

Vocabulary Retention as a Meaning-Making Process: Evidence from EFL Cadets in a Structured Learning Environment

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Abstract

Vocabulary retention remains a central concern in EFL learning, particularly in contexts where exposure to English is limited and often confined to structured classroom environments. This study examines how reading comprehension functions as a basis for vocabulary retention among cadets at Poltekad Batu. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research explores learners' experiences in engaging with English texts, focusing on how they interpret unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual cues, apply reading strategies, and gradually retain lexical items over time. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with cadets and instructors, supported by field-based documentation, and analyzed using a thematic approach. The findings reveal that vocabulary retention is not driven by memorization alone but emerges from a dynamic process involving comprehension, repeated exposure, and contextual interpretation. Learners tend to prioritize understanding the overall meaning of texts before focusing on individual words, using strategies such as inferencing, re-reading, and note-taking to reinforce retention. In addition, the study highlights how prior knowledge and situational context shape meaning construction, particularly within a military-based learning environment. These findings suggest that vocabulary learning is more effective when embedded in meaningful reading activities, carrying implications for transformative education in which comprehension-driven instruction fosters learner autonomy and reflective meaning construction in structured EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to retain vocabulary remains one of the persistent challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in contexts where exposure to the target language is limited to classroom settings (Ekinci & Ekinci, 2021; Najafov et al., 2025; Wei & Hu, 2025). While vocabulary is widely acknowledged as a core component of language proficiency, many learners continue to rely on memorization strategies that do not lead to long-term retention (Masrai, 2023; Shavkatovna, 2024). This issue becomes more complex in structured learning environments such as military-based institutions, where learners are required to process academic materials under time constraints and disciplinary routines (Berger & Hartgerink, 2022; Lindín et al., 2023). At Poltekad Batu, for instance, cadets are expected to engage with English texts as part of their training, yet their interaction with vocabulary often reflects a tension between understanding meaning and recalling lexical items. In such settings, reading comprehension is not simply a supporting skill but may function as a central mechanism through which vocabulary is encountered, interpreted, and retained over time.

A growing body of research has shifted attention from isolated vocabulary learning toward context-based acquisition (Gao et al., 2024; Li, 2021; Soleimani et al., 2022). Studies have shown

that vocabulary retention improves when learners encounter words repeatedly in meaningful contexts rather than through decontextualized lists (Le, 2024; Wei & Hu, 2025; Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021). More recent work has further emphasized the role of reading as a site where vocabulary learning naturally occurs, particularly when learners engage in inferencing and contextual interpretation (Dessenberger et al., 2023; Kristy Jane R. Muegna & Virgion H. Mamonong, 2024). Research by Matterson et al. (2024) highlights that learners who actively construct meaning while reading tend to demonstrate stronger lexical retention, as the process involves deeper cognitive engagement. Similarly, Sapienza et al. (2023) notes that repeated exposure to vocabulary in varied textual contexts contributes to more stable memory formation. However, much of this literature tends to focus on general EFL populations, often overlooking how specific institutional contexts shape the way learners interact with texts and vocabulary.

Despite these advances, there remains a gap in understanding how vocabulary retention develops in environments where learning is influenced by structured routines and discipline-based training. Existing studies rarely examine how learners integrate their contextual experiences into the process of interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. In particular, there is limited attention to how learners in military-oriented educational settings draw on their background knowledge and situational awareness when engaging with reading materials. This gap suggests that vocabulary retention cannot be fully understood without considering the specific context in which learning takes place. The present study addresses this limitation by examining how cadets at Poltekad Batu construct meaning from reading and how this process contributes to vocabulary retention. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the interaction between comprehension, strategy use, and contextual experience within a highly structured learning environment.

The study aims to explore how reading comprehension functions as a basis for vocabulary retention among EFL learners in a military-based educational setting. More specifically, it seeks to understand how learners interpret unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual cues, how they apply reading strategies in this process, and how these practices contribute to the retention of lexical items over time. By focusing on learners' experiences rather than predefined instructional models, the study offers a closer look at how vocabulary learning unfolds in practice. This approach not only complements existing research on vocabulary acquisition but also provides insights that are grounded in the realities of classroom interaction and learner behavior.

The central focus of this study lies in examining vocabulary retention as a process that develops through interaction with texts rather than as an outcome of memorization. It considers how learners move from initial exposure to unfamiliar words toward a more stable understanding, shaped by comprehension, repetition, and contextual interpretation. In doing so, the study highlights the role of reading as a space where meaning is negotiated and refined over time. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of vocabulary learning, particularly in contexts where learners must balance comprehension demands with limited exposure to the target language. The following section outlines the methodological approach used to capture these processes in detail.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed to explore how reading comprehension functions in supporting vocabulary retention among EFL learners within a specific institutional setting. A qualitative case study design was selected to allow an in-depth examination of learners' experiences as they interact with reading materials in their daily academic environment (Al Qur'an, 2025; Naeem & Thomas, 2025; Star et al., 2025). This design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to capture how vocabulary learning unfolds in practice rather than to measure it quantitatively. The research was conducted at Poltekad Batu, where English is taught within a structured and discipline-oriented context, offering a distinctive setting for examining language learning processes. A qualitative approach was adopted to provide detailed insights into how learners interpret unfamiliar

vocabulary and how these interpretations develop over time (Al-Eisawi, 2022; Palmer & Udoh, 2024; Udayanga, 2025). This approach enables a closer look at meaning-making processes, particularly how learners rely on context, prior knowledge, and repeated exposure when engaging with texts, which aligns with the focus of the study on comprehension-based vocabulary retention (Teng, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, supported by field-based documentation of classroom practices. Interviews were conducted with selected cadets and an English instructor, allowing the study to capture perspectives from both learners and teaching staff. The interaction between the researcher and participants was carried out in a semi-structured manner, enabling participants to describe their experiences freely while still addressing the focus of the study (Dalsten Hjort et al., 2025; Stockless & Brière, 2024; Taylor, 2024). The research took place at Poltekad Batu over a period of approximately two months, during which the researcher engaged directly with participants in their learning environment. To ensure the credibility of the findings, data were cross-checked through source triangulation, comparing responses from different participants as well as aligning interview accounts with actual classroom practices (O’Keeffe, 2025; Stockless & Brière, 2024; Udayanga, 2025). Member confirmation was also applied by revisiting key points with participants to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented. These steps were taken to maintain consistency between reported experiences and the conditions observed in the field.

Table 1. Research Informants and Interview Codes

Informant Group	Interview Codes	Role in the Study
Cadets	I_Cadet01_2025 – I_Cadet09_2025	Primary participants
Instructors	I_Instructor01_2025 – I_Instructor02_2025	Supporting participants

The data were analyzed using a thematic approach, allowing patterns to emerge from participants’ accounts without imposing predefined categories (Lamba et al., 2022; Polat, 2025; Udayanga, 2025). The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts to identify recurring ideas related to reading comprehension and vocabulary retention. These ideas were then grouped into broader categories, which were refined into themes that reflected how learners engage with vocabulary in context. The process involved continuous comparison across data sources to ensure consistency between participant responses and field findings. Triangulation was applied by examining how similar patterns appeared across different participants, particularly between cadets and instructors (Arslan, 2022; Martin et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2024). This approach helped strengthen the credibility of the interpretation by ensuring that the findings were grounded in multiple perspectives. The analysis remained closely connected to the data, focusing on how learners describe their experiences rather than relying on abstract generalizations. Through this process, the study was able to present a detailed account of how vocabulary retention develops through comprehension and contextual engagement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Retention

Reading comprehension and vocabulary retention are closely intertwined processes in second language learning, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Comprehension involves the ability to derive meaning from written texts, while vocabulary retention refers to the learner’s capacity to store and recall lexical items over time. In practice, these processes are not isolated; understanding a text often requires interpreting unfamiliar words through contextual clues, which in turn supports memory formation. When learners actively engage with texts, they tend to associate new words with meanings, situations, and prior knowledge, making retention more durable. Within the context of this study, this relationship

reflects how learners at Poltekad Batu rely on their comprehension skills to internalize vocabulary encountered in reading materials. Rather than memorizing words in isolation, they develop retention through meaningful exposure, repeated encounters, and contextual understanding, indicating that comprehension plays a central role in strengthening vocabulary acquisition in authentic learning settings.

Participants consistently described how understanding the overall message of a text helped them remember unfamiliar words more effectively. They did not rely solely on memorization but instead connected vocabulary with context and meaning. One cadet explained: *"When I read a passage, I usually don't translate every word. I try to understand the story first, and somehow the new words just stay in my mind because I know what's happening (I_Cadet01_2025)."* Another participant added: *"If I understand the sentence, I can guess the meaning of new vocabulary. After that, it's easier to remember compared to just memorizing from a list (I_Cadet03_2025)."* A different perspective was expressed by an instructor: *"Students who grasp the main idea of the text tend to recall vocabulary better. They are not just recognizing words, but actually understanding them in use (I_Instructor01_2025)."* This pattern was also supported by another: *"Sometimes I forget words I memorize, but when I see them again in reading, I remember because I've seen them in context before (I_Cadet05_2025)."* These accounts indicate that comprehension provides a meaningful framework that supports vocabulary retention beyond rote learning.

The interview data reveal that vocabulary retention is strongly shaped by the learners' ability to understand textual meaning rather than by isolated memorization practices. As reflected in the cadets' responses, comprehension enables learners to anchor new vocabulary within a broader semantic structure, making it easier to recall. The tendency to focus on overall meaning before individual words suggests a shift from word-by-word decoding to contextual interpretation. This process allows learners to infer meaning, reinforce associations, and revisit vocabulary through repeated exposure in texts. The instructor's statement further confirms that retention improves when vocabulary is processed as part of meaningful language use rather than as discrete units. Through these accounts, it becomes evident that comprehension acts as a cognitive bridge linking exposure to retention. Learners who engage with texts holistically appear to develop stronger and more durable lexical memory, indicating that comprehension is not merely supportive but integral to vocabulary retention in this context.

The findings in the field demonstrate that classroom practices at Poltekad Batu emphasize reading activities that encourage comprehension rather than isolated vocabulary drills. Learners were frequently observed engaging with short texts, where they were guided to identify main ideas before focusing on unfamiliar words. In several sessions, instructors prompted students to discuss the meaning of passages collectively, allowing them to negotiate understanding and clarify vocabulary through context. Written notes taken by students often showed that they recorded meanings alongside example sentences rather than listing words separately. Additionally, repeated exposure to similar vocabulary across different texts appeared to reinforce retention, as students became more familiar with recurring terms. These conditions indicate that vocabulary learning occurs as part of an integrated reading process. The alignment between instructional practices and student experiences suggests that comprehension-driven activities contribute significantly to how vocabulary is retained in actual learning situations.

The findings highlight a consistent pattern in which reading comprehension serves as a central mechanism in supporting vocabulary retention among EFL learners at Poltekad Batu. Learners tend to remember vocabulary more effectively when it is encountered within meaningful textual contexts rather than through isolated memorization. The ability to grasp the overall message of a text enables them to infer meanings, build associations, and reinforce memory through repeated exposure. Both participant accounts and field findings point to the importance of integrating comprehension-focused reading practices in vocabulary learning. This relationship suggests that retention is not simply a matter of repetition but is closely tied to how deeply learners engage with meaning. As a result, instructional approaches that prioritize understanding and contextual learning appear to provide more sustainable outcomes in vocabulary development. The pattern observed in this study underscores the need to position reading comprehension as a key component in facilitating long-term lexical retention.

Reading Strategies in Vocabulary Retention

Reading strategies refer to deliberate techniques employed by learners to process, interpret, and make sense of written texts. In the context of vocabulary retention, these strategies play a crucial role in shaping how new lexical items are noticed, understood, and remembered. Rather than passively encountering words, learners actively engage with texts through practices such as skimming for general ideas, scanning for specific information, inferring meaning from context, and marking unfamiliar vocabulary. These approaches enable learners to interact with language in a purposeful way, allowing repeated exposure and deeper cognitive processing. Within this study, reading strategies are understood as practical tools that facilitate the transition from initial exposure to long-term retention of vocabulary. The ways learners apply these strategies reflect not only their reading habits but also their ability to manage unfamiliar language input effectively, ultimately influencing how well vocabulary is retained over time.

Participants described a range of approaches they used while reading, particularly when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. These approaches were often applied intuitively rather than formally taught. One cadet noted: *"I usually read quickly first to get the idea, then I go back and check the difficult words. That helps me remember them because I see them more than once (I_Cadet02_2025)."* Another student explained: *"If I find a new word, I try to guess the meaning from the sentence before checking the dictionary. It stays longer in my memory that way (I_Cadet04_2025)."* A similar tendency was mentioned by another cadet: *"I like to highlight words that I don't know. Later, I review them again, especially when they appear in another text (I_Cadet06_2025)."* From the instructor's perspective: *"Students who apply simple strategies like re-reading or guessing meaning tend to retain vocabulary better than those who rely only on translation (I_Instructor02_2025)."* Another cadet added: *"Sometimes I write new words in my notebook with example sentences. It makes it easier to recall when I study again (I_Cadet08_2025)."* These accounts show that learners rely on multiple strategies that reinforce vocabulary retention through repetition, inference, and active engagement.

The responses indicate that learners do not depend on a single approach but combine several strategies to support vocabulary retention. Initial reading for general understanding, followed by closer attention to unfamiliar words, reflects a layered processing pattern that increases exposure frequency. The use of inferencing allows learners to construct meaning independently, which appears to strengthen memory compared to direct translation. Highlighting and note-taking further contribute to retention by creating visual and written reinforcement, enabling learners to revisit vocabulary in different contexts. Repetition emerges as a consistent element across strategies, either through re-reading texts or encountering the same words in subsequent materials. The instructor's observation reinforces the idea that strategic engagement leads to more effective retention. These findings suggest that vocabulary retention is closely linked to how actively learners interact with texts, with strategies serving as practical mechanisms that transform passive reading into a more cognitively engaging process. A summary of the reading strategies and their roles in vocabulary retention is provided in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Patterns of Reading Strategy Use

Reading Strategy	Context of Use in Reading Process	Observable Learner Behavior	Underlying Processing Pattern	Contribution to Vocabulary Retention
Skimming	Initial stage of reading to grasp overall meaning	Learners read rapidly without focusing on individual words, prioritizing general understanding	Global processing of text meaning before lexical focus	Establishes contextual framework that facilitates later recognition and recall of unfamiliar vocabulary
Inferencing	During encounter with unfamiliar words within sentences	Learners attempt to guess meanings using surrounding textual cues and prior knowledge	Context-driven meaning construction and semantic association	Strengthens memory through self-generated meaning, leading to more durable retention compared to direct translation

Highlighting	While identifying unfamiliar or important vocabulary during reading	Learner's mark or underline specific words for later attention	Selective attention and visual emphasis on lexical items	Enhances noticing and supports repeated exposure, increasing familiarity and recall accuracy
Re-reading	After initial comprehension or when encountering difficulty	Learner's revisit specific sections or entire texts multiple times	Iterative processing and reinforcement through repetition	Consolidates vocabulary in memory through repeated contextual exposure
Note-taking	After or during reading activities	Learners record new words along with contextual sentences or explanations	Externalization of understanding and elaborative encoding	Deepens retention by linking vocabulary to meaningful usage and enabling later review

Table 2 presents a layered account of how reading strategies are enacted by learners and how each strategy contributes to vocabulary retention through distinct processing patterns. The table shows that learners do not approach vocabulary as isolated items, but rather engage with it through staged reading practices that begin with general comprehension and gradually shift toward focused attention on unfamiliar words. Strategies such as skimming provide an initial contextual frame, while inferencing enables learners to construct meaning actively from textual cues. This is further reinforced through highlighting and re-reading, which increase exposure and strengthen recognition over time. Note-taking extends this process by allowing learners to externalize and revisit vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Taken together, these patterns indicate that vocabulary retention is shaped by a combination of repeated exposure, contextual understanding, and active learner involvement, rather than by memorization alone.

Context-Based Construction of Vocabulary Meaning

The construction of vocabulary meaning through reading involves a gradual process in which learners interpret unfamiliar words by relying on contextual cues within a text. Rather than depending solely on direct translation, learners draw on surrounding sentences, textual flow, and prior experiences to make sense of new lexical items. This process reflects an active engagement with language, where meaning is not immediately given but developed through interpretation. In this study, learners demonstrate a tendency to approach unfamiliar vocabulary as part of a broader meaning-making activity, where comprehension and inference work together. The context in which a word appears plays a central role in shaping understanding, allowing learners to form connections between new vocabulary and previously acquired knowledge. As a result, vocabulary retention emerges from this process of construction, where repeated encounters and contextual reinforcement contribute to more stable and meaningful lexical memory over time.

Learners described how they relied heavily on context when encountering unfamiliar words, often attempting to interpret meaning before seeking external confirmation. One cadet explained: *"Sometimes I don't know the word, but I look at the sentence before and after. Usually I can guess what it means, even if I'm not completely sure (I_Cadet07_2025)."* Another participant shared a slightly different experience: *"If the text is like a story, it's easier. I can follow the situation, so the new words make sense without checking the dictionary too often (I_Cadet03_2025)."* A similar point was raised by another cadet: *"I try to connect the word with something I already know. For example, if it's about military training, I relate it to what we do here (I_Cadet09_2025)."* From the instructor's perspective: *"Students tend to understand vocabulary better when they can link it to the context of the text or their own experience. That connection helps them remember (I_Instructor01_2025)."* Another cadet noted: *"Even if I guess the meaning at first, when I see the same word again in another text, I understand it more clearly (I_Cadet02_2025)."*

The responses indicate that learners engage in an interpretive process when dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, rather than relying on immediate translation. The use of surrounding sentences as a reference point suggests that meaning is constructed incrementally, with learners forming tentative interpretations that are refined over time. The ability to connect new words with prior experiences, particularly in familiar contexts such as military training, appears to strengthen understanding and recall. This indicates that meaning is not only derived from the text itself but

also shaped by the learner's background knowledge. Repeated exposure further reinforces this process, as initial guesses become more accurate with subsequent encounters. The instructor's observation supports the idea that contextual linkage plays a key role in retention. The process through which learners construct meaning from unfamiliar vocabulary while reading can be illustrated as a set of interconnected stages, as presented in **Figure 1**.

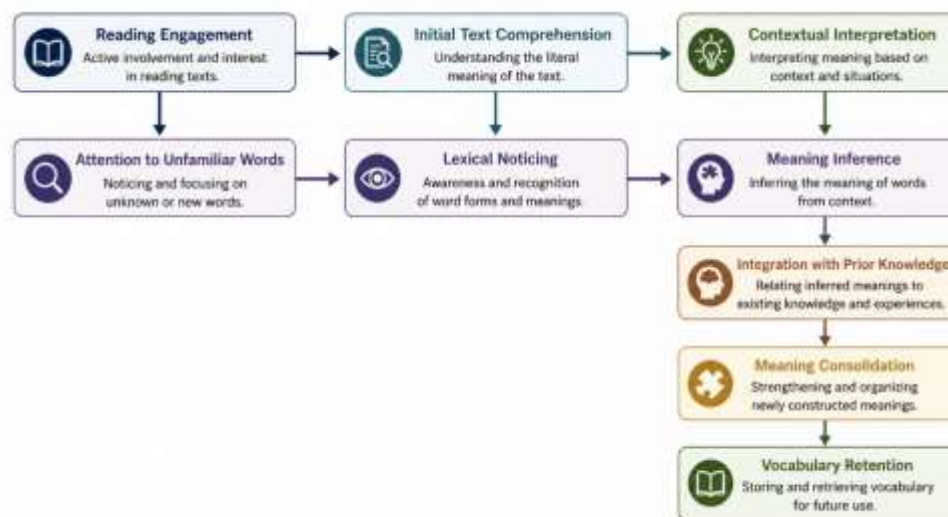


Figure 1. Process of Context-Based Vocabulary Meaning Construction

Figure 1 illustrates that vocabulary retention develops through a sequence of interrelated processes rather than a single-step activity. The diagram shows that learners begin with general engagement in reading, which allows them to form an initial understanding of the text before directing attention to unfamiliar words. At this point, vocabulary learning becomes more focused, as learners start to notice specific lexical items and attempt to interpret their meanings based on contextual cues. This interpretation is not immediate, but evolves through inference and is further shaped by the integration of prior knowledge. As learners revisit and refine their understanding, meanings become more stable, leading to consolidation in memory. The structure of the figure suggests that retention is the result of continuous interaction between comprehension, attention, and personal experience, indicating that vocabulary is internalized through an ongoing process of meaning construction rather than isolated exposure.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that vocabulary retention among EFL learners at Poltekad Batu is closely tied to how learners engage with reading as a meaning-making activity rather than as a process of memorization. Learners tend to retain vocabulary more effectively when they first develop a general understanding of the text and then focus on unfamiliar words within that context. The use of reading strategies such as inferencing, re-reading, and note-taking further supports this process by allowing learners to revisit and process vocabulary in multiple ways. In addition, the construction of meaning through contextual interpretation plays a central role, as learners rely on surrounding information and prior knowledge to make sense of new words. This process does not occur in a fixed sequence but unfolds gradually as learners interact with texts. The consistency between learner experiences and classroom practices suggests that vocabulary retention is shaped by sustained engagement with meaningful input, where comprehension, strategy use, and contextual interpretation work together to support long-term lexical development (Bai et al., 2025; Berger & Hartgerink, 2022; Najafov et al., 2025).

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in EFL research that emphasize the role of meaningful input in vocabulary acquisition. Previous studies have shown that learners retain vocabulary more effectively when words are encountered in context rather than in isolation (Berger & Hartgerink, 2022; Najafov et al., 2025; Wei & Hu, 2025). The present study supports this view by showing that learners actively construct meaning through contextual interpretation, which strengthens retention. At the same time, the findings extend earlier work on reading strategies by highlighting how strategies such as inferencing and re-reading are not used in isolation but are combined dynamically during reading. This aligns with research by Lindín (2023), which suggests that reading involves multiple layers of processing rather than discrete skills. However, this study also addresses a gap in the literature by illustrating how learners in a military-based educational context draw on their specific experiences to interpret vocabulary, an aspect that is often overlooked in more general EFL settings. In doing so, the study offers a more situated understanding of how vocabulary retention develops in context-specific learning environments.

This study offers several contributions to the field of EFL learning, particularly in understanding vocabulary retention as a process shaped by interaction between comprehension, strategy use, and contextual interpretation. Rather than treating vocabulary learning as a separate component, the study demonstrates how it is embedded within reading practices that encourage learners to engage actively with texts. It also provides a process-oriented account of how learners move from initial exposure to stable retention, which adds depth to existing discussions on vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of contextual familiarity, especially in specialized learning environments such as Poltekad Batu, where learners draw on their institutional and experiential background to interpret meaning. This perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of vocabulary learning that goes beyond general EFL assumptions. Practically, the study suggests that instructional approaches should prioritize meaningful reading activities and encourage the use of flexible strategies that support deeper engagement with vocabulary in context.

The study underscores the importance of viewing vocabulary retention as a process that emerges from sustained interaction with meaningful texts rather than from isolated memorization practices. The findings show that learners benefit from engaging with vocabulary in context, where comprehension, strategy use, and prior knowledge contribute to deeper understanding and recall. This perspective has implications for teaching practices, suggesting that reading activities should be designed to promote active interpretation and repeated exposure to vocabulary. It also points to the need for instructional approaches that allow learners to connect new vocabulary with their own experiences, particularly in specialized educational settings. More broadly, the study contributes to the discourse on transformative education and learning by framing vocabulary retention as part of a process in which learners actively reconstruct meaning, exercise autonomy, and transform contextual input into personally meaningful knowledge, thereby positioning reading not only as a language skill but as a vehicle for reflective and self-directed learning. This transformative orientation suggests that EFL instruction can move beyond skill acquisition toward fostering learner agency and critical engagement, where vocabulary development becomes one expression of a deeper educational transformation. Further studies could explore how these processes operate in different contexts or with learners at varying proficiency levels, providing a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary development in EFL environments.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to examine how reading comprehension functions as a basis for vocabulary retention among EFL learners, particularly within a context where learners engage with texts as part of structured academic training. The findings indicate that vocabulary retention is not shaped by memorization alone, but develops through a combination of comprehension, strategic reading practices, and the gradual construction of meaning from context. Learners who approached texts with the intention of understanding overall meaning were better able to interpret

unfamiliar words, revisit them through repeated exposure, and integrate them into their existing knowledge. This pattern highlights that vocabulary learning is closely tied to how learners engage with language in use rather than how many words they attempt to memorize. The study also points to the importance of context-sensitive instruction, where reading materials and learning activities allow learners to connect new vocabulary with familiar experiences. These insights suggest that language instruction should move beyond isolated vocabulary exercises and instead emphasize meaningful interaction with texts. Further research may explore how these processes operate across different proficiency levels or learning environments, offering a more comprehensive view of vocabulary development in EFL settings.

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