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TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS ON THE USE OF MULTISENSORY APPROACH IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO LEARNERS WITH DYSLEXIA IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in inclusive classrooms must adopt instructional approaches that accommodate diverse learning needs, including those of learners with dyslexia. This study explored an English teacher's perceptions of the Multisensory Approach in teaching English vocabulary to learners with dyslexia in an inclusive classroom. A qualitative design with narrative inquiry was employed. The participant was an English teacher at an inclusive school in Padang Bulan, Medan, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, two classroom observations, discussions, and documentation, and were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Four themes emerged. First, the teacher regarded the Multisensory Approach as essential because it offers visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile learning experiences. Second, it was implemented through pictures, flashcards, videos, real objects, sign language, games, songs, and movement adapted to individual abilities. Third, the teacher faced challenges related to differences in students' characteristics, communication barriers, the need for individual assistance, limited instructional time, and insufficient teaching staff. Fourth, the teacher perceived that the approach supported students' attention, motivation, participation, and understanding of vocabulary. Overall, the teacher held a positive perception of the approach and considered it beneficial for vocabulary learning in an inclusive classroom. These findings reflect perceived, rather than measured, effectiveness.

Keywords: dyslexia, inclusive classroom, multisensory approach, teacher's perception, vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become a primary focus of modern education systems as an effort to ensure equal access to learning for all students, including those with special needs such as dyslexia. Ainscow et al. (2006) view inclusion as a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to learning and participation, so that every student can take part actively and achieve his or her potential. In Indonesia, inclusive education continues to develop under the principle of "education for all", yet its implementation still faces systemic challenges such as limited resources, a lack of appropriate teaching materials, and low teacher competence in special education (Sunardi et al., 2011; Suharwoto, 2019). In English language learning, teachers often struggle with identifying dyslexia, selecting suitable strategies, and obtaining professional training that supports inclusive practice (Fernando, 2023).

Permendiknas No. 70 of 2009 provides the legal basis for inclusive education in Indonesia and requires schools to admit students with special needs, including those with dyslexia (Permendiknas, 2009). In practice, the level of implementation varies, and many teachers state that they are not yet prepared to teach students with learning difficulties in English, a subject with high orthographic and phonological complexity (Sunardi et al., 2011; Suharwoto, 2019). Inclusive English teaching is also expected to follow the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which promote flexible and multimodal approaches that help students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia, understand material more effectively (Halder et al., 2024). A multisensory approach is considered important because it can help bridge the gap between inclusive policy and classroom practice by providing concrete strategies for differentiated instruction.

Dyslexia is a common learning disability. The World Health Organization (2024) reports that developmental learning disorders affect approximately 5–15% of school-aged children worldwide, and a meta-analysis by Yang et al. (2022) estimated that about 7.1% of primary school children have dyslexia. Learners with dyslexia experience considerable difficulty in learning English as a foreign language, particularly in reading, spelling, and language processing (Cifre & Barceló-Coblijn, 2025; Folia & Malisiova, 2025; Middleton et al., 2024). Because vocabulary is the foundation for reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Kormos, 2024; Nation, 2024), difficulties in learning words can limit the development of all other language skills.

In this situation, the teacher becomes a decisive factor. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions act as cognitive filters that shape pedagogical decisions (Pajares, 1992), and teachers' instructional practices depend on their competence and their ability to adapt strategies to students' needs (Sahnan et al., 2025). Understanding how teachers perceive a particular approach therefore reveals how they interpret, design, and carry out instruction for learners with dyslexia. One approach widely recommended for these learners is the multisensory approach, which engages visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities simultaneously. The approach has its roots in the Orton–Gillingham tradition of structured, sequential, and multisensory instruction (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006) and is believed to strengthen comprehension and retention through several sensory pathways (Birsh & Carreker, 2018).

Several theoretical perspectives frame the present study. The VAKT principle developed by Fernald (1943) emphasizes the combined use of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities in teaching. Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) explains that information encoded both verbally and nonverbally is stored in separate but interconnected pathways, which increases the likelihood of recall. In inclusive classrooms, these ideas are complemented by differentiated instruction, which requires teachers to adapt materials, activities, and pace to individual differences (Tomlinson, 2014), and by Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the zone of proximal development, in which learners achieve more with appropriate support. Together,

these perspectives provide the lens through which the teacher's perceptions and practices are interpreted in this article.

Previous studies have examined multisensory teaching from several angles. Subramaniam and Kunasegran (2024) found that a multisensory approach improved the literacy of students with dyslexia, especially reading and letter recognition. Puspitaloka et al. (2020) reported positive teacher perceptions of multisensory teaching in English reading, although time limitations and the availability of materials remained problematic. Raihana and Salmiah (2026) showed that multisensory activities were effective for vocabulary learning difficulties among students with dyslexia, but their study emphasized implementation and learning outcomes. Other studies have focused on teachers' perceptions of reading instruction (Kurnia, 2025), general strategies for teaching dyslexic students (Fernando, 2023), and teachers' experiences in improving the vocabulary of dyslexic students (Rahmadhani & Damanik, 2025).

These studies leave a gap. Most research has concentrated on student outcomes or on reading instruction, while teachers' perceptions of multisensory approaches in English *vocabulary* instruction within an inclusive classroom have received little attention. Few studies explain how a teacher understands, interprets, and experiences the approach in an authentic setting. The novelty of the present study lies in bringing together teacher perception, English vocabulary instruction, the multisensory approach, and the inclusive classroom context in one inquiry. The study was guided by two questions: (1) how does the teacher perceive and experience the implementation of the multisensory approach in teaching English vocabulary to learners with dyslexia in an inclusive classroom, and (2) what challenges does the teacher encounter in implementing it? Theoretically, the study enriches the literature by foregrounding the teacher's perspective; practically, it offers a reference for teachers, schools, and policymakers in designing more adaptive instruction.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design. Qualitative research explores the meanings individuals assign to a social or human phenomenon, and narrative inquiry collects and interprets participants' stories of experience to understand how they construct meaning (Creswell, 2014). The design suited the aim of the study, which was to understand not only what the teacher did but also how she interpreted her experiences, responded to challenges, and reflected on her practice. The researcher observed teaching in its natural setting without manipulating variables or introducing any intervention, and acted as the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation.

The study was conducted at an inclusive school run by a foundation in Padang Bulan, Medan, North Sumatra. The school has three classrooms for kindergarten, elementary, and junior high levels, and regular students learn together with students

with special needs, including students with hearing impairment and dyslexia. The participant was one English teacher selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: teaching English in an inclusive classroom, having experience teaching students with dyslexia, and having used or adapted multisensory strategies. She was a female teacher with about three years of experience and had never attended formal training on the Multisensory Approach. A Grade 6 student with a hearing impairment accompanied by dyslexia was present as part of the classroom context; the student was observed but neither interviewed nor treated as a participant.

The school building resembles a residential house in a quiet alley, and classes are small, which allows the teacher to give close attention to each student. Adjacent to the building is a playground that the teacher sometimes uses as a learning space for movement-based activities. The elementary classroom is equipped with a whiteboard, desks and chairs, alphabet posters, educational pictures, and several teaching aids, and is arranged so that the teacher can move freely to give demonstrations and individual assistance. This setting was considered suitable because it represents an authentic context in which a teacher adapts instruction for students with diverse learning needs.

After a research permit was submitted on 31 July 2026, data were collected through four techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, two classroom observations (3 and 5 August 2026), discussions with the teacher to clarify and deepen information, and documentation. Documents included lesson modules, illustrated worksheets, assessment rubrics, photographs of learning activities, and students' progress notes. Interviews and discussions were transcribed, and observation notes and documents were compiled systematically.

The interview guide was designed flexibly to elicit rich narratives and covered four areas: the teacher's perceptions of the Multisensory Approach, her experiences of teaching students with dyslexia, the challenges she encountered, and the strategies she used to overcome them. Classroom observations focused on classroom interaction, instructional activities, the use of media, and the overall learning environment, and served as supporting evidence for the interview data. Discussions with the teacher took place throughout the research process and were used to clarify, verify, and deepen what had been obtained from interviews and observations, while documents complemented and verified these data. Together, the four techniques allowed information to be compared across sources.

The data were analyzed using the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Trustworthiness followed Shenton (2004). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, observations, discussions, and documents, and through member checking of transcripts and preliminary interpretations with the participant. Transferability was supported by rich description of the setting and

activities, dependability by an audit trail of procedures and analytical decisions, and confirmability by reflexivity and by grounding interpretations in the data. The scope of the study is limited to one teacher in one school and to her perceived experience; it does not measure students' learning outcomes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interviews, observations, discussions, and documentation produced four themes, summarized in Table 1. The themes are interrelated: the teacher's belief in the importance of the approach underlies her classroom practices, those practices meet several challenges, and despite the challenges she perceives positive effects on students' learning.

Table 1. Themes, main codes, and illustrative evidence

Theme	Main codes	Illustrative evidence
1. Perceived importance of the Multisensory Approach	Using concrete media; believing multisensory learning is essential; combining sensory modalities	Interview: "It is very important." Observation: flashcards, pictures, real objects, videos, and gestures combined
2. Implementation of the Multisensory Approach	Writing the topic on the board; audiovisual media; real objects; tactile contact; individual materials	Interview: "They need to be touched." Documentation: modules, worksheets, individual progress notes
3. Challenges in implementation	Communication barriers; differing abilities; shortage of teachers; limited time	Interview: "I myself find it a little difficult to keep up." Observation: repeated instructions and individual assistance
4. Perceived effectiveness	Keeping students engaged; creative activities; active participation; positive progress	Interview: "So that they don't get bored." Observation: enthusiastic participation in videos, games, and gestures

Before the themes are presented, the learning context observed in the classroom needs to be described, because it shaped how the approach was used. The class consisted of regular students and students with special needs, including students with hearing impairment and dyslexia, so the teacher could not rely on speech alone. She greeted students verbally and reinforced the greeting with sign language, explained the learning objectives to everyone, and gave equal opportunities for participation to regular students and students with special needs. The lesson ended with a short reflection, a closing prayer, and a farewell greeting. The observations therefore showed an environment that supported flexible, multisensory teaching: varied media, a small class, a playground for movement, and a teacher who moved around the room to assist individual students.

The first theme shows that the teacher regarded the Multisensory Approach as a primary need rather than an optional technique. She explained that students with dyslexia "are not like typical children", so verbal explanation alone is insufficient: "If

we say this is a glass, there has to be an actual object." Asked directly, she described the approach as "very important" in the language field of special schools. This belief was confirmed by observation, in which she introduced new vocabulary using pictures, flashcards, YouTube videos, real objects, and sign language, and by documentation showing modules and illustrated worksheets designed around visual media. The teacher's perception corresponds with Birsh and Carreker's (2018) explanation that learners with dyslexia learn language more readily when information comes through combined visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile channels. It also fits the view of inclusion as the removal of barriers (Ainscow et al., 2006): the teacher treated verbal-only instruction as a barrier and offered alternative forms of representation. Real objects served a communicative purpose as well: when students did not yet understand sign language or verbal instructions, a concrete object helped them connect a word with its meaning. Notably, she had never received specific training on the approach and developed her understanding through experience, reflection, and discussion with senior colleagues. This supports Pajares's (1992) argument that teachers' beliefs are shaped by experience and in turn guide practice. The finding is comparable with Kurnia (2025), who reported positive teacher perceptions of multisensory techniques in reading, and extends it to vocabulary instruction.

The second theme concerns implementation. Each lesson began with the teacher writing the topic on the whiteboard "to help them focus", followed by materials related to the target vocabulary, for example numbers. She stated, "I focus more on audiovisual materials for them," and still used actual objects when naming an item. Tactile and kinesthetic elements were evident when she approached a student directly: "They need to be touched. They cannot be called." During the first observation she paired each spoken English word with its sign, asked students to move both hands while saying *hello*, and used songs, clapping, and short games when concentration declined. The second observation involved evaluating vocabulary mastery, re-explaining with visual media and demonstration for students who still struggled, and giving exercises. The practices also varied between students: "Each child has their own individual learning materials." Documentation showed that the teacher also evaluated each student individually in reading skills, letter recognition, vocabulary comprehension, and communication, so assessment followed the same logic of adaptation as instruction. Table 2 maps the observed activities onto the four modalities. These practices integrate the four modalities of the VAKT principle (Fernald, 1943), yet the teacher selected and combined them according to students' responses rather than following a fixed procedure. Implementation was therefore a form of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014). The gradual movement from attention-building to concrete media to individual support can also be read as scaffolding within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher did not run a formal Orton–Gillingham program, but some of its principles, namely

linking symbols, sounds, and meanings through several senses, were reflected in her practice (Ritchey & Goeke, 2006).

Table 2. Multisensory modalities and activities observed in the classroom

Modality	Activities observed in the classroom
Visual	Topic written on the whiteboard; printed pictures; flashcards; instructional videos from YouTube; colorful illustrations; sign language demonstrations
Auditory	Spoken English words and teacher explanations; repetition of vocabulary; pronunciation imitation; songs
Kinesthetic	Moving both hands while saying hello; educational games; clapping; movement activities, including use of the playground
Tactile	Handling real objects (for example a glass or a stone); light touch to attract attention; hands-on demonstration

The third theme reveals that the main obstacles were not located in the method itself. The teacher said, "the main challenge is that we don't understand their language very well," because some students had not mastered sign language, so communication relied on objects, demonstrations, and touch. Students' abilities also differed widely, which required her to move from one student to another, and the shortage of teachers aggravated this: "I myself find it a little difficult to keep up." Time was also tight: "it is just barely enough," so she sometimes continued a lesson into break time. She added that learning media at the school were relatively complete, so the main obstacle was the need for individual assistance. Observation confirmed repeated instructions, individual help, and the use of praise, games, and simple physical activity to regain attention. This pattern indicates that challenges in inclusive learning are related more to the support system than to learners' abilities, which agrees with studies reporting limited resources, insufficient materials, and low teacher preparation in Indonesian inclusive schools (Sunardi et al., 2011; Suharwoto, 2019). Time limitations were also reported by Puspitaloka et al. (2020). The absence of formal training in this study is likewise in line with Fernando's (2023) observation that limited professional training constrains teachers of students with dyslexia. Her strategies of patience, instructional adjustment, and cooperation with the school and parents show commitment, but sustained implementation seems to require additional teaching staff and professional training.

The way the teacher coped with these obstacles deserves separate attention. Without formal training, she relied on self-directed learning: observing students' responses, reflecting on what captured their attention, and discussing strategies with more experienced colleagues. She also treated parents as partners, since consistent support at school and at home helps students engage more actively. This reflective, experience-based professional learning shows that teacher competence in inclusive education develops not only through formal education but also through practice in the field. At the same time, it exposes the fragility of relying on individual initiative alone. A teacher who must discover multisensory strategies independently, while

managing a heterogeneous class without an assistant, carries a heavy burden, and the quality of inclusion then depends on personal commitment rather than on institutional support.

The fourth theme shows that the teacher perceived the approach as effective in supporting attention, motivation, and understanding of vocabulary. She used audiovisual materials "so that they don't get bored" and insisted, "We have to be creative. If they get bored, we sing, clap our hands, and play games." Observation showed students attending to videos and pictures, imitating pronunciation, using sign language, and joining educational games, and documentation showed improvement in recognizing and using the vocabulary taught. Her judgment rested not only on learning outcomes but also on behavioral change, as students became more active, confident, and motivated. Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) offers an explanation: pairing verbal input with images and objects creates multiple, interconnected memory traces that make words easier to recall. The finding is consistent with Raihana and Salmiah (2026) and Subramaniam and Kunasegran (2024), who found multisensory teaching beneficial for vocabulary and literacy, although those studies measured student outcomes whereas the present study documents the teacher's perception. Effectiveness here also depended on individual adjustment of media, activities, and targets, so it was linked to learner-centered teaching rather than to media use alone.

Reading the four themes together, the teacher's positive perception (Theme 1) became the basis for a wide range of practices that integrated visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities (Theme 2). These practices did not remove the difficulties of teaching a heterogeneous class, including communication limits, differences in ability, scarce time, and few staff (Theme 3), yet the teacher continued to see clear benefits for students' motivation, engagement, and vocabulary understanding (Theme 4). The relationship is thus cyclical rather than linear: positive perceptions encourage practice, practice produces observable student responses, and those responses reinforce the perception, even in the presence of obstacles. This pattern also shows that, in this classroom, inclusion went beyond placing students with different abilities in one room; it was reflected in the teacher's continuous effort to adapt the learning process to students' individual needs (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Several implications follow. For teachers, the findings show that multisensory teaching does not depend on a fixed program: concrete objects, pictures, songs, gestures, and games can be combined flexibly according to students' responses. For schools, the shortage of staff and the lack of formal training indicate that support should include professional development on dyslexia and multisensory instruction as well as additional personnel who can provide individual assistance. For parents, simple and enjoyable multisensory activities at home can extend what students learn at school, and for policymakers the results underline that inclusive policies need to be accompanied by concrete support for classroom teachers (Sunardi et al., 2011; Suharwoto, 2019).

Alternative explanations should also be considered. Students' enthusiasm during lessons may have been influenced by factors other than the multisensory design itself, such as the novelty of videos and games, the small class size, the close personal attention of the teacher, or the teacher's own enthusiasm and commitment. Because the data come from the teacher's account, supported by two observations and documents, they show how the approach was understood and used rather than which component contributed most to students' learning. Likewise, the teacher's positive stance may partly reflect her investment in the approach she had built through experience. Triangulation and member checking reduce, but cannot eliminate, this possibility.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the approach is relevant for vocabulary teaching in inclusive classrooms, provided that teachers understand learners' characteristics, differentiate instruction, and receive adequate support from schools, families, and policymakers. Two limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a single teacher in one school, so the findings are not generalizable and should be read as a contextual account. In addition, effectiveness is the teacher's perceived effectiveness, supported by observation and documentation, and was not measured quantitatively. Future studies could involve more participants and settings or use mixed methods to examine students' vocabulary development.

CONCLUSION

The teacher perceived the Multisensory Approach as a necessary and beneficial way to teach English vocabulary to learners with dyslexia in an inclusive classroom. Her positive perception grew from direct experience with students' needs rather than formal training, and it shaped flexible, differentiated practice that combined visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile activities. The main difficulties came from communication barriers, diverse abilities, limited time, and insufficient teaching staff, not from the approach itself. This indicates that multisensory teaching is likely to be sustained only when teachers are supported through professional training, adequate staffing, and cooperation among schools and parents. Teachers are therefore encouraged to keep adapting multisensory activities to individual learners, schools to provide training, materials, and additional staff, and parents to reinforce vocabulary learning through simple, enjoyable activities at home.

Because this study involved one teacher and relied on perceived effectiveness, further research with more participants and different educational contexts is needed. Mixed-method studies that also measure students' vocabulary development would complement the present findings and show more precisely how teachers' perceptions relate to learning outcomes.

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