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From Concrete Objects to English Words: Rethinking Vocabulary Learning for Young Learners with Intellectual Disability

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ABSTRACT

English vocabulary learning can be challenging for young learners with intellectual disability, particularly when new words are presented without meaningful connections to familiar experiences. This qualitative case study explored how concrete objects were used to support English vocabulary learning among Grade II students with intellectual disability at SLB Negeri Semarang. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation and were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that concrete objects provided a meaningful starting point for vocabulary learning by enabling students to recognize familiar objects before connecting them with corresponding English words. Students demonstrated their learning through various verbal and non-verbal responses, including looking, pointing, touching, selecting objects, imitating pronunciation, and attempting to produce target words. Teacher scaffolding through modeling, repetition, gestures, prompting, and feedback further supported the connection between concrete objects and English vocabulary. The findings suggest that vocabulary learning for young learners with intellectual disability should be understood as a gradual and multimodal process rather than solely through immediate verbal production. Concrete objects can function as learning anchors that help learners move from concrete experience toward English word recognition and emerging production.

Keywords: concrete objects, English vocabulary, intellectual disability, young learners, special education

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INTRODUCTION

English vocabulary is an important foundation for language learning because it enables learners to understand and communicate meaning. For young learners, vocabulary is often introduced through familiar objects, pictures, actions, and everyday experiences (Amalia et al., 2026; Firdausy et al., 2025; Listianingsih et al., 2023; Maldy et al., 2025). However, learning English vocabulary can be more challenging for learners with intellectual disability because they may require greater support in understanding abstract concepts, remembering new information, and transferring newly learned words to different contexts (Abed, 2020; Acar, 2021; Ahram, 2021).

For young learners with intellectual disability, conventional vocabulary instruction that relies heavily on verbal explanation, memorization, or abstract representations may not always provide sufficient support for understanding the meaning of new English words (Nurhartanti & Ambarini, 2024; Setyaningrum et al., 2026; Syafitri et al., 2026). Learning becomes more accessible when students can connect new linguistic information with something concrete and familiar. Concrete objects provide a direct physical representation of meaning because students can see, touch, hold, and interact with the objects while being introduced to their English names (Aktan, 2020; Al-Hassan, 2024; Albusays, 2021).

The use of concrete objects is therefore particularly relevant in special education. Rather than presenting vocabulary as isolated words, teachers can establish a connection between students' existing knowledge of familiar objects and new English linguistic forms. For example, a student who already recognizes a book as a familiar object can be introduced to the English word *book* while directly interacting with the object. This process may help students move from concrete recognition toward word recognition, imitation, and gradual production (Almalki, 2021; Almalky, 2023; Almufareh, 2023).

However, vocabulary learning among learners with intellectual disability is often discussed in terms of whether students can produce the target words correctly. Such an approach may overlook other forms of learning and participation, including pointing, selecting an object, looking at the target object, touching it, responding to teacher prompts, and imitating pronunciation. These responses may represent important stages in the development of vocabulary understanding, particularly when students are still developing their ability to produce English words independently (Alnahdi, 2021; Alsolami, 2022; Anderson, 2023).

Therefore, vocabulary learning for young learners with intellectual disability needs to be reconsidered as a gradual and multimodal process rather than as simple word memorization. The connection between concrete experience and linguistic representation may provide an important pathway for making English vocabulary more meaningful and accessible (Ambarini, Sumardiyani, et al., 2025; Azka & Ambarini, 2023; Laveresa et al., 2024). In this process, teacher scaffolding through repetition, modeling, gestures, prompting, and feedback may also play an important role in supporting students' vocabulary development (Asbury, 2021; Averett, 2021).

In the context of special education in Indonesia, particularly at SLB Negeri Semarang, there is a need to understand how concrete objects are used in actual English vocabulary learning and how young learners with intellectual disability respond to this approach. Investigating classroom interactions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary learning beyond students' verbal performance alone (Abdullaeva, 2025; Abraham, 2024; Ajabshir, 2025).



Based on this context, this study aims to explore how concrete objects are used to support English vocabulary learning among young learners with intellectual disability in Grade II at SLB Negeri Semarang. Specifically, the study examines (1) how students move from recognizing concrete objects to recognizing their corresponding English words, (2) how students demonstrate their vocabulary learning through verbal and non-verbal responses, and (3) how teacher scaffolding supports the transition from concrete objects to English words.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how concrete objects support English vocabulary learning among young learners with intellectual disability. The study was conducted at SLB Negeri Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, focusing on Grade II students. Based on the school data for the 2024/2025 academic year, Grade II consisted of 54 students across different disability categories. Participants for this study were selected purposively according to their participation in English vocabulary learning activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations focused on how teachers introduced concrete objects and connected them with English vocabulary, as well as students' responses through pointing, touching, recognizing, repeating, pronouncing, or using the target words. Interviews with the teacher explored the use of concrete objects, students' responses, and challenges in teaching English vocabulary. Relevant teaching materials and students' learning activities were also used as supporting documentation.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically. Observation notes, interview data, and documentation were reviewed, coded, and grouped into categories based on recurring patterns. The analysis focused on the process of moving from concrete object recognition to English word recognition and production, including students' engagement, vocabulary responses, and teacher scaffolding. Findings from different data sources were compared to strengthen the interpretation.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of observations, interviews, and documentation, as well as member checking with the teacher. Ethical procedures included obtaining permission from the school and informed consent from parents or guardians. Participants' identities were kept confidential and replaced with codes or pseudonyms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Concrete Objects to English Word Recognition

The classroom observations indicated that concrete objects were used as an initial point for introducing English vocabulary to Grade II students. The teacher presented familiar objects before introducing their English labels. This sequence allowed students to establish the meaning of the object before being exposed to the corresponding English word.

Table 1. Students' Responses during Concrete-Object-Based Vocabulary Learning

Learning Stage	Teacher Activity	Students' Observable Responses	Emerging Meaning
1. Object presentation	The teacher showed a familiar object.	Students looked at, touched, pointed to, or reached for the object.	Object recognition
2. Meaning confirmation	The teacher asked students to identify the object.	Students responded verbally or through gestures.	Meaning association
3. English labeling	The teacher introduced the English word.	Students listened and looked at the object.	Word-object connection
4. Repetition	The teacher repeated and modeled the word.	Students imitated or attempted to pronounce the word.	Emerging word production
5. Recall	The teacher presented the object again and asked for the English word.	Some students attempted to recall or repeat the word.	Vocabulary recognition/recall

Source: Classroom observation data, [2026].

The table illustrates that vocabulary learning occurred through several interconnected stages rather than through direct memorization. Students first interacted with a concrete referent and subsequently encountered its English linguistic label. This sequence provided a meaningful context for the new vocabulary.

The findings demonstrate that Grade II students transition from concrete objects to English word recognition through a structured, multi-sensory process rather than rote memorization (Ambarini, Setyaji, & Zahraini, 2018; Ambarini, Setyaji, et al., 2019; Suciati & Ambarini, 2018). By utilizing a five-stage sequence, spanning from physical object presentation to final vocabulary recall, the teacher successfully anchors new linguistic labels to familiar real-world referents (Adi & Ambarini, 2025; Ambarini et al., 2024; Ambarini, Yuliasri, et al., 2025; Sumardiyani & Ambarini, 2025). This progressive workflow allows young learners to firmly establish conceptual meaning before being introduced to abstract foreign words. Consequently, this method creates a meaningful context that strengthens word-object connections, enhances engagement through physical interaction, and effectively fosters early stages of active vocabulary production.

An observation extract can further illustrate this process:

From Concrete Objects to English Words: Rethinking Vocabulary Learning for Young Learners with Intellectual Disability
(Ambarini.)

Observation Extract 1

Teacher: [shows the object] “What is this?”

Student: [points to/touches the object or gives the Indonesian word]

Teacher: “Yes. This is a book. Book.”

Student: “Book.” / [imitates the teacher]

Field note: The student looked at the object while repeating the target word.

Source: Classroom observation, [date].

This interaction demonstrates how the physical object served as a bridge between an already familiar concept and a new English word. The student did not have to construct the meaning of the word from an abstract linguistic explanation because the referent was physically present.

The observation extract confirms that physical objects serve as an immediate cognitive bridge, bypassing the need for abstract linguistic explanations for Grade II learners. When the teacher presents the item, the student's physical interaction, such as pointing or touching, demonstrates that conceptual meaning is already activated before the English label is introduced (Ambarini, Indrariansi, et al., 2018; Ambarini, Utami, Zahraini, & Hidayat, 2026; Ambarini, Utami, Zahraini, Ratimiasih, et al., 2026). By looking directly at the object while repeating “book,” the learner forms an immediate, sensory-driven word-object connection (Ambarini, Indrariansi, et al., 2019; Zahraini, Utami, & Ambarini, 2025; Zahraini, Utami, Ambarini, et al., 2025). This micro-interaction highlights how anchoring vocabulary in real-time, concrete reference minimizes cognitive load and allows young students to map new foreign words directly onto their existing worldview.

Connecting Familiar Objects with English Words

A recurring pattern in the observation data was the teacher's use of repetition and direct association between the object and its English label. The English word was introduced while the corresponding object remained visible to the students.

Table 2. Emerging Themes from Classroom Observations

Theme	Indicators Found in the Data	Interpretation
Concrete recognition	Looking, pointing, touching, taking the object	Students established meaning through physical objects
Word-object association	Looking at the object while hearing the English word	Students connected the linguistic label with its referent
Verbal imitation	Repeating the teacher's pronunciation	Students began producing the target vocabulary
Non-verbal participation	Pointing, selecting, or giving the correct object	Students demonstrated understanding without necessarily speaking
Teacher scaffolding	Repetition, modeling, gestures, and prompts	Teacher support facilitated vocabulary learning

Source: Observation data, [2026].

The findings suggest that understanding should not be equated exclusively with immediate verbal production. A student who correctly points to or selects the target object may already demonstrate an

emerging understanding of the vocabulary even when the student is not yet able to pronounce the English word independently.

An example of a data extract may be presented as follows:

Observation Extract 2

The teacher placed several familiar objects in front of the students and introduced the English names one by one. When the target object was mentioned, Student [P1] pointed to the object and looked at the teacher. After the teacher repeated the word several times, the student attempted to imitate the pronunciation.

Source: Classroom observation, [2026].

This finding is important in the context of intellectual disability because vocabulary learning may occur through gradual stages. Recognition, comprehension, imitation, and independent production should therefore be considered as interconnected stages rather than as a single outcome.

The findings reveal that vocabulary acquisition among young learners, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, progress through non-linear receptive and productive stages. Table 2 and Extract 2 highlight that language comprehension manifests physically through non-verbal participation, such as pointing or selecting objects, long before oral fluency is achieved (Suciati & Ambarini, 2018; Utami et al., 2025). By maintaining the visibility of concrete objects during instruction, the teacher creates a stable visual anchor that enables students to form immediate word-object associations (Alfianto & Ambarini, 2020; Ambarini, 2012, 2017a). This confirms that early comprehension should not be measured solely by immediate verbal output, as non-verbal gestures serve as a valid marker of internalizing the foreign language.

Furthermore, the data underscores the vital role of teacher scaffolding in transitioning students from passive recognition to active imitation (Ambarini, 2017b; Ambarini et al., 2021a; Ambarini, Faridi, et al., 2023). Continuous repetition, behavioral modeling, and strategic prompts establish a supportive learning framework that lowers cognitive barriers (Ambarini, Setyaji, & Suneki, 2018; Ambarini, Setyaji, et al., 2019; Ambarini et al., 2021b; Ambarini & Sumardiyani, 2018). As demonstrated by Student [P1], vocabulary learning is a gradual process where physical recognition smoothly paves the way for emerging verbal imitation. Consequently, educators must treat recognition, comprehension, and production as deeply interconnected developmental stages rather than an all-or-nothing learning outcome.

Students' Multimodal Responses

The observations showed that students responded to vocabulary instruction in different ways. Some responses were verbal, while others were demonstrated through gestures, object manipulation, attention, or physical selection of the target object.

Table 3. Forms of Students' Vocabulary Responses

Response Type	Example of Observable Behavior	Possible Interpretation
Visual	Looking at the target object	Attention and recognition
Gestural	Pointing at the object	Object identification
Tactile	Touching or holding the object	Physical engagement



Selection	Choosing the correct object	Vocabulary comprehension
Imitation	Repeating the teacher's word	Emerging verbal production
Independent production	Saying the English word without immediate modeling	Emerging vocabulary recall

Source: Classroom observation data, [2026].

These findings indicate that students' participation was multimodal. In other words, vocabulary knowledge was not expressed only through speech. Students could demonstrate engagement and understanding through actions involving the concrete objects. This is particularly relevant for young learners with intellectual disability because individual students may demonstrate different levels and forms of language production. Consequently, classroom assessment should consider observable responses that occur before independent verbal production.

The results compiled in Table 3 prove that early childhood vocabulary knowledge among students with intellectual disabilities manifests as a multimodal phenomenon rather than a purely verbal one (Ambarini, Setyaji, & Zahraini, 2018; Ambarini, Hidayat, et al., 2025; Artaninda et al., 2025; Dwi et al., 2024). Instead of relying solely on vocalization, these learners effectively express engagement and comprehension through various non-vocal channels. Sensory behaviors, including visual tracking, physical touching, and gestural selection, serve as observable evidence that a student is actively decoding language (Hasanah et al., 2023; Santoso et al., 2025; Stevani & Ambarini, 2023; Utami et al., 2022). When a student successfully identifies and manipulates a concrete object upon hearing its English name, they demonstrate an intact word-object connection. This highlights that linguistic comprehension develops through multi-sensory avenues before the mechanical ability to speak emerges.

Consequently, these insights present crucial shifts for inclusive classroom assessments, which must evolve beyond measuring independent oral production alone. Because individual students with intellectual disabilities exhibit highly varied timelines for spoken output (Ma & Ambarini, 2023; Nabila & Ambarini, 2024; Prayogo et al., 2021), standard verbal tests risk mischaracterizing their actual cognitive progress. Teachers should instead document pre-verbal milestones, such as physical selection and imitation, as valid metrics of vocabulary acquisition (Ka & Ambarini, 2022; Putri & Ambarini, 2025; Rahmawati & Ambarini, 2023). Broadening evaluation frameworks to credit gestural and tactile responses provides a fairer, more accurate portrait of language development, ensuring that emerging vocabulary skills in diverse learners are recognized and supported.

Teacher Scaffolding in Vocabulary Learning

The teacher's role was also evident in helping students move from object recognition toward English word recognition. The teacher provided repeated models, gestures, questions, and pronunciation prompts during the activities.

Table 4. Teacher Scaffolding Observed during Vocabulary Activities

Scaffolding Strategy	Classroom Practice	Function
Modeling	Teacher pronounced the target word	Provided a verbal model
Repetition	Teacher repeated the word several times	Reinforced word-object association
Gestures	Teacher pointed to or held the object	Supported meaning
Prompting	Teacher asked students to identify or repeat the word	Encouraged active response
Positive feedback	Teacher confirmed students' responses	Reinforced participation

Source: Classroom observation data, [2026].

An observation extract can be used to show the interaction:

Observation Extract 3

Teacher: "This is a [target word]. Say it."

Student: [attempts to repeat the word]

Teacher: "Yes, good. [Target word]."

Field note: The teacher repeated the target word while pointing to the object.

Source: Classroom observation, [2026].

The extract illustrates that concrete objects were most meaningful when accompanied by teacher scaffolding. The object provided the physical referent, while the teacher provided linguistic input and interactional support. Therefore, the learning process was not simply a matter of showing objects but involved a combination of concrete experience, language input, repetition, and guided participation.

The observation data and Table 4 demonstrate that concrete objects do not teach vocabulary in isolation; rather, their educational value is unlocked through strategic teacher scaffolding (Ambarini, Sumardiyani, Utami, & Ayu, 2026; Utami et al., 2026). While physical items provide the necessary real-world reference, the teacher's active mediation, combining modeling, continuous repetition, and dynamic gestures, serves as the engine for linguistic growth (Ambarini et al., 2022; Ambarini, Yulianti, et al., 2023). This interactional support bridges the gap between passive object recognition and active English word recall. As shown in Extract 3, a concrete experience becomes deeply meaningful only when embedded within an intentional cycle of structured input, patient prompting, and reinforcing positive feedback.

Furthermore, this pedagogical dynamic confirms that early vocabulary acquisition is inherently interactive and relies heavily on guided participation (Amellia et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2024; Hamidah et al., 2022). The learning loop is not completed by simply displaying an item, but by sustaining a structured dialogue where the teacher continuously models correct pronunciation while physically anchoring the word. This layered assistance lowers cognitive strain for young learners, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, by providing predictable verbal and physical guideposts (Hidayat et al., 2022; Kumala et al., 2021; Kusumaningrum et al., 2022). Ultimately, successful vocabulary instruction relies on this dual framework: the concrete object fixes the conceptual meaning, while systematic scaffolding safely guides the student toward independent production.

From Concrete Objects to English Words: An Emerging Learning Pattern

Based on the observation data, the vocabulary learning process can be summarized into the following sequence:

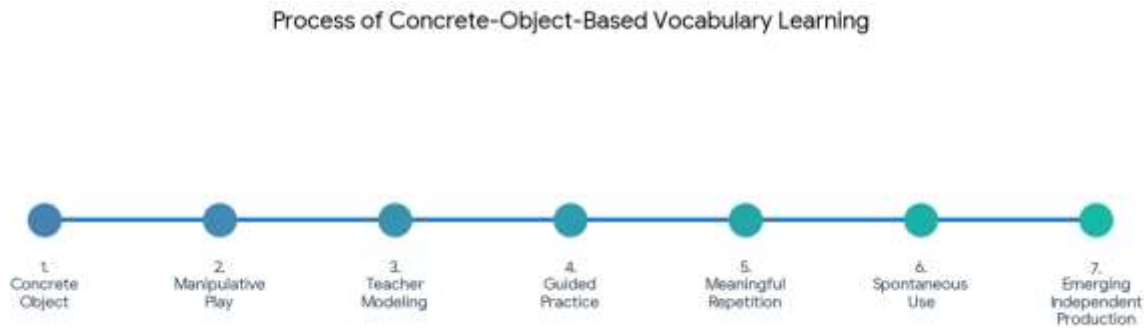


Figure 1. The Process of Concrete-Object-Based Vocabulary Learning

Source: Researcher's analysis of classroom observation data.

The sequence suggests that concrete objects can function as a learning bridge between students' existing knowledge and new English vocabulary. The process begins with something physically meaningful to the learner and gradually moves toward linguistic representation (Mustikawati et al., 2022; Mutiara et al., 2022; Prashanty et al., 2021). This finding supports the argument that vocabulary learning for young learners with intellectual disability should not be understood solely as memorization of word forms. Instead, vocabulary development may involve multiple stages of recognition, association, participation, and production.

Overall, the findings indicate that the transition from concrete objects to English words provides a meaningful framework for understanding vocabulary learning in a special education classroom. Concrete objects give students an accessible point of reference, while teacher scaffolding helps transform that physical experience into an emerging understanding of English vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that concrete objects can provide a meaningful bridge between familiar experiences and English vocabulary learning for young learners with intellectual disability (Ramayani et al., 2022; Sari & Ambarini, 2021; Utami et al., 2024). The findings indicate that vocabulary learning can develop gradually from recognizing and interacting with concrete objects, associating objects with their English labels, responding through verbal and non-verbal forms, and eventually attempting to produce or recall the target English words.

The study also highlights the important role of teacher scaffolding in this process. Repetition, modeling, gestures, prompting, and positive feedback help students establish the connection between physical objects and English words (Vianti et al., 2022; Wahyudi et al., 2022; Yulianti et al., 2023).



Therefore, vocabulary learning for young learners with intellectual disability should not be viewed only through immediate verbal production, but also through students' attention, recognition, gestures, object selection, imitation, and other forms of participation.

Overall, the movement from concrete objects to English words offers a more accessible and meaningful approach to vocabulary learning in special education contexts. Concrete objects function not merely as teaching aids but as learning anchors that support students in moving from concrete experience toward linguistic understanding.

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