

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, the research questions, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the scope and limitations, and the definition of key terms.

1.1 Research Background

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language proficiency, encompassing the collection of words that individuals use to communicate effectively through speaking, writing, and reading. It serves as a critical foundation for expressing ideas and understanding texts, significantly impacting academic achievement (Lelawati et al., 2018). Wyse & Hacking (2024) argue that vocabulary and reading are closely intertwined, with vocabulary knowledge being essential for text comprehension, a skill vital for academic success. Reading, as a receptive skill, not only supports vocabulary development by exposing learners to new words in context but also facilitates the acquisition and critical evaluation of information necessary for academic progress (Bahri, 2019; Tomas et al., 2021).

For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, acquiring sufficient vocabulary to support reading comprehension remains a significant challenge. Limited vocabulary knowledge often hinders students' ability to understand academic texts, affecting their engagement with course materials and overall language development (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019). Vocabulary, as the building block of meaning-making, plays a pivotal role in facilitating communication and comprehension within specific contexts (Ulfatussyarifah, 2017). This issue is

particularly pronounced among first-year university students in foundational English courses, such as the Literal Reading course at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM), where students struggle to master vocabulary necessary for effective reading comprehension.

This study investigates the role of reading activities in promoting vocabulary attainment among EFL university freshmen at UMM. By focusing on vocabulary tests derived from graded reading passages, the research examines how students' interactions with these tasks influence their vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. It specifically explores reading strategies, such as inferring meanings from context and engaging in vocabulary-focused tasks, to enhance both vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. The findings aim to provide educators with evidence-based strategies for designing reading tasks that foster vocabulary growth, thereby improving students' academic outcomes.

Numerous studies have established a positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. For instance, Chen et al. (2019) highlight that vocabulary mastery enables students to decode and interpret texts more effectively by understanding word meanings and their contextual applications. Similarly, Fitri & Rifa'at (2021) and Corpuz et al. (2024) demonstrate that students with stronger vocabulary skills exhibit better performance in literal and critical reading tasks. Sarena et al. (2023) further confirm a robust correlation between vocabulary mastery and comprehension of descriptive texts among high school students. Pardede (2017) emphasizes that reading is crucial for personal, intellectual, and vocational development,

underscoring the interdependence of vocabulary and comprehension.

However, recent studies suggest that the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension may not always be significant, particularly in specific contexts. Simanjuntak et al. (2024) found a low correlation (coefficient of 0.29) between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among second-grade students at MTsN 4 Banda Aceh, indicating that vocabulary mastery does not always strongly predict comprehension outcomes. Similarly, Dewi (2019) reported no correlation (coefficient of 0.001) between vocabulary and reading comprehension among ninth-grade students at SMP N 6 Jambi, attributing this to factors such as teaching methods or text complexity. Septiana & Hanafi (2022) also found no significant correlation (coefficient of 0.133) among IT Education Department students, suggesting that vocabulary mastery alone may not sufficiently contribute to reading comprehension in certain academic settings. These findings highlight potential contextual factors, such as teaching methods that fail to integrate vocabulary with comprehension, overly complex texts, or low student motivation, which may weaken the expected relationship (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Dewi, 2019).

Despite the established positive correlations in prior research, there remains a gap in understanding how vocabulary tests embedded in reading passages function as tools for assessing vocabulary attainment, particularly among university freshmen in Indonesia. Studies like Lisana et al. (2022) and Walad et al. (2022) primarily focus on school-level learners or broad correlations, with limited attention to university contexts or the role of structured reading tasks in

vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, Masrai (2019) notes that vocabulary across different frequency levels (high, mid, and low) contributes variably to reading comprehension, suggesting the need for targeted vocabulary instruction tailored to specific learner groups. The current study addresses this gap by examining the correlation between vocabulary attainment through reading-based tasks and reading comprehension among EFL freshmen at UMM. It also considers contextual factors, such as the integration of vocabulary in teaching methods at UMM, to explain potential weak or non-significant correlations, offering insights into tailored pedagogical strategies for enhancing vocabulary acquisition and comprehension.

1.2 Research Problem

Based on the background of the study above, the research problem stated as follows, is there a correlation between vocabulary attainment through reading activities and reading comprehension?

1.3 Research Objective

The objective of this study is to determine the correlation between vocabulary attainment achieved through reading activities and reading comprehension among first-year EFL students in the Literal Reading course at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang. By examining this relationship, the study aims to provide insights into how reading activities contribute to vocabulary development and their impact on students' text comprehension, while considering contextual factors such as teaching methods and text complexity, to inform tailored pedagogical strategies for EFL education.

1.4 The scope and limitation

The scope of this study is limited to first-year EFL students enrolled in the Literal Reading course at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang during the academic year. The study focuses on vocabulary attainment, measured through vocabulary tests based on graded reading texts where students highlight familiar words, and reading comprehension, assessed through midterm test scores evaluating literal understanding. The research employs a correlational design, using Pearson Product Moment correlation, to explore the relationship between these variables, with data collected from a sample of 14 students. Limitations include the small sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of findings, and the focus on literal comprehension, which may not capture higher-order reading skills such as inferential or critical comprehension. Additionally, the study is confined to vocabulary tests based on graded reading texts, potentially limiting its applicability to other reading materials or EFL learning environments. Contextual factors, such as teaching methods that do not integrate vocabulary with comprehension or ineffective reading strategies (e.g., skimming, scanning), may further limit the strength of the correlation observed.

1.5 Research Significance

This study is expected to offer valuable contributions to various stakeholders in English as a Foreign Language education, particularly within the context of the University of Muhammadiyah Malang.

1. For Educators

The findings are anticipated to provide practical guidance for designing reading tasks that enhance vocabulary attainment and reading comprehension,

even when the correlation between these variables is weak. By identifying strategies, such as contextual inference and vocabulary-focused activities, and addressing contextual limitations (e.g., teaching methods that do not integrate vocabulary with comprehension), educators can implement targeted interventions to support first-year EFL students in the Literal Reading course (Simanjuntak et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2019).

2. For Students

The study is expected to benefit first-year EFL students by highlighting reading strategies that facilitate vocabulary acquisition, thereby improving their ability to understand academic texts. Despite a weak correlation, understanding contextual factors such as text complexity or teaching methods can enhance students' learning outcomes and academic confidence (Ulfatussyarifah, 2017; Dewi, 2019).

3. For Researchers

This study contributes to the limited body of research on vocabulary attainment through reading in the Indonesian university EFL context. By exploring the mechanisms of vocabulary acquisition, it serves as a foundation for future research into reading strategies and their impact on language learning.

4. For English Department

The results are expected to inform the development of EFL curricula, particularly for courses like Literal Reading, by emphasizing the need for teaching methods that integrate vocabulary and comprehension. This alignment with students' academic needs is critical for effective language instruction, especially

in contexts where traditional methods may limit correlation strength (Corpuz et al., 2024).

1. 6 Definition of Key Terms

This thesis needs to define the following terms to avoid misinterpretation.

The terms are defined as follows:

1. Students vocabulary attainment

In this study, vocabulary attainment refers to a student's level of competency in recognizing and understanding words within graded reading texts, measured by the number of familiar words highlighted in vocabulary tests. This indicates the breadth of their vocabulary knowledge and its contribution to text comprehension (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019; Simanjuntak et al., 2024).

2. Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to accurately understand and interpret written material, focusing on literal understanding of texts. It involves decoding the text and grasping its meaning, context, and intended message, which is crucial for accessing academic knowledge and engaging with reading material (Bahri, 2019).