

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning the study on the correlation between vocabulary attainment through reading activities and reading comprehension.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework outlines the core concepts of vocabulary attainment and reading comprehension, providing a foundation for understanding their interrelationship in the context of English as a Foreign Language education at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang.

1. English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refers to the learning and teaching of English in countries where English is not the native or primary language of communication (Ajaka, 2020). In EFL contexts, learners typically have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, making formal instruction crucial for language acquisition (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). The EFL learning environment presents unique challenges that distinguish it from English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, as students primarily encounter English through structured classroom activities, textbooks, and limited authentic materials, which can restrict their exposure to natural language use and contextual vocabulary (Bulusan, 2024). In EFL settings, vocabulary acquisition often depends on explicit instruction and extensive reading, as opportunities for incidental learning through natural communication are limited. Reading comprehension is influenced by vocabulary knowledge, but factors such as teaching methods that fail to integrate

vocabulary with comprehension or overly complex texts can weaken this relationship (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Dewi, 2019). For example, ineffective reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning) or lack of curriculum integration may hinder students' ability to connect vocabulary knowledge with text understanding (Septiana & Hanafi, 2022). These contextual factors are particularly relevant for UMM students in the Literal Reading course, where structured reading tasks are designed to foster vocabulary growth but may be limited by pedagogical approaches.

For Indonesian EFL learners, the linguistic distance between Indonesian and English creates additional challenges in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. The differences in grammatical structures, writing systems, and cultural contexts require students to develop specific strategies for understanding English texts (Pahrizal et al., 2024). Vocabulary development in EFL contexts requires systematic and sustained effort, as students have fewer opportunities for natural acquisition compared to immersion environments. EFL learners need explicit vocabulary instruction combined with extensive reading practice to build sufficient lexical knowledge for academic success, which is particularly relevant for Indonesian university students who must develop academic vocabulary to engage with English-medium texts and materials.

Reading comprehension in EFL contexts is significantly influenced by vocabulary knowledge, as students must decode both linguistic and cultural meanings embedded in texts. The limited exposure to authentic English materials in EFL environments means that students often struggle with unfamiliar

vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references that native speakers take for granted (Ajaka, 2020). The role of L1 (first language) transfer in EFL learning cannot be overlooked, as students often rely on their native language knowledge to make sense of English texts, which can sometimes facilitate comprehension but can also lead to misunderstandings when linguistic structures or cultural concepts do not have direct equivalents.

2. Vocabulary Attainment

Vocabulary attainment refers to the process through which learners acquire new or reinforce familiar words, particularly through exposure to texts, a critical aspect of language development for first-year EFL students. Vocabulary encompasses the repertoire of words an individual employs to communicate effectively across academic contexts, including reading, writing, and speaking (Lelawati et al., 2018). Ulfatussyarifah (2017) defines vocabulary as a collection of words that facilitates meaning creation and communication in context, emphasizing its role in language proficiency.

Vocabulary knowledge is multidimensional, involving word forms (e.g., spelling, pronunciation), meanings (e.g., denotation, connotation), and contextual usage (e.g., collocations, register). For EFL students, robust vocabulary knowledge is essential for navigating academic texts, as it facilitates comprehension and expression of complex ideas (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019). Viera (2017) underscores that vocabulary knowledge is a prominent device in understanding all language skills, including reading, by enabling learners to grasp the material of written texts. Similarly, Djuarsa (2017) notes that knowing the

meaning of words constitutes a fundamental aspect of vocabulary knowledge, which directly supports reading comprehension. Mustafa et al. (2019) further argues that vocabulary is a strong predictor of comprehending reading texts, highlighting its critical role in academic settings. Hashemi (2021) reinforces this by stating that vocabulary acquisition is a vital subskill in learning any target language, particularly for EFL learners.

Theoretically, vocabulary attainment is supported by the concept of incidental learning, which posits that learners acquire words through repeated exposure in meaningful contexts, such as reading, without explicit instruction (Masrai, 2019). Van den Bosch et al. (2020) and Tong et al. (2018) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge, in both first and second languages, significantly influences reading comprehension development, particularly through contextual exposure in reading activities. In the Literal Reading course, vocabulary attainment occurs as students encounter high-, mid-, and low-frequency words in graded texts, promoting incidental acquisition through contextual exposure. Operationally, vocabulary attainment is measured by the number of words students recognize as familiar in these texts, reflecting their vocabulary growth (Chen et al., 2019). This process is particularly significant for first-year EFL students, who are transitioning to university-level academic demands and require a strong vocabulary foundation to succeed in reading-intensive courses.

3. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the cognitive process of deriving meaning from written texts, a fundamental skill for EFL students engaging with academic

materials. It involves decoding words, processing syntactic structures, and integrating text information with prior knowledge to construct coherent understanding. Comprehension encompasses multiple levels, including literal understanding (extracting explicit information), inferential understanding (drawing conclusions), and critical evaluation (assessing text credibility) (Bahri, 2019; Tomas et al., 2021). Hall & Barnes (2017) explain that reading comprehension involves understanding information literally while integrating the readers background knowledge, a process critical for academic success. Özdemir & Akyol (2019), define reading as the process of understanding text meaning through effective communication between the author and reader, emphasizing the role of appropriate information integration. Chaudhry & Al-Adwani (2019) further note that reading plays a vital role in language acquisition, contributing to the development of academic skills through reading proficiency.

Schema theory provides a theoretical lens, suggesting that comprehension occurs when readers activate and connect relevant background knowledge (schemas) with text information. The interactive model of reading further posits that comprehension results from the interplay of bottom-up processes (e.g., word recognition, syntactic parsing) and top-down processes (e.g., using context and prior knowledge), both heavily reliant on vocabulary knowledge (Chen et al., 2019). Mohammadian et al. (2018) identify several factors affecting reading comprehension, including unique elements in written texts, content knowledge, schemata, learner language proficiency, obscure vocabularies, sentence structures, and the communication setting between writer and reader. Alharbi (2016) notes

that reading comprehension requires significant time to focus on decoding words and understanding their meanings, a process hindered by limited vocabulary. Ibrahim et al. (2016) and Paige & Smith (2018) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is a crucial component of reading comprehension, with Ibrahim et al. (2016) further highlighting vocabulary size as a key factor in enhancing comprehension performance. Nurjanah (2018) argues that a lack of vocabulary knowledge leads to difficulties in understanding texts, underscoring the interdependence of vocabulary and comprehension. In EFL contexts, limited vocabulary can impede these processes, making comprehension challenging (Chen et al., 2019). Operationally, reading comprehension in this study is measured by midterm test scores assessing literal understanding of graded texts, focusing on student ability to identify explicit information. This focus aligns with the Literal Reading course's emphasis on foundational reading skills, essential for first-year EFL students navigating university-level texts.

2.2 Previous Related Studies

To help fund this research, the researcher reviews some previous studies related to the topic of the present study. Chen et al. (2019) found that vocabulary knowledge enhances reading comprehension among English as a Foreign Language university students in China, with a significant correlation ($r = 0.65$). Their use of digital reading activities to boost vocabulary acquisition suggests that contextual exposure aids comprehension, aligning with the graded texts in the Literal Reading course.

Fitri & Rifa'at (2021) reported a strong correlation ($r = 0.807$) between

vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension among Indonesian middle school students. The study's Indonesian English as a Foreign Language context is relevant, but its middle school focus and lack of emphasis on reading activities limit its applicability to university students in the Literal Reading course. Corpuz et al. (2024) identified a significant correlation ($r = 0.72$) among college students in the Philippines, with vocabulary supporting literal and critical comprehension. This university setting mirrors the current study's context, but the focus on general vocabulary mastery rather than reading-based acquisition highlights a gap addressed by the Literal Reading course.

Sarena et al. (2023) observed a strong correlation ($r = 0.79$) between vocabulary and descriptive text comprehension among Indonesian high school students. The study's focus on descriptive texts aligns with the Literal Reading course's materials, but its high school context limits relevance to university English as a Foreign Language students. Lisana et al. (2022) found a moderate correlation ($r = 0.473$) among Indonesian seventh-graders, suggesting vocabulary influences comprehension alongside other factors. The study's English as a Foreign Language context is relevant, but its younger learner focus and general vocabulary approach underscore the need for university-specific research.

Walad et al. (2022) reported a significant correlation ($r = 0.678$) among Indonesian high school students, with vocabulary aiding comprehension of varied texts. The study's text diversity reflects the Literal Reading course's materials, but its high school setting and lack of focus on reading activities reinforce the research gap. Masrai (2019) showed that high- and mid-frequency vocabulary differentially

impact comprehension among university English as a Foreign Language learners in Saudi Arabia ($r = 0.60\text{--}0.68$). This suggests tailored reading materials, like the Literal Reading course's graded texts, are crucial, but the study's focus on vocabulary frequency rather than reading-based acquisition leaves a gap.

Simanjuntak et al. (2024) found a low correlation ($r = 0.29$) between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among second-grade students at MTsN 4 Banda Aceh, suggesting that contextual factors, such as teaching methods or text complexity, may weaken the relationship. Dewi (2019) reported no correlation ($r = 0.001$) between vocabulary and reading comprehension among ninth-grade students at SMP N 6 Jambi, attributing this to ineffective teaching methods or complex texts. Septiana & Hanafi (2022) found no significant correlation ($r = 0.133$) among IT Education Department students, indicating that vocabulary mastery alone may not predict comprehension in certain contexts.

These studies highlight a range of correlations, from strong ($r = 0.807$) to none ($r = 0.001$), reflecting the influence of contextual factors. While university-focused studies (Corpuz et al., 2024; Masrai, 2019) are relevant, most research targets school-level learners or general vocabulary, with limited exploration of reading-based vocabulary tests in Indonesian university EFL settings. The current study addresses this gap by examining vocabulary attainment through graded reading texts and its correlation with comprehension at UMM, considering contextual factors like teaching methods that may weaken the relationship (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Dewi, 2019).