies and are more flexible in applying them according to contextual needs.

Challenges in Teaching English Vocabulary

This study identifies four major challenges that are interrelated and shape a complex teaching context. The first challenge is the teacher's limited academic background in English. Unlike the studies by Kalora et al. (2022) and Mahmuda et al. (2024), which involved teachers with formal qualifications in English language education, the teachers in this study lacked adequate academic preparation in the language they were teaching. This situation leads to uncertainty regarding the correct pronunciation of vocabulary, so the teacher must first independently research how to pronounce each English word using Google before the lesson. Nevertheless, teacher does not allow this limitation to become a passive obstacle, instead she proactively develops strategies to

overcome it. This finding fills a significant gap in the literature because it represents the real reality faced by many teachers in special education schools throughout Indonesia, namely teaching subjects that are outside their formal areas of expertise.

The second challenge, which is the most distinctive and has not received adequate attention in the literature, is the fundamental disconnect between the spelling system and the pronunciation system in English. English is known as a language with a highly opaque or non-phonetic orthographic system, meaning that the relationship between written symbols and the sounds they represent is highly inconsistent and cannot be directly predicted. For typical students learning English as a foreign language, this gap can be relatively overcome through repeated exposure to spoken input. However, for deaf students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), this gap becomes a far more fundamental obstacle because they tend to rely on visual spelling to reconstruct the phonological representation of new words. As a result, students often pronounce words by spelling them out letter by letter, resulting in pronunciations that deviate significantly from actual pronunciation. Birinci and Saricobani (2021) discuss deaf students' reliance on visual input, but do not specifically identify the complexity of the non-phonetic English orthographic system as a distinct challenge for deaf EFL learners. Thus, these findings make an important new contribution to the literature in this field.

The third challenge is students' limited ability to retain and recall new vocabulary they have learned. Based on direct observations during the learning process, some students still had difficulty recalling the meanings and pronunciations of vocabulary words even though the material had been explained repeatedly by the teacher. In some situations, students appeared to be able to follow the explanations during the lesson, but after a few minutes had passed, they forgot the vocabulary they had previously learned. This indicates that the process of storing vocabulary in long-term memory has not yet been optimized.

The fourth challenge is the significant diversity in students' conditions and abilities within a single class. The observed seventh-grade class consisted of seven students with varying degrees of hearing loss, ranging from moderate to severe, as well as diverse educational backgrounds. Two of these students had recently transferred from a regular school and had no prior foundation in sign language. This diversity creates significant complexity in classroom management, as the teacher must simultaneously meet the diverse learning needs of students with limited resources and time (Arnida et al., 2024).

Teacher's Strategies for Teaching English Vocabulary

In response to the complexity of the challenges they faced, the teacher developed six adaptive strategies that complemented one another and were validated through data triangulation. The first strategy is the integrated use of layered visual media and real objects. In the observed learning sessions, the teacher did not rely on just one type of visual media but used various layers of media simultaneously: text and images on the whiteboard, printed images, and real objects in the classroom as direct references. This multimodal approach allows students to associate vocabulary words with visual representations and real-world object references simultaneously, thereby strengthening the memory traces formed. This strategy aligns with the recommendations of Birinci and Saricobani (2021), who state that the use of rich and diverse visual materials is one of the most effective strategies in supporting vocabulary learning for deaf students.

The second strategy, and the one with the greatest theoretical significance, is the local phonetic spelling innovation developed independently by the teacher. To address

the challenges posed by the spelling-pronunciation gap, teacher developed a simple phonetic notation system adapted to the phonemic system of the Indonesian language. Specifically, the teacher wrote phonetic representations in capital letters beneath each English vocabulary word on the blackboard, for example, writing “BUK” under “BOOK,” “BEG” under “BAG,” and “CHER” under “CHAIR.” This strategy is not included in any official teaching module, indicating that it is a local pedagogical innovation born purely from the teacher’s intuitive sensitivity to the specific needs of her students. From a theoretical perspective, this strategy can be understood as a form of visual scaffolding that cleverly bridges the gap between the opacity of the English orthographic system and the visual perception strengths possessed by deaf students. This finding strongly confirms the claim by Chew and Cerbin (2020) that experienced teachers develop highly specific and contextual pedagogical knowledge through reflective teaching practice knowledge that often goes beyond what formal training can provide.

The third strategy involves the use of SIBI (Indonesian Sign Language System) and BISINDO (Indonesian Sign Language), combined with body gestures and expressive facial expressions, consistently throughout the entire learning session. The teacher does not merely use sign language as an additional communication tool but fully integrate it into the instructional flow of learning, ensuring that every introduction of new vocabulary is always accompanied by its corresponding sign. This is fully in line with Khasawneh’s (2021) recommendation, which emphasizes that the integration of sign language in English instruction for deaf students is a fundamental pedagogical necessity. Kurniawan et al. (2022) also highlight the importance of multimodality in supporting English language learning for students with hearing and speech impairments.

The fourth strategy is structured, systematic drills and repetition. In the observed sessions, each new vocabulary word was repeated at least three to five times in various formats: the teacher spoke and signed the word, then the students collectively imitated it, followed by individual repetition. Birinci and Saricobani (2021) emphasize that repetition is not merely beneficial but essential for deaf learners due to the lack of access to incidental vocabulary acquisition.

The fifth strategy is an individualized approach with direct, personalized pronunciation guidance. The teacher consistently approaches each student and guides them to produce sounds that approximate correct pronunciation, using visual techniques such as demonstrating the correct lip positions. Winarsih (2010) emphasizes the need for systematic articulation stimulation and phonological awareness for deaf children. Additionally, observations revealed the phenomenon of peer learning emerging organically, where students who mastered vocabulary more quickly voluntarily helped their peers through sign language gestures. Rosyida and Fatimah (2025) noted that collaborative learning methods have proven effective for deaf students.

The sixth strategy involves the use of diverse and creative assessment methods. The teacher employ three forms of assessment in sequence: formative assessment based on gestural responses, individual oral production assessments in front of the class with immediate pronunciation guidance, and creative project-based assessments involving the task of labeling objects in English with accompanying images on a piece of cardboard. Pusparani (2024) explains that for deaf students, formal and informal assessments are used in vocabulary learning, where formative assessment involves memorizing vocabulary and presenting it in front of the class, as well as pair projects to improve collaboration skills. The assessment strategies implemented by teacher in this study are concrete examples that enrich the variety of documented assessment approaches for this group of students.

Overall, the six documented strategies not only confirm the existing literature but also substantially expand and enrich it. Innovations in local phonetic spelling, the integration of consistent pronunciation guidance, and the organic emergence of peer learning collectively demonstrate that extensive and reflective teaching experience, even without a formally relevant academic background, can generate pedagogical knowledge that is highly specific, context-sensitive, and meaningful both theoretically and practically.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that extensive and reflective teaching experience, even without a formal academic background in the subject being taught, can foster rich, adaptive, and innovative pedagogical competencies. The teacher who participated in this study has gradually developed their competencies through a combination of intensive self-directed learning, informal collaboration with colleagues, and ongoing reflection on classroom practices over nearly two decades. Students' enthusiasm and curiosity about English as a new subject became one of the most memorable experiences and served as an important motivational asset for teacher in developing her teaching practices.

The main challenges faced by the teacher encompass four interrelated dimensions: teacher's own limited proficiency in English, the fundamental gap between the spelling and pronunciation systems of the English language, which has not been extensively discussed in EFL literature for deaf students, the weak consolidation of vocabulary into students' long-term memory due to the absence of incidental learning, and the heterogeneity of students' conditions and abilities within a single class, which demands differentiated instruction. In response to these challenges, the teacher developed six adaptive strategies confirmed through data triangulation: the use of layered visual media and real objects, innovations in local phonetic spelling, the integration of SIBI/BISINDO sign language, systematic drills and repetition, an individualized approach with direct pronunciation guidance, and diverse and creative project-based assessments.

The most significant finding of this study is the innovation of a local phonetic spelling system developed independently by the teacher in response to the challenges posed by the spelling-pronunciation gap. This innovation represents an original contribution not yet documented in the literature on EFL vocabulary instruction for any deaf students, and can be understood as a form of visual scaffolding that is pedagogically highly relevant and has the potential to be adapted in similar contexts. More broadly, this study offers a theoretical contribution in the form of new insights into how a teacher without relevant formal training can develop effective pedagogical knowledge through reflective teaching experiences, as well as a practical contribution in the form of documented concrete strategies that can serve as a reference for other teachers in similar situations. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct a multi-case study involving more teacher participants from diverse backgrounds and different special education school contexts, as well as to design classroom action research to examine the comparative effectiveness of the phonetic spelling strategies identified in this study.

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