

READING ABILITY OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AT SLB AC DHARMA WANITA SIDOARJO

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Submit, 31-07-2026

Accepted, 29-08-2026

Publish, 31-08-2026

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study described the English reading ability of tenth-grade students with moderate and severe intellectual disability at SLB AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo and the strategies their English teacher uses to teach them. Seven students, four classified with moderate and three with severe intellectual disability, took part together with the English teacher responsible for their instruction. Data came from a teacher questionnaire, a structured interview, and documentation combined with a field verification visit, analysed through the interactive model of data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. Findings showed a gap between the two categories that Frith's stage model of reading acquisition describes as a difference in strategy rather than speed: students with moderate intellectual disability were transitioning from the alphabetic stage toward the orthographic stage, producing whole words such as *gud moni* for good morning but consistently dropping final consonants, while students with severe intellectual disability remained at the logographic stage, with only a narrow, copy-based foothold in the alphabetic stage. To teach reading, the English teacher combined four strategies, adapted English instruction, multisensory instruction,

the Visual Auditory Kinesthetic Tactile (VAKT) method, drilling and repetition, and scaffolding with visual support, adjusting the intensity of support to each category rather than applying one procedure to the whole class. The study concludes that reading instruction in special education English classes needs a level-by-level account of reading ability to calibrate support to each student's severity category.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, Reading ability, Teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a multidimensional cognitive process in which a reader combines decoding skill with language comprehension to construct meaning from print (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Reading proficiency is a basic requirement for academic progress and for active participation in school learning, and researchers who describe reading instruction in special education settings treat this proficiency as inseparable from a student's opportunity to learn it in the first place (Dessementet et al., 2022). For students with intellectual disability, this opportunity depends on instruction pitched inside what Vygotsky (1978) calls the zone of proximal development, the gap between what a learner can do alone and what a learner can do with structured support. Because reading development in this population already contends with constrained working memory, limited phonological awareness, and slower information processing (Nilsson et al., 2025), the size and position of this zone shift with severity level. A single lesson plan pitched to the midpoint between a moderate and a severe zone of proximal development teaches inside neither.

The same literature that documents these constraints also tends to treat intellectual disability as a single category, which blurs the differences in independence, support needs, and literacy outcomes between students with moderate and students with severe intellectual disability. A description written for one severity level gives limited guidance to a teacher whose class enrolls both, so special education teachers need an account of reading ability at each level, mapped onto instruction that respects each level's own zone of proximal development. This is the gap between what special education English instruction is expected to deliver and what the descriptive literature currently supports: expectation calls for differentiated, level-specific guidance, while the available research still measures whether a technique works rather than describing how reading ability itself differs across severity levels.

SLB AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo brings this gap into a practical classroom problem. Within its Type AC unit, the tenth-grade class enrolls four students with moderate intellectual disability and three with severe intellectual disability under one English teacher. A single, undifferentiated account of the class's reading ability hides the differences in reading level and instructional need

that decide whether a lesson reaches a particular student, and a classroom in which two severity categories share one teacher and one lesson plan is the setting where a level-by-level account of reading ability matters most.

This study therefore describes the reading ability of students with moderate and severe intellectual disability in the tenth grade of SLB AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo and the strategies the English teacher uses to teach them. Without a descriptive benchmark of how reading ability differs between the two groups in a shared classroom, any attempt to apply targeted strategies such as the VAKT method or multisensory drilling rests on guesswork, aimed at a zone of proximal development that has never been mapped.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Ability

Frith (1985, 1986) describes reading acquisition as a progression through three stages that differ in strategy rather than speed or accuracy: the logographic stage, in which a reader treats a written word as a single visual pattern recognised by shape or setting rather than by its letters; the alphabetic stage, in which a reader learns that letters stand for sounds and can sound out an unfamiliar word slowly and effortfully; and the orthographic stage, in which a reader recognises words and larger letter patterns instantly, freeing attention for meaning. Ratz and Lenhard (2013) applied this model directly to 1,629 German students with intellectual disability aged 6 to 21 and found that, within the subgroup with severe to profound disability, most had either not yet begun to read or remained at the logographic stage, with only a small fraction reaching the alphabetic stage and fewer still the orthographic stage. This distribution is the empirical reason a stage model, rather than a single pass-or-fail measure, is needed to describe reading ability in this population.

Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, classified by severity from mild through moderate and severe to profound (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Schalock et al., 2021). Current diagnostic practice gives more weight to how far cognitive limitations restrict a person's functional independence and to the level of support the person needs in daily life than to standardised IQ scores alone (Schalock et al., 2021). Students in the moderate range need structured programming built around functional routines rather than abstract academic content, while students in the severe range need

extensive and continuous support across almost all areas of daily functioning (Schalock et al., 2021).

Teaching Strategies for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Tomlinson's (2001, 2014) model of differentiated instruction explains why reading instruction for this population takes several distinct forms rather than one fixed method: a teacher differentiates content, process, product, or environment in response to a student's readiness, and a classroom that enrolls both moderate and severe intellectual disability needs more than one of these levers. Underneath this framework run two further threads: Fernald's (1988) multisensory principle, which holds that a written form is retained more reliably when several sensory channels encode it together, and Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development.

Adapting English instruction means simplifying vocabulary and sentence length, moving at a slower pace with frequent structured review, and prioritising communicative ability over knowledge of language rules (Beta & Upa, 2025). Multisensory instruction engages two or more sensory channels at once, giving students whose phonological memory and attention regulation are relatively weak a compensatory route into written forms through concrete sensory association (Cuajao et al., 2023; Suwarsih & Pujaningsih, 2025). The Visual Auditory Kinesthetic Tactile (VAKT) method is a structured multisensory technique, developed by Fernald (1988) and later refined within the Orton-Gillingham tradition, in which a student sees, hears, traces, and says a target word so that the four modalities reinforce one another (Cuajao et al., 2023; Jayanti & Pratisti, 2023). Drilling and repetition rest on the finding that automatic word recognition comes from frequent, spaced practice rather than single exposure (Dessemontet et al., 2022; Nilsson et al., 2025). Scaffolding gives a student temporary, adjustable support to work slightly beyond independent capacity, withdrawn as competence consolidates (Vygotsky, 1978), and visual support complements it by leaving a permanent external cue that lowers working memory demand, anchoring written language in the visual recognition that this population tends to hold onto more reliably than phonological processing (Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2025; Nilsson et al., 2025).

Related studies support this picture from different angles. Wadihah and Fauzi (2021) found that image-based media helped students with intellectual disability recognise words and interpret simple Indonesian texts, though most still needed the teacher's help with pronunciation and meaning. Pradipta et al. (2024) found that an interactive website-based platform helped students with intellectual disability recognise English words and build simple sentences, particularly with

visual and audio support, though students still needed teacher guidance to link vocabulary to meaning. Both studies confirm that students with intellectual disability read better with visual, repeated, teacher-guided instruction, but neither describes how reading ability itself differs between severity categories inside one classroom, and neither addresses English reading at the secondary level in a class enrolling both moderate and severe students. This is the gap the present study addresses, describing reading ability through Frith's three stages and reading strategy through Tomlinson's differentiated instruction, in a single tenth-grade classroom that spans both severity categories.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design, an approach in which the researcher interprets the meanings participants attach to a phenomenon through sustained engagement with data gathered in a real-world setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A case study design suits this research because it asks how English reading ability appears among students with intellectual disability within one institutional setting, a naturally bounded unit of analysis.

The research took place at SLB AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo, a special needs school that runs Type AC services for students with intellectual disability, from December 2025 to June 2026. Participants were seven tenth-grade students in the Type AC unit, four classified with moderate and three with severe intellectual disability, together with their English teacher. During a field verification visit, the researcher observed two of these students directly, one from each category, because the teacher's leave and the students' extended holiday break restricted access to the full class.

Data collection followed a triangulation logic across three techniques (Miles et al., 2020). A teacher questionnaire, administered remotely through a Google Form, used open-ended items covering the teacher's use of adapted instruction, multisensory instruction, the VAKT method, drilling and repetition, and scaffolding with visual support for both severity categories (Cohen et al., 2018). A structured interview followed, built from the same thematic focus, to clarify and expand brief or general questionnaire answers with concrete classroom examples (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Documentation, comprising student learning profiles, teaching materials, worksheets, and learning outcome scores, supplied a third source, corroborated by a field verification visit on 17 June 2026 in which the researcher checked school records against a document checklist and observed two students working on the reading tasks the teacher had described.

Data were analysed using the interactive model developed by Miles et al. (2020), which treats analysis as three concurrent flows: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The researcher transcribed the questionnaire responses and interview recording into a single corpus, then coded excerpts under two themes, reading ability (coded by logographic, alphabetic, and orthographic stage, separated by severity category) and teaching strategies (coded by the four instructional themes above). Condensed excerpts were organised into comparative matrices that set the two categories, or the four strategies, side by side. A conclusion was retained only when at least two independent data sources converged on it; where sources diverged, the researcher returned to the interview data or field verification notes to resolve the discrepancy.

FINDING

Table 1. Reading Ability Indicators by Severity Category

Indicator	Moderate Intellectual Disability	Severe Intellectual Disability
Reading stage (Frith, 1985, 1986)	Transitioning from the alphabetic stage toward the orthographic stage	Logographic stage, with a narrow, copy-based foothold in the alphabetic stage
Letter recognition	Recognised most English letters; vowels more reliable than consonants	Only copying letters from an example; no independent letter naming
Word/phrase attempt (example)	<i>good morning</i> → <i>gud moni</i> ; <i>table</i> → <i>tebol</i> ; <i>chair</i> → <i>cer</i> ; <i>book</i> → <i>bu</i>	<i>good morning</i> → <i>gu.../mo...</i> ; <i>book</i> → <i>bu</i> ; <i>pen</i> → <i>pe</i> ; <i>chair</i> → <i>ce</i>
Repetitions needed before an attempt	Four to five repetitions of the teacher's model	No fixed limit; forgot quickly and needed frequent re-modelling
Meaning after repeated explanation	Could translate a word after repeated explanation	Mostly imitated sound only; often could not state or retain meaning

Source: teacher questionnaire, structured interview, and field verification (2026)

Table 1 summarises the reading ability indicators observed for each severity category. As a group, the students with moderate intellectual disability were transitioning from the alphabetic stage toward the orthographic stage. They held adequate eye contact once directed, recognised most English letters, and attempted complete short words and phrases: *good morning* as *gud moni*, *table* as *tebol*, *chair* as *cer*, and *book* as *bu*. The initial sound was clearly audible in each attempt, while the final consonant was often dropped. The teacher had to model a word four to five times before a student attempted it independently, and a sound-correct attempt did not carry understanding with it until after repeated explanation. A field verification visit confirmed the same pattern directly: a

student asked to read *table*, *chair*, and *book* produced *tebol*, *cer*, and *bu*, understandable in context even where individual sounds were incomplete.

Students in the severe category remained at the logographic stage, with only a narrow, copy-based foothold in the alphabetic stage. They needed far more stimulation before engaging with the material, and pointing to a picture still required physical or verbal help. Asked to say good morning, they typically managed only *gu...* or *mo...*, *book* became *bu*, *pen* became *pe*, and *chair* became *ce*, each a single syllable or initial sound standing for the whole word. Reaching even this point took repetition without a fixed limit, and the resulting imitation rarely carried meaning: where the moderate group could translate a word after repeated explanation, the severe group mostly imitated the sound and often could not answer, or had already forgotten, what a word meant when asked directly. The structured interview recorded only the copying of letters from an example as evident for this category; independent letter naming, sound identification, and discrimination between similar letters had not yet emerged. A field verification visit confirmed the same pattern: one student's attempts at *book*, *pen*, and *chair* produced only an unclear initial vowel sound, a short unidentifiable sound, and near silence in phonemic formation.

The English teacher combined four strategies to teach reading through material on greetings, summarised in Table 2. Multisensory instruction combined sight, hearing, movement, and touch within a single activity: the teacher displayed a flashcard showing a sunrise, modelled the phrase *good morning*, and had students wave or shake hands while giving the greeting before holding and selecting the flashcard matching the time of day. The VAKT method operated at a finer letter-and-sound level, with the teacher exaggerating mouth shapes for the Visual component, slowing speech and repeating a word four to five times for the Auditory component, having students greet the teacher and classmates for the Kinesthetic component, and having students trace the written phrase while the teacher named each letter for the Tactile component. For students with severe intellectual disability, the Auditory component used shorter words, fewer words per utterance, more repetition, and more visual support than the pacing used with the moderate category. Drilling and repetition moved from choral repetition with the whole class to individual turns with each student, including those in the severe category, to consolidate what each one had learned. Scaffolding with visual support was applied routinely across sessions: the teacher kept the same set of flashcards and word cards in use from session to session and reduced verbal and physical prompting gradually as a student became more independent.

Table 2. Teaching Strategies and Category-Specific Adjustments

Strategy	Description	Adjustment for the Severe Category
Adapted English Instruction	Simplified vocabulary and sentence length, slower pace, frequent structured review, priority on communicative ability over language-rule knowledge	Baseline applied to both categories
Multisensory Instruction	Flashcard (sunrise) + modelled phrase + wave/handshake gesture + flashcard selection, repeated across sessions	Same activity; more repetitions before independent attempt
VAKT Method	Visual (exaggerated mouth shape), Auditory (slowed speech, syllable emphasis), Kinesthetic (greeting gesture), Tactile (tracing while teacher names letters)	Auditory component: shorter words, fewer words per utterance, more repetition, more visual support
Drilling and Repetition	Choral repetition with the whole class, then individual turns	Individual turns included every severe-category student for consolidation
Scaffolding with Visual Support	Same flashcards/word cards kept across sessions; verbal and physical prompting reduced as independence grows	Prompting withdrawn more gradually, calibrated to slower independence

Source: teacher questionnaire, structured interview, and field verification (2026)

DISCUSSION

The findings show a gap between the two categories that Frith's (1985, 1986) stage model describes more precisely than a simple pace difference would suggest. Students with moderate intellectual disability were transitioning from the alphabetic stage toward the orthographic stage: they attempted whole words and sounded out an initial grapheme-phoneme correspondence reliably, but had not yet consolidated a complete word into the instant, whole-unit recognition that marks the orthographic stage. Students with severe intellectual disability remained at the logographic stage, with only a narrow, copy-based foothold in the alphabetic stage. This distribution matches what Ratz and Lenhard (2013) found when they applied Frith's model to a large sample of students with intellectual disability: among students with severe to profound disability, most had either not yet begun to read or remained at the logographic stage, with only a small fraction reaching the alphabetic stage and fewer still the orthographic stage. Set against that wider pattern, the gap observed in this classroom is not an anomaly of this particular sample; it is the shape reading development in intellectual disability is documented to take.

The word-level data make the mechanism of the gap visible. Students with moderate intellectual disability produced the initial sound of a word reliably but

consistently dropped the final consonant, alphabetic decoding under way but incomplete: the grapheme-phoneme correspondence needed to carry a word through to its end had not yet stabilised enough to support the instant recognition Frith's orthographic stage describes. Students with severe intellectual disability did not reach this point; reduced to a single initial syllable, their attempts show a reader still forming the first sound-symbol connections the alphabetic stage requires, rather than a reader applying connections already held but applying them incompletely. This is consistent with the broader finding that reading instruction for students with intellectual disability must contend with substantial constraints in phonological processing that go beyond limited vocabulary alone (Dessementet et al., 2022): the instructional material held vocabulary exposure constant across both groups, so what separated a fuller, if imperfect, production like *gud moni* from a fragment like *gu...* is best read as a difference in how far each group's phonological processing could carry a decoding attempt. Faiza and Astutik (2025) reported comparable limitations in the reading ability of students with intellectual disability at the same school, a convergence that strengthens confidence in the pattern reported here.

On teaching strategies, the English teacher's use of multisensory instruction, the VAKT method, drilling and repetition, and scaffolding with visual support was consistent with the theoretical recommendations reviewed above and mirrored the moderate-severe distinction in reading ability. The VAKT implementation was comprehensive, drawing on all four modalities every session (Cuajao et al., 2023), and comparable multisensory gains have been reported in a classroom action research study with fourth-grade students with intellectual disability, though on a small, single-school sample (Suwarsih & Pujaningsih, 2025). The teacher adjusted the Auditory component with particular care for the severe category, an adjustment that tracks the same phonological-processing gap described above even though the teacher did not frame it in those terms. Drilling and repetition moved from choral to individual practice, giving personalised feedback suited to each student's level instead of one repetition rate applied uniformly across a heterogeneous class, consistent with the principle that limited working memory in this population makes new information easy to lose without repeated, spaced practice (Dessementet et al., 2022).

Scaffolding with visual support, read against Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, showed a clear instance of scaffold withdrawal: support was heaviest while a skill was emerging and was reduced as independence developed, visible in the gradual reduction of verbal and physical prompting and in displaying flashcards in randomised order once a response became reliable. Scaffolding theory assumes the skill is far enough along for withdrawal to help

rather than to strand the learner. For the severe-disability group, who needed the teacher's model repeated an indefinite number of times before attempting an imitation at all, and whose reading still sat mostly within the logographic stage, a fully independent response to a randomised card may sit beyond what their current stage of reading can support. This does not make the strategy wrong; it suggests that the pace of scaffold withdrawal may need to be calibrated separately for the two severity categories, matched to where each sits on Frith's stages, a distinction the instruction recorded here, applied to the whole class at once, does not yet make explicit.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to describe the reading ability of students with moderate and severe intellectual disability in the tenth grade of SLB AC Dharma Wanita Sidoarjo and the strategies their English teacher uses to teach them. On reading ability, the students with moderate intellectual disability were transitioning from the alphabetic stage toward the orthographic stage, recognising most English letters and attempting complete short words and phrases, usually after four to five repetitions of the teacher's model, though they frequently dropped final consonants, producing *bu* for *book*. The students with severe intellectual disability had not yet established independent letter recognition and reduced a word to a single initial sound or syllable, such as *pe* for *pen*, with articulation that stayed unclear however many times the teacher repeated the model. Because both groups received the same greeting-unit vocabulary, the gap between the two stages reflected a difference in phonological-processing capacity between the two categories rather than a difference in what they were taught.

On teaching strategies, the English teacher combined adapted English instruction, multisensory instruction, the VAKT method, drilling and repetition, and scaffolding with visual support, adjusting the intensity of support, particularly repetition and simplification, to each severity category rather than applying one procedure to the whole class. Taken together, these findings indicate that a level-by-level account of reading ability is a precondition for calibrating instructional support in a classroom that enrolls more than one severity category, rather than a matter of descriptive thoroughness alone. Future research with a longitudinal design, a larger sample, and full-session classroom observation would extend how far this pattern generalises beyond one school and one unit of material.

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