

UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: THEME-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE NON-ENGLISH MAJORS' READING AND WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of Theme-Based Learning (TBL) in enhancing reading and writing skills among 50 fourth-semester non-English major students at the State Polytechnic of Ambon. Using a quasi-experimental design, students were divided into experimental and control groups, with the former undergoing 20 TBL sessions integrating contextually relevant themes into English instruction. These themes were chosen based on their potential to engage students and enhance their understanding of the English language. Pre- and post-tests assessed reading comprehension and writing proficiency, focusing on critical elements such as grammar, organization, and the understanding and applying these contextually relevant themes. The findings of this study are compelling, indicating significant and impressive improvements in the experimental group compared to the control group. In reading comprehension, 36% of students in the experimental group achieved 'Excellent' scores, a substantial increase from the pre-test, alongside improved performance in areas like cause-and-effect relationships and inference-making. Writing proficiency also showed remarkable improvement, with 32% of students attaining 'Good' scores post-intervention, reflecting enhanced coherence, grammar accuracy, and contextual relevance in their work. Thematic instruction fostered academic literacy and professional readiness, highlighting its holistic impact. To fully harness the benefits of TBL, this study recommends its integration into vocational curricula, aligning themes with students' research fields, and providing targeted teacher training. Robust assessment mechanisms and tailored resources are also crucial for scalability and effectiveness. These findings underscore the potential of TBL to bridge the gap between academic learning and career readiness in vocational education, offering a promising future for students and educators alike.

Key Words: *Theme-based learning; English for non-majors; Reading comprehension; Writing skills; Content-Based Instruction (CBI).*

INTRODUCTION

Theme-based learning (TBL) has gained recognition as an effective pedagogical strategy, particularly for enhancing students' language skills in reading and writing. By organizing content around a central theme, TBL promotes deeper engagement, fosters contextual understanding, and facilitates improved competencies in these core areas (Howden et al., 2021; Wadi et al., 2021; Yulsyofriend et al. 2022)). Its adaptability and success in various educational settings highlight its potential (Chaojing, 2023; Ishak et al., 2023). However, its application still needs to be improved in polytechnic environments, especially among non-English majors such as accounting students. At

the State Polytechnic of Ambon, this gap underscores an urgent need to explore how TBL can address deficiencies in academic literacy and language proficiency (Subaedah et al., 2023; Noviyanti et al., 2023). The urgency of this exploration cannot be overstated, given the potential impact on non-English majors' academic and professional success.

Learning English presents significant hurdles for non-English majors, particularly in mastering reading and writing skills. Traditional teaching approaches often fail to establish contextual relevance, resulting in disengagement and struggles with comprehension and expression (Maming, 2022; Maming et al., 2023; Wang & Xia, 2022). In contrast, TBL provides a cohesive

framework connecting language learning with real-world experiences, enhancing motivation and understanding (Puspita et al., 2020; Phan, 2024). However, while promising, the application of TBL in vocational education, particularly in accounting programs, has yet to be extensively explored.

Research has demonstrated that theme-based instruction supports language skill development by creating meaningful contexts that help learners organize their ideas effectively (Yumey et al. 2022). It provides thematic coherence, addressing the limitations of traditional methods and fostering language proficiency (Howden et al., 2021; Koç et al., 2022; Flores, 2023). TBL could be a bridge for accounting students, linking academic literacy to professional goals and aligning language education with vocational success (Shibata, 2022; Noviyanti, 2022; Pan, 2022). This dual focus on academic and career readiness highlights TBL's potential and hints at its transformative power in reshaping instructional strategies in vocational settings (Phan, 2024; Basarir & Sari, 2022).

Furthermore, TBL has shown notable success in enhancing reading comprehension and writing proficiency. It enables learners to identify patterns, draw inferences, and structure their thoughts, resulting in better academic performance (Howden et al., 2021; Shibata, 2022). Thematic environments encourage critical thinking and creativity, skills essential for educational and professional contexts (Liu, 2023; Noviyanti et al., 2023). Nevertheless, implementing TBL effectively in vocational education poses challenges, including selecting appropriate themes, developing reliable evaluation methods, and the resource-intensive nature of the approach (Yumey et al. 2023; Phan, 2024; Djoumana, 2024).

Non-English majors need help with language learning, such as limited vocabulary, ineffective reading strategies, and difficulty transitioning from conversational to academic writing (Anik et al., 2023; Okta et al., 2023). These challenges are often exacerbated by a need for immersive language experiences, which limits the connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Hoyou, 2021; Rachmadani, 2022). Additionally, motivation plays a crucial role, as many non-English majors view English learning as secondary to their primary fields of study, further hindering their progress (Liu, 2023; Ji et al., 2024; Duong & Tran, 2024; Phan, 2024).

TBL offers a viable solution to these challenges by aligning language instruction with students' academic and professional interests. Situating language learning in relevant contexts fosters meaningful engagement, improved comprehension, and enhanced writing proficiency. Reflective practices integrated into TBL environments further encourage critical thinking, creativity, and the production of well-structured academic writing (Liu, 2023; Okta et al., 2023; Zhang & Tang, 2024)). As such, TBL not only emerges as a promising approach for addressing the unique challenges faced by non-English majors but also reassures us of its effectiveness in equipping them with the skills necessary for their academic and professional endeavors.

This study aims to evaluate the impact of TBL on the reading and writing skills of non-English majors, specifically accounting students at the State Polytechnic of Ambon. By assessing the effectiveness of this instructional method, the research seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for integrating TBL into polytechnic curricula. Ultimately, the study aspires to enhance academic literacy, language proficiency, and professional readiness among vocational students, addressing the current limitations of traditional teaching methods and contributing to the body of knowledge on language pedagogy in vocational education settings (Howden et al., 2021; Subaedah et al., 2023).

METHOD

This study employed a matching-only pretest-post-test control group method and a quasi-experimental research design to assess the effectiveness of a theme-based learning intervention. The quasi-experimental design was chosen due to its reliability in evaluating educational methods, as evidenced by its widespread application in studies aimed at enhancing language and literacy education (Kilinc, 2020; Herda et al., 2023; Walls & Johnston, 2020; Almarshedi, 2022). This approach ensures the robustness of findings, particularly in educational settings, where variability in participant abilities and contexts necessitates controlled and systematic methodologies (Bachega & Carmo, 2023; Liu, 2023; Sun, 2023; Nelson et al., 2022). We chose this method, highly regarded for its reliability in evaluating educational methods (Kilinc, 2020; Herda et al., 2023; Walls & Johnston, 2020), to ensure the robustness of our findings. We formed two

distinct groups: the experimental group, which participated in 20 instruction sessions using the theme-based model of content-based instruction (CBI), and the control group, which continued with traditional instruction without thematic integration. The comparison aimed to reveal the advantages of embedding thematic learning into English instruction for improving language skills.

Participants for this study were fourth-semester non-English majors from the State Polytechnic of Ambon, selected during the 2023/2024 academic year. We deemed these students academically ready for advanced instructional interventions after they completed foundational courses. The selection process used purposive sampling to identify two classes with comparable academic performance and prior completion of the English for Accounting II course. We administered the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) by Roe and Burns (2011) to further ensure equivalency. We matched 50 of the 75 students based on their IRI scores, assigning 25 students to each group. Due to higher pre-matching scores, we designated Class A as the control group, while we formed Class B as the experimental group, receiving the theme-based intervention.

We designed the thematic learning sessions for the experimental group to integrate relevant themes into English instruction, focusing on

improving reading comprehension and writing proficiency. These sessions incorporated meaningful and contextually relevant content that encouraged students to effectively organize and express their thoughts. Research has demonstrated that thematic instruction enhances engagement, critical thinking, and overall language performance (Liu, 2023; Sun, 2023; Truman, 2023), and this new intervention aligns with this research. By linking linguistic concepts directly to the student's field of study, the sessions aimed to provide academic relevance and practical application.

Data collection involved two critical assessments, reading comprehension, and writing tests, conducted during the pre-test and post-test phases. The reading test had multiple-choice questions based on five levels of passages. The questions were about six things: the main idea (MI), the details (D), the inferences (Inf), the sequence (Seq), the causes and effects (CE), and the vocabulary (Voc). The writing test required students to write a 150-word paragraph on accounting-related topics within 45 minutes. Two independent raters evaluated the writing using Boardman and Frydenberg's (2008) rubric, which assessed topic sentences, supporting details, coherence, grammar, and word choice. The following table summarizes the data collection methodology:

Table 1. *Data collection details*

Category	Details
Tests Conducted	Reading comprehension test and writing test.
Testing Phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-test: Before the 20 sessions of theme-based learning. • Post-test: After the completion of theme-based sessions.
Reading Test Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Format: Multiple-choice questions. • Passages: Five levels of English reading passages. • Aspects Assessed: Main idea (MI), Detail (D), Inference (Inf), Sequence (Seq), Cause-and-Effect (CE), Vocabulary (Voc).
Writing Test Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task: Paragraph composition of 150+ words in 45 minutes. • Topics: Six accounting-related themes (e.g., "The Role of Accounting in Business Decision-Making"). • Focus: Contextual relevance to students' field.
Scoring for Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raters: Two independent evaluators. • Rubric: Boardman & Frydenberg (2008), assessing topic sentence, supporting details, coherence, concluding sentence, grammar, and word choice. • Weighting: 20% for key criteria.
Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Test: Scores calculated from correct answers per comprehension aspect. • Writing Test: Aggregate scores across all rubric criteria, averaging raters' scores for reliability.
Purpose of Testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare pre-test and post-test results.

Category	Details
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate improvements in reading comprehension and writing skills due to theme-based learning intervention.

The reading comprehension and writing tests underwent rigorous review by experienced raters to ensure content validity and alignment with study objectives. A try-out test with fourth-semester students from the DIII Accounting Program assessed construct validity using Pearson correlation coefficients. Only 30 items were valid, indicating high internal consistency among test items. Cronbach's alpha analysis showed a reliability coefficient of 0.877, above the accepted threshold of 0.70. Spearman's rank-order correlation assessed inter-rater reliability and revealed a robust correlation coefficient of 0.932. This high correlation coefficient indicates a high agreement between two independent raters, reinforcing the objectivity and trustworthiness of the results. Scores were similar, making writing test data more reliable. We could use the results to objectively and trustingly determine how theme-based learning affected students' writing skills.

This study used three statistical analyses to evaluate the impact of theme-based learning on students' reading and writing skills. Descriptive statistics briefly overviewed the students' performance before and after the treatment. We conducted a prerequisite analysis to ensure data normality and homogeneity. We used inferential statistics, specifically paired sample t-tests and independent t-tests, to assess the efficacy of the

treatment. We also used step-wise regression analysis to identify critical factors influencing student achievement. We conducted all statistical tests using SPSS version 20. This comprehensive approach provided detailed insights into the impact of theme-based learning on students' reading and writing skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Improvements in reading and writing skills: descriptive analysis

The pretest and post-test score analysis reveals the significant impact of theme-based teaching interventions on enhancing students' reading comprehension and writing skills. The experimental group demonstrated remarkable progress, transitioning many students from the 'Poor' and 'Very Poor' categories, which were determined based on pretest score intervals below 60 (50–59.99 for 'Poor' and 0–49.99 for 'Very Poor'), to higher performance levels such as 'Good' (70–79.99) and 'Excellent' (80–100). This improvement is evident in Table 2, highlighting the score distribution for reading comprehension and writing tests in the experimental and control groups, where post-test results show a significant increase in the proportion of students achieving higher levels in the experimental group compared to the control group.

Table 2. *The score distribution of English reading comprehension and writing test (N=50)*

Skills	Score Interval	Score of Achievement	Experimental Group (EG)				Control Group (CG)			
			Pre-test		post-test		Pre-test		Post-test	
			f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reading Comprehension	80-100	Excellent	0	0	9	36	0	0	4	16
	70-79.99	Good	6	24	11	44	5	25	8	32
	60-69.99	Average	6	24	5	20	10	40	9	36
	50-59.99	Poor	9	36	0	0	6	24	4	16
	00-49.99	Very Poor	4	16	0	0	4	16	0	0
	Mean		58.92		76.32		60.44		69.08	
Writing	80-100	Excellent	0	0	4	16	0	0	0	0
	70-79.99	Good	3	12	8	32	3	12	5	20
	60-69.99	Average	8	32	10	40	9	36	8	32
	50-59.99	Poor	8	32	3	12	10	40	10	40
	00-49.99	Very Poor	7	28	0	0	2	8	2	8
	Mean		58.32		70.18		60.72		61.98	

For reading comprehension, the posttest results for the experimental group are awe-inspiring. A substantial 36% achieved an 'Excellent' score, a significant increase from the pretest where no one

scored in this category. Similarly, 44% reached the 'Good' category, compared to 24% before the intervention. The mean score for reading comprehension improved significantly from 58.92

to 76.32. In contrast, the control group displayed only modest improvements, with 16% achieving an 'Excellent' score and the mean rising from 60.44 to 69.08.

Writing skills followed a similar pattern, with the experimental group showing a significant rise in 'Excellent' scores from 0% to 16% and in 'Good' scores from 12% to 32%. Their mean writing score increased from 58.32 to 70.18, demonstrating the strong effect of the intervention. Conversely, the control group showed negligible improvement, with the mean rising slightly from 60.72 to 61.98. These outcomes underscore the overall impact of theme-based instruction (TBI) in significantly enhancing language skills compared to conventional methods.

These findings align with Mortini et al. (2024), who emphasized theme-based learning enhances students' abilities to infer and sequence information, two critical components of reading comprehension. Additionally, our study confirmed the effectiveness of this approach, as the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in inference and sequence comprehension (Phan, 2024). These results reinforce the conclusion that theme-based instruction provides a robust framework for improving reading skills through contextualized and meaningful engagement.

In writing, the experimental group also exhibited remarkable progress, with 32% of students achieving "Good" scores in the post-test compared to 12% in the pretest. This aligns with the findings of Noviyanti (2023) and Maming et al. (2023), who noted that theme-based teaching helps students produce more coherent and structured writing. Familiar and contextually relevant themes enabled students to organize their ideas more effectively, improving grammar, structure, and overall writing quality. Shibata (2022) similarly highlighted the role of thematic instruction in fostering structured and logical writing, underscoring its potential to create a more effective and engaging learning environment for students.

These findings corroborate the broader advantages of theme-based instruction (TBI), as highlighted in earlier research. Noviyanti et al. (2023) demonstrated that TBI enhances student writing by fostering motivation and providing engaging, context-rich materials. Similarly,

Puspita et al. (2020) found that thematic instruction improves reading comprehension by connecting linguistic tasks to meaningful real-world contexts. However, challenges still need to be addressed in implementing TBI effectively. Adhikary (2020) stressed the importance of selecting culturally relevant and interdisciplinary themes while ensuring materials are adapted to students' proficiency levels. Aksoy (2020) and Bizetto (2020) noted that successful implementation often requires extensive resources, such as teacher training and customized materials, which can pose scalability challenges in underfunded educational settings. These insights highlight that while TBI offers significant promise, its success hinges on careful planning, adequate resources, and alignment with learner needs and contextual realities.

Contribution of specific aspects to learning outcomes

This study thoroughly explores the contribution of specific elements to students' learning outcomes in reading and writing skills. Students' reading abilities were assessed based on six key comprehension elements: cause-and-effect relationships, details, inference, vocabulary, main ideas, and the sequence of ideas. The learning process, which was systematically integrated, demonstrated gradual improvement as these elements were combined. This systematic integration enabled students to progress from fundamental understanding, such as identifying cause-and-effect, to mastering comprehensive comprehension of main ideas and inter-idea relationships. This integration enhanced students' analytical abilities and broadened their knowledge of texts.

In writing, the study analyzed grammar, idea organization, word choice, content and ideas, and mechanics. Two independent raters conducted the assessment using Boardman and Frydenberg's (2008) rubric, which provided a comprehensive view of the quality of students' writing. This evaluation, which included topic sentences, supporting details, coherence, grammar, and word choice, ensured a thorough understanding of the student's writing skills. The student's writing progress reflected the rubric-based approach's effectiveness in holistically improving writing skills. The research findings are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. *The result of step-wise regression between the aspects of reading comprehension and writing and the result of post-test in experimental class*

Skills	Model Summary	R	R ²	Change statistics	
				R ² Change	Sig. F Change
Reading Comprehension	Cause-and-Effect	0.618	0.382	0.382	0.001
	CE, Detail	0.751	0.565	0.183	0.006
	CE, D, Inference	0.844	0.713	0.149	0.003
	CE, D, I, Vocabulary	0.910	0.828	0.115	0.002
	CE, D, I, V, Main Idea	0.955	0.913	0.085	0.000
	CE, D, I, V, MI, Sequence	1.000	1.000	0.087	0.000
Writing	Grammar/Structure	0.969	0.939	0.939	0.000
	G/S, Organization	0.990	0.980	0.041	0.000
	G/S, O, Word Choice/Word Form	0.996	0.992	0.011	0.000
	G/S, O. WC/WF, Content/Ideas	0.998	0.996	0.005	0.000
	G/S, O. WC/WF, C/I, Mechanics	1.000	1.000	0.004	0.000

Reading comprehension contributions

The analysis of reading comprehension outcomes underscores the pivotal role of the *Cause-and-Effect (CE)* aspect. This significant factor accounted for 38.2% of the variance in post-test scores ($R^2 = 0.382$, $p = 0.001$). CE is not just another aspect but a cornerstone in helping students understand complex texts by identifying relationships between events and their outcomes, a foundational skill for advanced comprehension. This finding aligns with Subeadah et al. (2023), who demonstrated the effectiveness of theme-based approaches integrated with the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model in enhancing cause-and-effect comprehension, and with Howden et al. (2021), who emphasized the value of such strategies in understanding text structures. Wadi et al. (2021) further validated the significance of CE in fostering logical reasoning within theme-based instruction. Adding the *Detail (D)* aspect increased the R^2 to 0.565, contributing an additional 18.3% ($p = 0.006$), highlighting the complementary nature of CE and D in creating a robust framework that integrates broad patterns with granular information. Wang and Shen (2023) similarly affirmed that theme-based instruction strengthens comprehension at both macro (cause-and-effect) and micro (specific details) levels.

The subsequent inclusion of *Inference (I)* raised the R^2 to 0.713, explaining 14.9% of the variance ($p = 0.003$). As a higher-order skill, inference is not just a skill but a catalyst that enables students to deduce implicit meanings and connect ideas, fostering critical thinking and contextual understanding. This finding is supported by Mortini, Fitriati, and Haryanti (2024), who emphasize inference as a crucial component of theme-based reading instruction,

and Wadi et al. (2021), who highlight its role in improving implicit comprehension and critical analysis. Howden et al. (2021) further stress the importance of inference in advancing higher-order thinking within theme-based learning, while studies such as Rachmadani (2022) and Pan (2022) provide additional frameworks for integrating inference into broader educational contexts. Duong and Tran (2024) affirm its relevance for contextual understanding, reinforcing its indispensability in literacy development.

Finally, the addition of *Vocabulary (V)*, *Main Idea (MI)*, and *Sequence (Seq)* progressively enhances the model's explanatory power, culminating in an R^2 of 1.000. Vocabulary contributes 11.5% ($p = 0.002$), followed by Main Idea (8.5%) and Sequence (8.7%) ($p = 0.000$), highlighting the comprehensive nature of theme-based learning. This approach fosters holistic text comprehension and analytical proficiency. This aligns with Mortini, Fitriati, and Haryanti (2024), who emphasize vocabulary, main ideas, and information organization as integral to theme-based instruction, and with Subeadah et al. (2023), who underscore the importance of sequencing and primary idea comprehension. Wadi et al. (2021) similarly affirm the effectiveness of integrating these components, while Rachmadani (2022), Pan (2022), and Bizetto (2020) highlight the broader impact of theme-based approaches in enhancing vocabulary, comprehension structure, and organizational skills. Collectively, these findings validate the critical role of integrating diverse skills in a theme-based framework to advance reading comprehension (Zhou, 2020).

Writing comprehension contributions

Grammar and Sentence Structure (G/S) emerged as the most significant predictor of writing outcomes, accounting for 93.9% of the variance in post-test scores ($R^2 = 0.939$, $p = 0.000$). This underscores the foundational role of grammar in producing coherent and accurate written texts, as supported by Shibata (2022), who linked theme-based instruction to enhanced lexical diversity and grammatical complexity, and Bizetto (2020), who emphasized grammar's role in 21st-century writing tasks. The profound impact of grammar on writing success is a critical insight that this research brings to scholars, educators, and students interested in writing pedagogy and assessment.

Adding *Organization (O)* to the model increased the R^2 to 0.980, contributing 4.1% ($p = 0.000$), highlighting the importance of logical structuring in writing. This aligns with Noviyanti (2020), who emphasized theme-based teaching in fostering cohesive text structures, and Bizetto (2020), who stressed the role of organized ideas in technical writing. The role of organization in enhancing coherence is a reassuring finding for scholars, educators, and students interested in writing pedagogy and assessment.

Including *Word Choice/Word Form (WC/WF)* added 1.1% to the R^2 , raising it to 0.992 ($p = 0.000$), highlighting the importance of vocabulary precision and stylistic appropriateness in writing. This finding aligns with Shibata (2022) and Bizetto (2020), who noted that theme-based instruction enhances lexical diversity and contextual appropriateness. The importance of vocabulary precision and stylistic appropriateness in writing is a crucial insight this research brings to scholars, educators, and students interested in writing pedagogy and assessment.

Finally, *Content/Ideas (C/I) and Mechanics* completed the model, contributing 0.5% and 0.4% ($p = 0.000$) to $R^2 = 1.000$. These elements emphasize originality, substance, and technical accuracy, which are essential for persuasive and error-free writing. Maming et al. (2023) and Bizetto (2020) highlighted their importance in theme-based tasks, while Mortini et al. (2024) linked theme-based teaching to structured and meaningful content. However, some studies, such as Rachmadani (2022), Duong and Tran (2024), and Peng (2022), focused on vocabulary, creativity, or listening skills, diverging from the emphasis on C/I and Mechanics. These variations illustrate the nuanced contributions of each component to effective writing development.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the transformative potential of Theme-Based Learning (TBL) in enhancing reading and writing skills among non-English major students in vocational settings. With its focus on cause-and-effect relationships, inference-making, and identifying main ideas, TBL can significantly boost reading comprehension. The experimental group's substantial improvements, surpassing the control group and elevating many students to 'Good' and 'Excellent' levels, underscore TBL's ability to make reading more engaging and effective. By embedding language learning within meaningful and contextually relevant themes, TBL inspires a new approach to education.

Writing proficiency also saw marked advancements through TBL, integrating essential aspects such as grammar, logical organization, and thematic relevance. Students in the experimental group showed considerable improvements in their ability to produce well-structured, grammatically correct paragraphs, with their mean scores reflecting notable progress compared to traditional teaching methods. This structured approach enhances technical writing skills and helps students better align their academic output with professional expectations. For instance, by writing about real-world scenarios in their field of study, students can develop a writing style that aligns more with what is expected in their future careers, reinforcing TBL's potential as a holistic educational strategy.

To ensure the practical benefits of TBL, several recommendations are provided. Integrating TBL into vocational curricula with themes directly related to students' fields of study, such as accounting, can foster relevance and engagement. Lecturer training programs are essential to equip educators with the skills to design and implement TBL effectively. Investing in tailored resources and ensuring robust assessment mechanisms, including pre-and post-tests, will support continuous improvement. Scaling TBL institution-wide while addressing potential resource and contextual challenges is vital for broader adoption. These strategies collectively highlight TBL's capacity to bridge the gap between academic learning and career readiness, fostering comprehensive skill development for vocational students practically and effectively.

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