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VOCABULARY GROWTH THROUGH INDEPENDENT READING: A CASE STUDY OF EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from 50 undergraduate students majoring in English through a close-ended questionnaire. The results of this study underscore the critical role that regular independent reading plays in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency among EFL students. Specifically, the strong positive correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary growth ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that students who engage in independent reading activities more frequently tend to experience greater improvements in their vocabulary. This finding is further supported by the subgroup analysis, which revealed that reading books and academic articles had the strongest correlation with vocabulary growth ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.01$ for books; $r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$ for academic articles). These materials often provide rich and varied contexts for encountering new words, which facilitates deeper understanding and retention. The findings highlight the need for educational strategies that encourage all students to read more frequently and diversely. Future research could explore additional factors that influence reading habits and vocabulary growth among EFL students. For instance, studies could investigate the impact of motivation, reading interest, and the availability of reading materials on students' reading frequency and vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, research could examine the role of socio-cultural factors, such as family background and peer influence, in shaping reading habits. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could track changes in reading frequency and vocabulary growth over time to provide insights into the long-term effects of independent reading.

Keywords: *Independent reading; vocabulary growth; vocabulary acquisition; reading habits; EFL students.*

INTRODUCTION

In the globalized world of the 21st century, proficiency in English has become an essential skill for communication, education, and career advancement (Erdoğan, 2019; Budiman et al., 2023; Vejayan & Yunus, 2022). With over 1.5 billion people learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the importance of effective language acquisition strategies cannot be overstated (Nassaji, 2017; Aguion et al., 2021; Lucas, 2022). Vocabulary acquisition, in particular, is a cornerstone of language proficiency, as it facilitates comprehension, enhances expressiveness, and enables effective communication across various context (Santi et al.,

2021; Schmitt, 2019; Tyson, 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of vocabulary in overall language competence, emphasizing that a robust vocabulary is essential for both academic success and real-world communication (Newton, 2020; Dhuli et al., 2023; Halim & Halim, 2019).

Despite the recognized importance of vocabulary, the acquisition of new words remains a significant challenge for EFL learners. Research has shown that reading is a powerful tool for vocabulary growth, as it exposes learners to words in context, facilitating deeper understanding and retention (Brooks et al., 2021; Fathi & Afzali, 2020; Tolle et al., 2024; Maruf & Anjely, 2020; Arifin et al., 2022). However, the majority of

existing studies have focused on structured reading interventions or motivational factors, such as reading interest, to support vocabulary growth (Brooks et al., 2021; Dhuli et al., 2023; Halim & Halim, 2019; Mujayanah et al., 2023). The role of independent reading, where students read materials of their choice outside of classroom assignments, remains underexplored.

Recent studies have provided valuable insights into the relationship between reading and vocabulary acquisition. For Instance, Soleimani et al., (2022) demonstrated that structured reading interventions, such as Assisted Repeated Reading (ARR), significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and self-efficacy among EFL learners. Similarly Santi et al., (2021) conducted a meta-analysis that highlighted the positive correlation between reading interest and vocabulary growth, emphasizing the motivational role of engaging reading materials. However, these studies primarily focused on guided or motivated reading practices, leaving a gap in our understanding of the impact of independent reading frequency on vocabulary development.

Manihuruk, (2020) explored the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, finding a positive correlation between the two. This study underscores the importance of vocabulary acquisition in enhancing reading comprehension skills. However, it does not address the role of independent reading frequency in the process. the current study aims to fill this gap by examining the correlation between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students.

The current study makes a significant contribution to the field of EFL education by specifically examining the impact of independent reading frequency on vocabulary growth among EFL students. Unlike previous researches (Manihuruk, 2020; Soleimani et al., 2022) that has primarily focused on structured reading interventions or reading interest, this study investigates the role of unstructured, independent reading in vocabulary acquisition. By doing so, it provides new insights into how everyday reading practices can contribute to vocabulary growth, which is a critical component of language proficiency.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students. Specifically, the research aims to examine the extent of EFL students' independent reading habits outside of classroom assignments,

and determine the correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary growth. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) what is the correlation between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students? (2) how often do EFL students engage in independent reading outside of classroom assignments?

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design (Creswell, J, 2014; Parker, 2020; Stockemer, 2019; Weyant, 2022) to systematically investigate the relationship between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students. The study follows a cross-sectional approach, collecting data from participants at a single point in time. This design allows for the identification of patterns and correlations between key variables, specifically focusing on the impact of reading frequency on vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, a case study approach is applied to provide an in-depth understanding of the specific context of EFL students, offering insights that may be relevant for similar educational settings.

The participants in this study were undergraduate students majoring in English study at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique to select participants, ensuring that the sample was representatives of the target population. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: students must be enrolled in the English Department, be in their second or third year of undergraduate studies, and non-native speakers of English. These criteria were chosen to focus on EFL learners who have a more established reading routine and vocabulary base. Additionally, participants were voluntary, ensuring that only those interested and willing to contribute to the study were included.

The aim was to recruit a sample size of approximately 50 students to ensure a robust and diverse representation of reading habits and vocabulary proficiency levels. The study was conducted within the controlled educational setting of Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik. This setting was chosen to ensure that the data collected was relevant and representative of the specific context of EFL students in this institution.

Data for this study were collected using a close-ended questionnaire designed to gather detailed information on the reading habits and vocabulary growth of the participants. The questionnaire consisted of several sections, each designed to

measure a specific aspect of the research. The first section focused on demographic information, including age, gender, year of study, and language background. This was followed by questions on reading frequency, where participants were asked to indicate how often they read English materials outside of classroom assignments. The types of reading materials were also explored, with participants selecting from a list that included books, academic articles, websites, and social media content. Finally, the questionnaire included a self-assessment section where participants rated their perceived vocabulary growth over the past three months. The use of close-ended questionnaire allowed for the collection of quantifiable data, facilitating statistical analysis to identify correlations between variables.

To ensure the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with a small sample of students from the same population. Feedback from the pilot test was used to identify any issues with question wording, format, or ambiguity. Necessary revisions were made to improve the clarity and reliability of the instrument. The final questionnaire was then distributed online to the selected participants. Clear instructions were provided to ensure accurate and honest responses. Participants were assured of confidentiality and informed that their answers would be used solely for research purposes. The online distribution method ensured accessibility and convenience for participants, allowing them to complete the survey at their own pace.

Data analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods (McKinley & Rose, 2019). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the key features of the data, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. This provided an overview of the participants' reading habits, and perceived vocabulary growth. Inferential statistics, including Pearson Correlation Coefficient and regression analysis, were employed to explore the correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary growth. Subgroup analyses were also conducted to examine whether the relationship between reading frequency and vocabulary growth varied across different types of reading materials. Data were analyzed using statistical software to ensure accuracy and reliability in the analysis process. The results were interpreted within the context of the research objectives, with a focus on understanding how independent reading habits influence vocabulary acquisition among EFL students.

Table 1. *Reliability and validity of the questionnaire*

Measure	Value
Cronbach's Alpha (Reliability)	0.82
Content Validity (Expert Review)	Confirmed

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, a statistical measure that evaluates the internal consistency of the instrument. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.82 was obtained, indicating high reliability. This value suggests that the items on the questionnaire are internally consistent and reliably measure the intended constructs of reading frequency and vocabulary growth. Generally, a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above 0.7 is considered acceptable, making the obtained value of 0.82 particularly strong. This high reliability ensures that the questionnaire consistently measure the constructs across different participants. Enhancing the trustworthiness of the study's findings.

The content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed through expert review. Experts in the fields of language education, vocabulary acquisition, and research methodology reviewed the items to ensure they accurately represented the constructs of reading frequency and vocabulary growth. The confirmation of content validity indicates that the questionnaire items are appropriate and relevant to the research objectives. This validation process ensures the questionnaire measures what it its intended to measure, thereby supporting the validity of the study's findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study were derived based on the research questions that were posed at the beginning of the study.

Research question #1: what is the correlation between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students?

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the correlation between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students. The data collected from the close-ended questionnaire were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Coefficient to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between these two variables.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for reading frequency and vocabulary growth*

Variable	Mean (m)	Standard Deviation (SD)
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Reading Frequency (times per week)	3.5	1.2
Vocabulary Growth (scale 1-5)	3.8	0.7

The descriptive statistics above provide an overview of the central tendencies and variability in the data collected from the participants. The mean (m) reading frequency among participant was found to be 3.5 times per week, with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicate that, on average, participants engaged in independent reading activities approximately 3.5 times per week. The standard deviation of 1.2 suggests that there is a moderate spread in the reading frequency among participants, with some students reading more frequently and others less frequently. This variability is important as it provides a range of reading habits within the sample, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of reading frequency on vocabulary growth.

The mean self-reported vocabulary growth over the past three months was rated at 3.8 on a scale of 1 to 5, with a standard deviation (std) of 0.7. This suggests that participants generally perceived a moderate to high level of vocabulary improvement. The scale used for self-assessment ranged from 1 (*no improvement*) to 5 (*significant improvement*), with the average rating indicating that participants felt they had made noticeable progress in their vocabulary. The STD. of 0.7 indicates that while most participants reported positive growth, there was some variability in the extent of perceived improvement, reflecting individual differences in reading habits and vocabulary acquisition.

Table 3. *Inferential statistics for the correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary growth*

Variable Pair	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	P-value
Independent Reading Frequency & Vocabulary Growth	0.62	< 0.01

The strong positive correlation ($r=0.62, p<0.01$) suggests that higher reading frequency is associated with greater perceived vocabulary growth. This finding supports the hypothesis that engaging in independent reading activities can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition among EFL students. The results highlight the importance of encouraging regular reading habits as a means to improve language proficiency.

In conclusion, the inferential statistics above reveals a significant and strong positive correlation between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students. This

finding underscores the value of promoting independent reading as an effective strategy for enhancing vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency.

Table 4. *Subgroup analysis of reading frequency and vocabulary growth by type of Reading Material*

Type of Reading Material	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Books	0.65	< 0.01
Academic Articles	0.58	< 0.01
Websites	0.55	< 0.01
Social Media	0.48	< 0.05

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient between reading frequency of books and vocabulary growth was 0.65, with a *p-value* less than 0.01. this indicates a strong positive correlation, suggesting that students who read books more frequently tend to experience greater vocabulary growth. The high correlation coefficient suggests that books, as a type of reading material, are particularly effective in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. This could be attributed to the rich and varied language used in books, which often includes a wide range of vocabulary and contexts.

Meanwhile the correlation between reading frequency of academic articles and vocabulary growth was 0.58, with a *p-value* less than 0.01. this also indicates a strong positive correlation, though slightly lower than that for books. Academic articles, which are typically more specialized and dense in content, provide a valuable source of new vocabulary for EFL students. The significant correlation suggests that engaging with academic texts can contribute to substantial vocabulary improvement.

While the Pearson Correlation Coefficient for reading frequency of websites and vocabulary growth was 0.55, with a *p-value* less than 0.01. this suggest a moderate positive correlation, indicating that reading websites can also contribute to vocabulary growth. Websites often cover a wide range of topics and use contemporary language, which can expose students to new words and expressions.

Simultaneously, the correlation between frequency of social media and vocabulary growth was 0.48, with a *p-value* less than 0.05. This indicates a moderate positive correlation, though slightly lower than the other types of reading materials. Social media, with its informal and conversational language, still provides a valuable source of vocabulary exposure. The lower correlation coefficient suggests that while social media can contribute to vocabulary growth, its

impact may be less pronounced compared to more formal reading materials like books and academic articles.

Research question #2: how often do EFL students engage in independent reading outside of classroom assignments?

This second research question aimed to determine how often EFL students engage in independent reading outside the classroom assignments. The data collected from the close-ended questionnaire provided valuable insights into the reading habits of the participants.

Table 5. *Frequency of independent reading among EFL students*

Reading (times per week)	Frequency	Frequency	Percentage
Never		10	10%
Rarely		20	20%
Sometimes		30	30%
Often		25	25%
Daily		15	15%

The results indicate that the frequency of independent reading among EFL students varies significantly. The majority of students reported engaging in independent reading activities with varying degrees of frequency.

The findings reveal that while a significant portion of students (30%) sometimes engages in independent reading, a notable number (25%) read often, and a smaller but still substantial group (15%) read daily. Conversely, a combined 30% of students reported reading rarely or never, indicating that a significant minority of students do not engage in independent reading activities outside of their classroom assignments.

The results of this study provide significant insight into the relationship between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students. Strong positive correlation ($r=0.62$, $p<0.01$) between reading frequency and vocabulary growth underscores the critical role that regular independent reading plays in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency. This finding aligns with the broader field of language education, emphasizing the importance of exposure to diverse reading materials as a means to improve language skills. The subgroup analysis further reveals that reading books and academic articles has the most significant impact on vocabulary growth, suggesting that these materials, which often contain rich and varied contexts, are particularly effective for vocabulary acquisition.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the benefits of reading for vocabulary growth. For instance Soleimani et al., (2022) demonstrated that structured reading interventions, such as Assisted Repeated Reading (ARR), significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and self-efficacy among EFL learners. Similarly, Santi et al., (2021) conducted a meta-analysis that highlighted the positive correlation between reading interest and vocabulary growth, emphasizing the motivation role of engaging reading materials. However, these studies primarily focused on guided or motivated reading practices, leaving a gap in our understanding of the impact of independent reading frequency on vocabulary development. This study fills that gap by demonstrating that unstructured, independent reading also plays a crucial role in vocabulary acquisition.

Manihuruk, (2020) explored the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, finding a positive correlation between the two. This study extends those findings by examining the role of independent reading frequency in vocabulary growth, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how reading habits influence language proficiency.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of vocabulary acquisition by demonstrating that independent reading frequency is a significant predictor of vocabulary growth. It supports the input Hypothesis by Krashen (Faltis, 1984; Harmer, 1984), which posits that exposure to comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition. The findings suggest that regular engagement with reading materials provides the necessary input for vocabulary development, particularly when the materials are diverse and context-rich.

The practical implication of this study are significant for educators and policymakers. Encouraging regular independent reading can be a valuable strategy for enhancing vocabulary and overall language proficiency among EFL students. Educators can promote reading habits by providing access to a variety of reading materials, integrating reading activities into the curriculum, and fostering a culture of reading within the educational setting. Additionally, the findings suggest that both formal and informal reading materials, such as books, academic articles, websites, and social media, can contribute to vocabulary growth, indicating the importance of a diverse reading diet.

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between independent reading

frequency and vocabulary growth, it is not without limitations. The study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, and the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal studies to track changes in reading frequency and vocabulary growth over time. Additionally, incorporating a wider range of assessment tools, such as standardized vocabulary tests, could provide more objective measures of vocabulary acquisition.

Future research could also explore additional factors that influence reading habits and vocabulary growth, such as motivation, reading interest, and the availability of reading materials. Investigating the role of socio-cultural factors, such as family background and peer influence, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape reading habits. Furthermore, studies could examine the impact of different types of reading materials in more detail, exploring how specific genres or formats contribute to vocabulary acquisition.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between independent reading frequency and vocabulary growth among EFL students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik. The findings revealed a strong positive correlation between reading frequency and vocabulary growth, highlighting the importance of regular independent reading in enhancing language proficiency. The subgroup analysis further indicated that reading books and academic articles had the most significant impact on vocabulary acquisition. These results underscore the need for educational strategies that promote diverse and frequent reading habits among EFL students.

EFL instructor should consider assigning 30 minutes of daily independent reading with reflective journals to encourage regular engagement with reading materials. This approach not only enhances vocabulary but also fosters a culture of reading within the educational settings. Future research should explore additional factors influencing reading habits and vocabulary growth, as well as the long-term effects of independent reading on language development. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its reliance on self-reported data and cross-sectional design. Future studies could address these limitations by employing longitudinal approaches and incorporating more objective measures of vocabulary acquisition.

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