From Words to Understanding: Tracing the Path from Vocabulary to Comprehension

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Abstract. This study aimed to determine students' mastery of English vocabulary and reading comprehension levels, as well as the correlation between these two variables. This study employed a quantitative approach, which involved both descriptive and correlational analyses. The instrument of this study was a test adapted from Ratnawati (2006). The study's respondents were 108 grade 7 students from a public junior high school. The results showed that the level of students' English vocabulary mastery was poor (M = 38.39). It means that the students have limited mastery of vocabulary. Additionally, the results showed that the level of students' reading comprehension was fair (M = 48.93). It means that students somehow still struggle to comprehend reading texts. Finally, this study found a significant positive correlation between students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension, as indicated by a *p-value* of 0.000 and an *R*-value of 0.471. Therefore, students must develop an awareness of improving their vocabulary mastery by memorizing words and attempting to find the meaning of unfamiliar words in reading texts so that they can enhance not only their English vocabulary mastery but also their reading comprehension.

Keywords: Vocabulary mastery, Reading comprehension, Students, English, Junior high school

1. INTRODUCTION

English holds significant global importance, with many individuals learning it for higher education or international communication. This highlights its crucial role for anyone seeking to interact across borders [1]. Its pervasive use extends to various fields like business, education, and industry [2]. Although it is a formal part of the Indonesian curriculum from primary school through university, English is still considered a foreign language. Consequently, many Indonesian students struggle with comprehension and mastery, even with its inclusion in every school's curriculum.

Mastering vocabulary is crucial for English language learners. A significant hurdle many students face in acquiring English is an insufficient vocabulary. Indeed, vocabulary is a common challenge for English learners [3]. This suggests that a strong grasp of English words, or vocabulary, can significantly facilitate language acquisition. Having a strong vocabulary is a crucial part of language learning that should be considered when aiming to enhance reading comprehension, in addition to grasping English grammar and possessing relevant background knowledge [4]-[7]. Extensive vocabulary knowledge significantly correlates with strong performance in both vocabulary assessments and reading comprehension. A learner's vocabulary proficiency is a crucial predictor of their overall reading ability [6]-[9]. This implies that increased familiarity with words directly enhances reading performance, while a limited vocabulary can impede reading comprehension. Therefore, consistent engagement with reading not only expands vocabulary but also enriches general knowledge, refines reading comprehension, and fosters the development of other essential language skills.

Reading is a fundamental skill in the English language, and mastering it is crucial for language learners. At its core, reading aims for comprehension, as "the goal of reading is comprehension" (para. 1) [10]. Through reading, students can significantly expand their knowledge base. Proficient readers employ diverse strategies to interpret texts, thereby effectively acquiring a wealth of information [11]. Reading plays a crucial role in learning across all areas of life, as people frequently gain knowledge through what they read [12]. Beyond knowledge acquisition, reading empowers students to articulate ideas more effectively in both oral and written communication. Developing strong reading comprehension skills is crucial for fostering new ideas. Moreover, a strong reading ability directly contributes to improved reading

comprehension. Therefore, cultivating strong reading comprehension is vital for students seeking to enhance their overall English language proficiency.

Vocabulary is considered to be one of the essential elements of the English language. Moreover, vocabulary is a fundamental component of language that plays a crucial role in developing the four essential language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking [13]. A broad vocabulary is necessary for effective communication in English. It means that to improve their language skills, learners must first master vocabulary [14]. Vocabulary mastery can contribute to enhancing an individual's language skills. However, junior high school students in Indonesia have low achievement in vocabulary [15]. At this level, students often lack the motivation to look up the meaning of unfamiliar words. So, when they read, they only read without understanding and do not pay attention to the text's meaning or contents. Furthermore, students lack the desire to learn more about the text, and they are reluctant to open the dictionary. This leads them to have difficulty understanding or communicating ideas. For instance, when they are confronted with unfamiliar words, they often misunderstand or fail to understand what is communicated, whether in writing or orally. Moreover, to understand, students need to consult a dictionary to determine the meaning of the word. Therefore, students need to master vocabulary in order to comprehend a wide range of English texts.

Furthermore, vocabulary limitations significantly hinder students' reading comprehension, making it essential to understand the underlying challenges they face in order to improve their reading skills. When students lack understanding of the words in a text, they often struggle with comprehension. Those with strong reading skills can access a wide range of information and knowledge from textbooks and other resources, which supports their learning. Reading comprehension enhances both the enjoyment and effectiveness of reading, benefiting individuals not only academically but also professionally and personally (para. 2) [16]. This highlights the importance of reading comprehension for students. Many international students learning English often face challenges in understanding reading materials, primarily due to limited vocabulary [17]. In fact, Indonesian junior high school students continue to struggle with reading comprehension [18]. These students struggle with recognizing synonyms and antonyms, word formation, identifying the topic and main idea, understanding the text's structure, and extracting information [19]. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the contributing factors to these difficulties in order to find effective solutions.

A strong relationship is widely acknowledged between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension. There is a strong connection between the two [20]. A limited vocabulary can negatively affect students' reading comprehension. On the other hand, having a strong command of vocabulary can positively enhance their ability to understand what they read. Weiser further explained that vocabulary mastery can help students develop prior knowledge and make connections to the text; vocabulary mastery can also improve students' fluency in comprehending the text. In other words, the more vocabulary students have, the better their skill in comprehending a text. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge is "fundamental to reading comprehension; one can't understand text without knowing what most of the words mean" (p. 2) [21]. This illustrates the importance of vocabulary in enhancing students' reading comprehension skills. Hence, it is clear that mastering vocabulary is essential for students to advance their reading comprehension.

Mastery of vocabulary is crucial for language learners, as it significantly influences their ability to understand and interpret texts. Research consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. For instance, a study found a significant correlation between students' vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension abilities, highlighting the importance of vocabulary in understanding reading materials [22]. Furthermore, research was conducted among seventh-grade students. The researchers found a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.655$) between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension, highlighting the significant role of vocabulary in comprehending texts [23]. Considering these findings, it is evident that vocabulary mastery is integral to reading comprehension. Despite the recognized importance of vocabulary, some students tend to skip unfamiliar words during reading tasks and may lack the motivation to consult dictionaries. This behavior can hinder their understanding, especially when key information is embedded in challenging vocabulary. Students' reluctance to use dictionaries negatively impacted their reading comprehension, underscoring the necessity of vocabulary mastery for effective understanding [24]. Additionally, several studies have shown no significant correlation between the two variables [25] [26] [1]. Therefore, although studies show that vocabulary mastery significantly correlates with reading comprehension, some research shows different results. This suggests that other factors could correlate with students' reading comprehension. Consequently, further research is required to gain a clearer understanding of the correlation between the variables. Thus, the purpose of this study was to find out the levels of students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension. This study also aimed to determine whether the students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension are significantly correlated.

2. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach, utilizing descriptive and correlational designs. Quantitative methods are focused on collecting numerical data and analyzing it using statistical techniques to identify patterns or relationships [27]. These methods aim to quantify variables and generalize findings across larger populations or phenomena. Specifically, descriptive research is designed to systematically describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon without delving into causal relationships [28]. This method was used to assess students' mastery of English vocabulary and their reading comprehension levels. A correlational research design was employed to explore the relationship between these two variables. Correlation analysis reveals the strength and direction of a relationship between two variables [29]. Still, it does not imply causality, as it only indicates whether a relationship exists.

Respondents

The researcher administered the test to 126 grade seven students at a public junior high school in North Sulawesi. These students were chosen because a problem with vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension was observed among these students. The participants were divided into five classes: Class A (24 students), Class B (25 students), Class C (23 students), Class D (28 students), and Class E (26 students). After collecting the data for the study, 18 test responses were excluded due to incomplete answers, leaving 108 valid respondents who fully completed the test.

Sampling Method

The researcher employed a non-probability sampling method, namely convenience sampling, to collect the data. Convenience sampling refers to the selection of participants based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher [30]. However, the generalizability of the findings is limited to the specific subgroup from which the sample was obtained, rather than the entire population. In this case, the data were gathered from students who were available in the classroom at the time the test was administered.

Instrument

For data collection, the researcher used a multiple-choice test. Multiple-choice tests are effective for measuring students' vocabulary and reading comprehension in English because they are straightforward and valid for scoring [31]. The test was adapted from [18] and included 40 vocabulary items and 40 reading comprehension items. Each item had four options: A, B, C, and D. The tests were derived from various sources and had been previously validated by Ratnawati [18].

Validity and Reliability

To assess the validity and reliability of the instrument, the researcher conducted validity and reliability analyses. Validity refers to "a test or instrument measuring what it's intended to measure" (para. 6), while reliability is "a measure of the stability or consistency of test scores" (para. 2) [32]. For the vocabulary mastery test, 15 out of 40 items were found to be valid, and 25 items were invalid. Similarly, for the reading comprehension test, 13 out of 40 items were valid, while the remaining 27 were invalid. Only the valid items were used for the final study: 15 valid vocabulary items and 13 valid reading comprehension items.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.832 for the vocabulary test and 0.765 for the reading comprehension test (see Appendix D). It is noted that "acceptable values of alpha range from 0.70 to 0.95" (p. 54) [33], indicating that both tests are reliable for use in the study.

3. FINDINGS

The Level of Students' Vocabulary Mastery

One of the primary objectives of this study was to assess the level of English vocabulary mastery among students. Utilizing descriptive statistical analysis, the mean score for students' vocabulary mastery was found to be 38.39 (Table 1), indicating that their vocabulary mastery was categorized as poor. This result suggests that students encounter difficulties in mastering English vocabulary, which may hinder their overall language development.

Table 1. The level of students' English vocabulary mastery

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Vocabulary Mastery	108	13.00	93.00	38.39	19.99
Valid N (listwise)	108				

This finding contrasts with previous research. For instance, a study reported a mean score of 54.16, categorizing students' academic vocabulary proficiency as poor to average [34]. Similarly, it is found that students' vocabulary mastery was classified as "Good," with an average score of 69 [35]. These discrepancies suggest that factors such as instructional methods, student engagement, and assessment tools may influence vocabulary acquisition outcomes. The variation in vocabulary mastery levels across studies underscores the necessity for further research to identify effective strategies for enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Such strategies may include integrating technology, employing diverse teaching methods, and fostering a learning environment that encourages active engagement with new vocabulary.

The Level of Students' Reading Comprehension

The second research question aimed to determine the level of students' reading comprehension. This was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods through a statistical software application. The findings revealed that the average score for students' reading comprehension was 48.93 (refer to Table 2). According to the interpretation scale, this score falls within the range of 46–65, which places the students' reading comprehension in the "fair" category. In other words, students demonstrated a moderate level of reading comprehension. This suggests that they continue to encounter difficulties in fully understanding reading texts.

Table 2. The level of students' reading comprehension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Reading Comprehension	108	.00	100.00	48.93	23.09
Valid N (listwise)	108				

Previous research has also found that students' reading comprehension skills generally fall within a fair or moderate range. For example, it is concluded that students struggled to fully understand reading materials, which contributed to their fair level of comprehension [18]. Similarly, it is reported that students had difficulty grasping the meanings of various words within texts, which affected their overall comprehension [1]. These findings suggest that limited vocabulary and a lack of familiarity with English significantly hinder students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, it is emphasized that insufficient prior knowledge, along with a lack of motivation or interest in reading, can further contribute to students' difficulties in understanding texts [36].

The Correlation Between Students' Vocabulary Mastery and Their Reading Comprehension

Correlation analysis was employed to examine the strength of the relationship between two variables. To determine whether a significant relationship exists between students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension, the data were analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient. As presented in Table 4, the analysis yielded a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.471$ with a significance value of $p = 0.000$, which is less than the alpha level of 0.05. This indicates a statistically significant and positive correlation between students' vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension. Additionally, the correlation falls within the range that denotes a moderate relationship (see Table 3). This interpretation is based on Ratner's (2009) guidelines for evaluating correlation strength.

Table 3. Guidelines for interpreting correlation coefficient

Value of r	Strength of Relationship
-1.0 to -0.5 or 1.0 to 0.5	Strong
-0.5 to -0.3 or 0.3 to 0.5	Moderate
-0.3 to -0.1 or 0.1 to 0.3	Weak
-0.1 to 0.1	None or very weak

The correlation is statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.05 [37]. Thus, the alternative hypothesis, which states "There is a significant correlation between students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension," is accepted. The finding of a significant correlation between students' English vocabulary mastery and their reading comprehension suggests that improvements in vocabulary knowledge can lead to better reading comprehension. In this study, students demonstrated a low level of vocabulary mastery, which appears to be linked to their only fair performance in reading comprehension. This implies that vocabulary mastery is key in enhancing students' ability to understand texts. However,

because the correlation strength was moderate, other factors, such as reading strategies, background knowledge, and motivation, are likely to influence reading comprehension.

Table 4. Correlation between Students' English Vocabulary Mastery and Their Reading Comprehension

		Reading Comprehension
Vocabulary Mastery	Pearson Correlation	.471**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	108

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To enhance both vocabulary and reading skills, students should be encouraged to actively expand their vocabulary—for instance, by memorizing new words and looking up the meanings of unfamiliar terms encountered in reading materials. Moreover, Mobile-Assisted Vocabulary Learning (MAVL)—especially through the use of digital flashcards—supports learner independence, boosts engagement, and enhances long-term vocabulary retention by incorporating features such as spaced repetition and gamified elements [38]. Developing such habits can gradually improve their language proficiency and comprehension ability. This study's results are consistent with another study that also observed a positive and significant relationship between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension [35]. Their research supports the view that vocabulary is a foundational component of reading success. It is argued that students who have a strong grasp of vocabulary are better equipped to understand reading texts, and that gains in vocabulary often lead to improved comprehension [39]. On the other hand, some studies have produced different results. For example, [1] [25] [26] found no significant correlation between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension, suggesting that vocabulary knowledge alone may not be sufficient to explain variations in reading ability. These differing findings highlight ongoing debates in the field and underscore the need for further research to explore the various factors that contribute to reading comprehension.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined students' mastery of English vocabulary and reading comprehension skills and explored the connection between these two skills. The results show that students' vocabulary mastery was relatively low, with an average score of 38.39, placing them in the "poor" category. This suggests that many students struggle to build a solid vocabulary base, which could be a major obstacle to developing their overall English proficiency. This could be because students lack motivation to learn or are affected by the teacher's teaching methods. Interestingly, this result differs from those found in several other studies. For example, a study reported a higher average score of 54.16, which they categorized as poor to average [34]. Meanwhile, other researchers found a much better outcome, with an average score of 69, placing students in the "good" category [35]. These differences may be influenced by various factors, such as different teaching methods, the level of student motivation, or even the tools used to measure vocabulary knowledge. This suggests that the success of vocabulary acquisition might depend heavily on context and highlights the importance of exploring teaching approaches that are more effective and engaging.

Moreover, in terms of reading comprehension, students achieved an average score of 48.93, which falls into the "fair" category. This means that while students can understand basic reading materials, they still face challenges when it comes to comprehending more complex or challenging texts. The reason for this could be limited vocabulary knowledge or difficulty recognizing words quickly and accurately, which can then slow down reading and reduce comprehension. This finding is consistent with earlier research. It is also reported that students often struggle to understand texts, particularly due to limited vocabulary and difficulty identifying the meanings of unfamiliar words [18] [1]. In short, it seems that without a strong vocabulary foundation, students will continue to struggle with reading comprehension.

The correlation analysis in this study confirms the link between vocabulary and reading skills. A moderate positive correlation was found (r = 0.471, p < 0.05), meaning that students with better vocabulary knowledge tended to perform better in reading comprehension as well. It is believed that having more vocabulary significantly affects students' reading comprehension [40]. Based on Ratner's (2009) guidelines, this is considered a moderate relationship, neither weak nor extremely strong. While vocabulary is clearly essential, it is likely not the only factor influencing how well students comprehend what they read. Other factors, such as prior knowledge, interest in the topic, and reading strategies, may also play significant roles.

These results are in line with other researchers' studies, who also found that a strong vocabulary base contributes to better reading outcomes [35] [39] [41]. When students understand more words, they are better

equipped to grasp the meaning of a text as a whole. However, not all studies agree. A previous study found no significant correlation between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension [1]. This suggests that while vocabulary is essential, it is not always the sole factor behind reading success.

Overall, these findings suggest that to enhance students' reading comprehension, it is essential to focus closely on how vocabulary is taught. Teachers could try more interactive approaches, such as using digital tools, real-life contexts, or media, to make vocabulary learning more engaging. Encouraging students to make a habit of learning new words, using them in context, and looking up unfamiliar terms when reading can go a long way in improving both vocabulary and comprehension. In conclusion, vocabulary plays a crucial role in helping students understand texts, but it's not the only piece of the puzzle. A well-rounded approach that incorporates effective teaching strategies, engaging reading activities, and motivational support is necessary to help students succeed. Future research could investigate the combination of factors that yields the most effective reading outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the seventh-grade students at the school possess limited English vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, they continue to face challenges in comprehending reading texts. The study also reveals that students' vocabulary mastery contributes to enhancing their reading comprehension. This indicates that as students expand their vocabulary, their ability to comprehend texts is likely to improve. However, since the average score for vocabulary mastery was lower than that for reading comprehension, and the correlation between the two variables was only moderate, it is likely that other factors also influence students' reading comprehension skills. Based on the findings and discussions, this study offers several recommendations. First, given that the respondents demonstrated poor vocabulary mastery and fair reading comprehension, it is recommended that students work on enhancing both their vocabulary skills and reading comprehension. One practical approach could be memorizing additional vocabulary to increase word recognition, which in turn will improve their ability to understand a variety of reading materials. Second, English teachers, especially those at the school involved in this study, should adopt creative teaching methods to make learning more engaging for students. Teachers should also encourage students to develop a habit of regular reading by providing diverse reading tasks that are linked to the lessons. By fostering a love for reading, students can simultaneously improve their reading comprehension and vocabulary. Lastly, for future researchers interested in studying the relationship between students' English vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension, the results of this study can serve as a foundation. Additionally, future studies could explore this topic in different schools and educational levels, and consider using advanced assessment tools, such as higher-order thinking skills tests, to evaluate students' vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension.

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