



Enhancing Reading Comprehension Through Systematic Vocabulary Instruction

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ABSTRAK

Abstrak ditulis dalam Bahasa Indonesia dan Bahasa Inggris menggunakan huruf arial ukuran 10, spasi 1 dan dengan Panjang teks antara 200-250 kata. Untuk artikel dalam bahasa Inggris, abstrak bahasa Indonesia tidak perlu diikutsertakan. Abstrak versi Bahasa Indonesia ditulis menggunakan Bahasa Indonesia baku dengan ejaan yang disempurnakan. Penulisan singkatan dan rumus matematika di dalam abstrak perlu dihindari. Abstrak memaparkan secara ringkas tentang masalah, tujuan, metode, hasil dan kesimpulan.

ABSTRACT

This study examined whether Systematic Vocabulary Instruction (SVI) could improve first-semester university students' reading comprehension through three instructional cycles. Systemic vocabulary development emphasizes understanding vocabulary not as isolated words, but as a network of interconnected meanings, integrated within language structures and communicative contexts. The primary objective of this study is to evaluate how systematic vocabulary instruction can improve reading comprehension skills, with a focus on first-semester university students who frequently struggle with academic texts. Using a qualitative descriptive research design through Classroom Action Research (CAR), this study has been conducted in three cycles involving planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. Data were collected through classroom observations, student reflections, pre- and post-intervention assessments, and open-question,

ensuring a comprehensive analysis of pedagogical changes and student progress. This research found that Reading Comprehension can be achieved through Systematic vocabulary development by strengthening and enriching the language education literature on systems-based instruction, it leads to fostering students' independence and creativity in language exploration, equipping them to navigate complex texts more effectively. However, when this method applied into unfamiliar themes with developed complex material, it led students to an abstract domain that requires intensive scaffolding

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a multidimension and a complex cognitive process in which readers not only identify words or sentences but also construct in-depth meaning from the text being read (Kendeou, McMaster and Christ 2016). In general, reading comprehension can be defined as an individual's ability to extract meaning and comprehensively understand the contents of a text, which involves an active interaction between the text, the reader's knowledge, and the reading strategies applied (Yang et al, 2021). Duke and Pearson (2002) explain that reading comprehension includes the ability to interpret, analyze, and evaluate reading content. The main principle of reading comprehension is a constructive process, in which readers combine text information with their existing knowledge to effectively understand the context. Stanovich (1980) emphasized that reading comprehension is the result of the interaction between decoding and linguistic comprehension. One major challenge is the reliance on traditional methods that emphasize memory and memorization rather than in-depth understanding. Many teachers still use a "reading and answering questions" approach with closed-ended questions that only test memory, not higher-order thinking skills. Nugraha (2024) stated that his research shows that some science teachers in Indonesia still apply learning methods that predominantly use closed-ended questions and a memorization approach in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, Rahayu (2023) also found that in the field of language teaching, teachers still predominantly use closed-ended questions to check student understanding, which tends to emphasize providing correct answers rather than encouraging open-ended answers that stimulate critical and creative thinking. Furthermore, in the Indonesian context, educational policies emphasizing high-level cognitive assessment have not been fully integrated into the daily learning process. This is evidenced by the continued dominance of memorization-

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based assessments, limited teacher training, and time pressures lead teachers to prefer quick and easy to graded assessments. Consequently, reading skills are often associated solely with speed reading or memorization, even though the essence of comprehension is reading with purpose and understanding. Furthermore, students often struggle due to a lack of ability in "active reading strategies," such as making predictions, summarizing, identifying main ideas, establishing relationships between sentences, and understanding language nuances (Rahman et al., 2021 and Sari et al., 2020). Another factor exacerbating this situation is the "variation in text difficulty," which is not always tailored to students' abilities. Furthermore, many students struggle due to a lack of background knowledge. One finding from Anggia and Habok (2023) in her research found a relationship between the text complexity and the degree of difficulty of the tasks. Anggia's case often found that limited vocabulary understanding was an obstacle that referred to a text being complex and causing the degree of difficulty of the tasks. Furthermore, findings from Muchlis (2024) found that many high school students face significant obstacles in reading literacy skills, especially related to a lack of accuracy, attention, and care regarding information in texts, limited use of information and communication technology (ICT) which often uses foreign languages in learning, and low background knowledge (prior knowledge) possessed by students. All of them make it difficult to connect new information with what is already known (prior knowledge). Both of the above findings imply that prior knowledge is the basis for acquiring knowledge that will be received, one of which is the ability to master vocabulary.

Vocabulary serves as a cornerstone in the process of acquiring a second language. According to Hatch and Brown (1995), it can be understood as "the list or collection of words for a language or the list or collection of words used by individual speakers of a language." This perspective highlights that true vocabulary knowledge goes beyond merely knowing a certain number of words; it also involves the depth and precision with which individuals can apply them. Thornbury (2002) further elaborates that mastering vocabulary entails grasping the form and meaning of words, along with the skill to deploy them suitably across different situations. Schmitt (2010) identifies two primary competencies in this domain: receptive skills, encompassing listening and reading, and productive ones, including speaking and writing. Nation (2001) argues that effective vocabulary learning demands repetition, active recall, meaningful application, and exposure in varied settings. To embed words firmly in long-term memory, learners must encounter them repeatedly in diverse contexts. Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) stress the value of frequency and prominence, suggesting that commonly used words deserve priority in instructional approaches. Moreover, vocabulary becomes more accessible when learners participate actively, employing metacognitive and mnemonic techniques (Safitri, 2022). The acquisition of vocabulary unfolds as a structured journey. Cameron (2001) describes key phases: initial encounters with words, reinforcement via repetition, and eventual use in spoken and written forms. This progression blends intentional study, like targeted vocabulary exercises, with incidental absorption through activities such as reading or listening. Diyono (2009) notes that learners who diversify their approaches; such as categorizing words, forming associations, or using imagination tend to achieve greater proficiency. Techniques like word mapping, inferring from context, and mnemonic aids have proven effective in enhancing retention and recall (Budi, Mulyati and Halim, 2021). Those techniques emerged from strong vocabulary.

The concept of Systematic Vocabulary Development emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional approaches. In recent years, researchers have highlighted the importance of Systematic Vocabulary Development by giving the clear Instruction or Systematic Vocabulary Instruction (SVI) to improve vocabulary and to support reading comprehension, as an explicit, intentional, and sequenced approach to teaching vocabulary that helps learners develop both breadth (the number of words known) and depth (the quality of understanding). Unlike incidental vocabulary learning, which depends on passive exposure through reading or listening, SVI ensures that vocabulary learning is planned, structured, and reinforced across various contexts (Stone and Urquhart, 2008). It emphasizes the explicit teaching of words, their definitions, and strategies for using them effectively in reading, writing, and speaking. A systematic approach recognizes that students require multiple exposures to words in different contexts to truly learn them (Stone and Urquhart, 2008; Graves, 2016.). According to Wright and Cervetti (2027), SVI offers a step-by-step framework for teaching vocabulary that links word learning to comprehension, reading fluency, and academic achievement. This process is systematic, following a logical sequence from word selection to active engagement and reinforcement, which makes vocabulary growth measurable and intentional.

Systematic Vocabulary Instruction is a learning approach that incorporates Marzano's theory (2004). The core characteristics of systematic vocabulary instruction (SVI) include *explicit teaching*. This means that SVI involves the direct instruction of word meanings, pronunciation, and usage. Teachers do not assume that students will learn new words independently; instead, they explicitly introduce, define, and model their use in context. This clarity helps learners develop a deeper understanding of words beyond

rote memorization (Nation & Coady, 2014). The next is *Intentional Word Selection*. In this step, teachers purposefully select vocabulary, focusing on high-frequency, high-utility, and conceptually rich words that frequently appear in texts. Words are chosen based on their relevance to reading comprehension and subject matter learning (Shuangye, 2023). Following this, *contextualized learning* steps occur within authentic reading passages or content lessons, allowing students to understand how vocabulary functions in real communication. In this step, students explain the meaning of terms in their own words, and then students create non-linguistic representations. This approach helps learners infer meaning, use context clues, and strengthen reading comprehension. Sakkir (2026) found that contextualized and visual instruction significantly improved vocabulary retention. *Repetition and reinforcement* are also essential components of this process. Systematic instruction requires multiple exposures to target words in different contexts, either before, during, and after reading. Repetition ensures long-term retention and promotes automatic recognition during reading. The next step is to *actively engage students* with the words through activities such as semantic mapping, word classification, sentence construction, and morphological analysis. This hands-on engagement deepens word understanding and supports independent learning (Wahyuni, Atmowardoyo and Sakkir 2026). These processes must integrate vocabulary instruction across the curriculum. SVI extends beyond language classes, as vocabulary instruction is reinforced in different subjects, ensuring continuity and practical application. This approach helps learners effectively use academic vocabulary in varied contexts (Wright and Carveti, 2017). Rather than memorizing words in isolation, this approach emphasizes the integration of several important elements such as vocabulary selection, repeated exposure, contextualization, morphology, and retrieval strategies, organized systematically throughout the curriculum. This approach is based on the premise that vocabulary does not stand alone, but is part of an interconnected language structure. In a systemic view, students are encouraged to understand vocabulary through a network of meanings, such as synonyms, antonyms, semantic categories, idiomatic phrases, word classes, and contexts of use. For example, when learning the word "impact," students not only memorize its meaning but also explore related words such as "consequence," "influence," and "effect," and how these words appear in argumentative or narrative sentences. Research by Halliday (1994) in systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) theory states that language is a system used to create meaning. Therefore, when students understand vocabulary systematically, they not only have a richer vocabulary bank but also deeper language cognition that directly strengthens their ability to analyze texts and understand meaning relationships holistically. SVI research by Aswad, et al (2022) which examined the effect of Word List Instruction (WLI) as one of the SVI methods on improving the vocabulary of English as a foreign language (EFL) students in Indonesia showed that the systematic use of WLI resulted in significant improvements in vocabulary mastery and positive responses from students towards the method. Another study conducted by Marpaung (2020) on SVD using authentic materials to develop the vocabulary of ESL students. The results of this study indicate that an authentic materials-based approach systematically improves vocabulary understanding and the ability to use words in real contexts.

From the two studies mentioned above, research on the application of Systematic Vocabulary Instruction as a strategy to improve reading comprehension is worthwhile, as it offers an approach that is not only cognitively effective but also applicable in classroom practice. Although several studies have examined vocabulary techniques individually, few have specifically explored an integrated, systemic approach to reading instruction. Furthermore, many teachers struggle to implement such an approach due to a lack of practical guidelines, clear assessment instruments, or adequate training. In addition, a review of recent studies reveals a trend in measuring vocabulary breadth (the number of words learners know) without assessing vocabulary depth (how well they understand and use those words). However, vocabulary depth which includes knowledge of word meanings, collocations, morphology, and semantic relationships is more predictive of reading comprehension (Ma and Lin, 2015). This neglect of depth-oriented instruction and assessment represents a significant conceptual gap that this study aims to address by implementing systematic vocabulary instruction that develops both breadth and depth. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether systemic vocabulary instruction is able to enhance students' reading comprehension or not, particularly at the university level in the first semester of students. The results of this study are expected to form the basis for the development of innovative learning modules, provide concrete guidance for lecturers, and enrich the language education literature related to systems-based learning strategies. This study is expected not only improve reading comprehension but also foster students' independence and creativity in exploring language more deeply.

2. METHODS

This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach through Classroom Action Research (CAR), following the cyclical model of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting across three cycles. This method allows for direct intervention and continuous pedagogical refinement to understand the evolution of the learning experience. The respondents consist of 31 first-year students from the English Language Program at Pamulang University, selected via purposive sampling to represent diverse educational backgrounds from across Indonesia. To gather data, four types of instruments are employed: vocabulary tests, reading comprehension tests, open questions and observation sheets with field notes. These tools facilitate data triangulation and ensure a comprehensive view of student progress. The data analysis involves a combination of qualitative-descriptive methods and light quantitative-descriptive techniques. Quantitative test data is analyzed using scores in each cycle to track cycle-to-cycle development. Meanwhile, qualitative data from students responding to open questions and observations are processed through triangulation, following the Miles and Huberman model. This rigorous analysis, bolstered by source and method triangulation, ensures the credibility and integrity of the research findings

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1 shows the result score obtained by the students in cycle 1 up to cycle 3

Category	Cycle 1		Cycle 2		Cycle 3	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Mean	55.06	88.44	76.25	73.13	85.69	95.50
Median	50.00	95.00	90.00	70.00	93.00	100.00
Minimum Value	12	20	10	40	23	60
Maximum Value	100	100	100	100	100	100
Standard Deviation	23.30	19.36	24.20	16.74	22.19	9.26

As previously mentioned, Cycle 1 focuses on the meanings of base words without deep morphological complexity, whereas in Cycle 2, the material expands to include morphological forms such as organize-organization-organizational or manage-manager-managerial. In Cycle 3, the material returns to focusing on basic meanings, excluding morphological complexity. In terms of quantitative data regarding students' reading test scores across the three cycles reveals significant fluctuations in learning outcomes. Cycle 1 shows that there is a very significant improvement. The average score jumped from 55.06 to 88.44. The median score also rose from 50 to 95, indicating that most students achieved very good scores. The majority of students saw score improvements from the pre-test to the post-test; for instance, Adi Nadjaen's score rose from 70 to 100, Ajwa's from 40 to 100, and Silvy's from 40 to 100. Responses to open questions revealed that the Cycle 1 theme resonated with the students' daily lives, it makes the provided vocabulary easier to assimilate.

Discussion

Based on the score table, a large number of students improved their reading comprehension scores from the pre-test to the post-test, frequently reaching very high levels. This suggests that the SVI approach enabled learners to link newly learned or reinforced vocabulary to meanings they could readily associate with their own academic setting. In the published qualitative analysis, students also stated that the university-life theme felt familiar, which in turn made the vocabulary easier to absorb. These results reinforce the view that reading comprehension improves when learners already have a conceptual foundation for the theme, so that vocabulary knowledge operates as a meaningful instrument for understanding texts rather than remaining as isolated memorization of individual words.

The situation contrasted to cycle 2 with theme Business, which saw a marked decline or stagnation in scores. In terms of the drop in scores observed in Cycle 2, it does not imply that the SVI method failed; rather, it highlights a "learning limit" that arises when linguistic complexity is increased

without allowing sufficient time for adaptation. In Cycle 2, the researcher introduced morphological elements (word families). In open-ended feedback, several students reported that distinguishing word functions based on suffixes was the most challenging aspect. For instance, many students struggled to determine when to use supervisor versus supervision. This aligns with the theory that knowing a word involves more than just understanding its definition; it also requires knowing how to use it across various contexts and forms. The lack of "repeated exposure" to these word-form variations prevented students from achieving a sophisticated level of understanding.

On average, there was a slight decrease from the pre-test (76.25) to the post-test (73.13). This also indicates certain challenges in the material or evaluation during this cycle. Some students who had achieved perfect scores on the pre-test actually saw their scores drop on the post-test; Adi Nadjaen's post-test score fell to 50, while Ahmad Jordan's dropped from 100 (pre-test) to 90 (post-test). Overall, many students did not experience the rapid score improvements seen in the previous cycle, with some even seeing their scores decline or remain low. In addition, Cycle 2 introduced vocabulary development that extended beyond basic meanings into word forms, including morphological variations such as related word families. It is also noted that students experienced morphological confusion, particularly when trying to tell apart similar forms, for example, how meaning shifts across different word classes. This confusion likely increased cognitive load: students had to do more than memorize meanings; they also needed to understand how different word forms influence grammatical function and sentence interpretation. Moreover, students reported that the time available for testing or completing the tasks (around 15 minutes) was limited, which likely restricted their ability to fully process complex sentences. Consequently, Cycle 2 did not lead to stable improvements in comprehension. This was not because SVI is generally ineffective, but because the learning requirements were higher than students could handle without stronger scaffolding, more time, and repeated exposure to morphological forms.

Conversely, Cycle 3 with theme *At the Bank*, the study's final cycle demonstrated a recovery and steady improvement. This cycle showed the best overall performance. The final average reached 95.50, with a median value of 100. The low standard deviation (9.26) indicates that student abilities have begun to equalize at a high level. Most students achieved post-test scores above 90. Adi Nadjaen once again scored 100, and several other students such as Adrian, Ahmad Jordan, and Cinta maintained perfect scores on both the pre-test and post-test. Notable improvements were also observed in other students; for example, Hanan's score rose from 23 on the pre-test to 75 on the post-test, and Muhammad Almer's score increased from 60 to 93. It shows that Cycle 3 (*At the Bank*) showed a clear recovery and more consistent improvement. The table indicates that many students achieved high post-test scores again, and the qualitative evidence from the published analysis supports this result. Students described the bank theme as more understandable and easier to relate to than the business theme, in a way similar to how the university theme supported Cycle 1. Furthermore, Cycle 3 returned to emphasizing basic meanings, excluding the morphological complexity that had produced confusion in Cycle 2. The results therefore suggest that when learners receive vocabulary that can be anchored in a familiar context and when the lexical focus is simpler, SVI more effectively supports reading comprehension. Students were able to convert their vocabulary knowledge into comprehension skills, showing that declarative word meaning could once again develop into procedural reading ability, namely understanding meanings within sentences and text passages.

The findings above indicate that, theoretically, vocabulary is a key component of students' background knowledge. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), as cited in Wright and Carvetti (2017) argue that direct or explicit vocabulary instruction can improve students' ability to comprehend new content by up to 12 percentile points. Furthermore, if the instruction focuses on specific words, that improvement can reach 33 percentile points. These results align with the outcomes observed in Cycles 1 and 3. Providing systematic instruction explicitly on terms such as enroll, register, or banking terminology like opening a bank account or deposit encourages students to build connections between new words and their existing knowledge within campus and banking contexts. In Steps 5 and 6, the lesson shifted to word meanings; the question "Can you imagine what happens when class is cut?" prompted relevant responses from several students, confirming their understanding of the target verb. This demonstrated that vocabulary instruction helps transform declarative knowledge or word meaning into procedural knowledge or usage in sentences. One important factor emerging from student feedback is familiarity with the theme. "Regarding the 'University' and 'Bank' themes, there were many words I was already familiar with" but with the 'Business' theme, while I knew some, there were others I didn't, especially words with similar spellings that were hard to distinguish." This response highlights the need for teachers to identify which words students have already "acquired" in their listening and speaking vocabularies before teaching them in a reading context. In Cycle 1, students already possessed a conceptual framework regarding university

life, so the SVI served merely to reinforce the corresponding linguistic labels. In Cycle 2, however, students had to learn business concepts and similarly spelled word forms simultaneously. Among the responses from students who experienced a decline in performance during Cycle 2, one stated:

"For the 'university' and 'bank' themes, there were no words that looked nearly identical in spelling; however, for the 'business' theme, I was confused between the word advise and advice. I knew the meaning was related to giving counsel, so I was unsure during the post-test and ended up changing my answer". These responses indicate that the inability to distinguish between words with similar spellings such as advise and advice suggests students are still at a word knowledge level characterized by "having heard the word but lacking a deep understanding of its meaning." Furthermore, the respondents were first-semester university students with diverse backgrounds. Research by Dickenson & Tabors (2001), Moats (2001), Storch & Whitehurst (2002), Marzano (2003), and Paynter, Bodrova, & Doty (2005) claimed that Systematic Vocabulary Instruction (SVI) helps minimize gaps between learners, particularly those facing socioeconomic, linguistic, or learning-related disadvantages. However, the responses also indicate that when SVI is applied to more complex material, it is not directly giving impact to reading comprehension. It requires intensive instructor support in four areas. First, regarding thematic familiarity; before conducting an SVI-based class, instructors must assess the students' existing knowledge levels, so that the chosen themes align with their familiarity. Second, when expanding into more complex material, time allocation must be increased; it cannot be equated with simpler themes that do not involve complex extensions such as morphological changes. Third, the target vocabulary should be integrated into the students' daily lives prior to formal instruction. Fourth, vocabulary should not be taught as a one-off event; instead, it requires repeated study across multiple sessions (an extended approach) to ensure students have ample opportunities to comprehend and use the words.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that when SVI is applied to single theme instruction without thematic expansion or complexity, it directly enables students to connect new words with their existing knowledge. It achieves this by transforming declarative knowledge in terms of newly acquired word meanings into procedural knowledge by applying those meanings within sentences. In other words, systematic instruction minimizes the impact of disparities in students' prior knowledge resulting from diverse backgrounds. However, for more complex, expanded themes, students' background differences significantly influence the learning process. Consequently, SVI cannot immediately convert declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge; instead, it requires intensive scaffolding in terms of habituation, time allocation, and other forms of assistance. This aligns with the findings of Orman, Ardasheva, Carboneau, and Firestone (2021), who argued that vocabulary instruction is not a one-time event but an ongoing process spanning multiple sessions, providing students with ample opportunities to comprehend and utilize the terms. Each word recurs across various activities, ensuring that students do not merely memorize definitions but also grasp their application within a scientific context.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Systematic Vocabulary Instruction (SVI) is highly effective for improving reading comprehension, particularly when the material's theme is relevant to students' daily life (as seen in Cycles 1 and 3). However, when SVI is applied in complex material, such as complex morphological instruction (Cycle 2), a longer adaptation period, more varied practice, and the use of non-linguistic representations (images or symbols) are required to address student confusion regarding words changing forms. SVI proves capable of narrowing the comprehension gap when implemented consistently and strategically, tailored to the students' background knowledge needs. In terms of the result, themes that expanded into complexity form should be on all cycles to avoid the gap of substance and to dig more what specific scaffolding should be addressed on vocabulary instruction to make students easier construct the meaning into passage.

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