



Department of Digital Business

Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Digital Business (RIGGS)

Homepage: <https://journal.ilmudata.co.id/index.php/RIGGS>

Vol. 5 No. 2 (2026) pp: 10737-10746

P-ISSN: 2963-9298, e-ISSN: 2963-914X

Understanding EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Experiences through Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Motivation: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) investigates how vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation shape English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading comprehension experiences across secondary and tertiary education levels (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). Adhering to the PRISMA guidelines, this review synthesizes 20 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 sourced from major international databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Taylor & Francis, Springer, SAGE, Wiley, and Google Scholar (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). The synthesis reveals that vocabulary knowledge provides a critical cognitive foundation, acting as a threshold-dependent predictor of text accessibility (Alfiani et al., 2024). Concurrently, reading motivation functions as the primary affective driving force that determines reading engagement and the deployment of self-regulated strategies (Lesiana et al., 2024). The integration of these variables indicates a reciprocal cognitive-affective interaction: rich lexical frameworks enhance task-specific self-efficacy, while high intrinsic motivation prompts sustained engagement with complex vocabulary (Alfiani et al., 2024). Conversely, limitations in these domains lead to cognitive fragmentation, vocabulary constraints, and reading anxiety (Nanda, 2020). This paper identifies critical research gaps, particularly regarding longitudinal moderation dynamics in rural and under-resourced learning environments (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). It concludes with actionable implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies, promoting the adoption of balanced, strategy-based instructional designs (Nanda, 2020).

Keywords: Vocabulary Knowledge, Reading Motivation, Reading Comprehension, EFL Learners, Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a complex cognitive process that serves as a cornerstone for academic achievement and linguistic development (Alfiani et al., 2024). Within global educational systems, the capability to efficiently extract, analyze, and synthesize written texts remains crucial for lifelong learning and professional integration (Alfiani et al., 2024). However, achieving high-level literacy is notoriously challenging in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where learners are required to process complex structural elements, dense semantic inputs, and foreign socio-cultural nuances using limited target language exposure (Lesiana et al., 2024). As a result, educational researchers have shifted from viewing reading as a purely mechanical skill to analyzing it as a multifaceted interplay of cognitive faculties and affective drivers (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024).

Importance of Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

In the contemporary globalized era, English reading proficiency is an essential academic and professional necessity (Alfiani et al., 2024). Within foreign language classrooms, reading serves as the primary gateway for receiving comprehensible input and acquiring broader language skills (Lesiana et al., 2024). For adolescent and adult EFL learners at the lower secondary, upper secondary, and university levels, reading comprehension forms the basis of academic evaluation and curriculum engagement (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). Furthermore, performance on standardized English proficiency examinations (such as TOEFL or IELTS) dictates access to higher education and career development opportunities, emphasizing that reading text comprehension directly impacts student trajectories (Nanda, 2020).

The Role of Vocabulary Knowledge

Cognitive models of reading emphasize that vocabulary knowledge serves as a fundamental pillar of comprehension (Alfiani et al., 2024). According to the Simple View of Reading (SVR), successful comprehension relies on efficient word decoding and lexical access (Alfiani et al., 2024). In an EFL context, a robust lexicon allows learners to accurately recognize words, lower cognitive load, and dedicate mental energy to deeper textual interpretation and inferencing. Conversely, text comprehension breaks down rapidly when a learner encounters severe vocabulary. Empirical studies indicate that EFL learners must navigate a significant lexical threshold—typically estimated between 2,500 and 3,000 words for academic texts—below which independent reading comprehension becomes highly fractured (Nanda, 2020).

The Role of Reading Motivation

While vocabulary knowledge establishes the structural boundaries of text accessibility, reading motivation acts as the psychological driving force that determines whether a learner engages with or avoids a text (Nanda, 2020). Reading motivation is a multidimensional construct encompassing:

1. **Intrinsic Motivation:** The internal desire to read for inherent enjoyment and curiosity
2. **Extrinsic Motivation:** The drive to read to fulfill external demands, maximize performance grades, or earn social recognition.
3. **Reading Self-Efficacy:** A learner's confidence in their ability to successfully execute specific reading tasks (Alfiani et al., 2024).

In foreign language environments, high motivation encourages sustained text engagement, prompts the use of strategic reading actions, and transforms passive decoding into an active, meaning-making process (Mishra, 2023).

Research Gap

Despite extensive independent lines of inquiry into vocabulary mastery and motivational dimensions, standard literature frequently limits these investigations to isolated analyses of single variables (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). There is a noticeable shortage of comprehensive research that synthesizes the combined cognitive-affective pathways through which vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation interact to shape the lived reading experiences of EFL learners (Alfiani et al., 2024). Existing reviews have largely overlooked how these variables intersect across different educational tiers (secondary vs. tertiary) or within under-resourced rural environments, where vocabulary deficits and low self-efficacy often trigger severe reading anxiety (Lesiana et al., 2024).

Research Objectives

1. Identify and synthesize key empirical findings regarding EFL students' reading comprehension experiences across secondary and higher education settings.
2. Analyze the structural contribution of vocabulary knowledge in supporting text comprehension and mitigating cognitive breakdown.
3. Evaluate the specific influence of multidimensional reading motivation on driving active student engagement with foreign language texts.
4. Map the conceptual relationship between vocabulary knowledge, reading motivation, and reading comprehension based on previous literature.
5. Isolate prominent research gaps to guide future educational interventions and research designs.

Literature Review

Reading Comprehension in EFL Learning

Reading comprehension within foreign language learning is defined as a complex interaction between the text, the reader's linguistic background, and the situational environment (Nanda, 2020). Unlike native-speaker reading environments where language processing is automated, EFL reading demands concurrent execution of bottom-up decoding and top-down inferencing (Nanda, 2020). Sociocultural and constructivist frameworks highlight that reading is a dynamic meaning-making process where learners draw on schemas to interpret external language inputs (Mishra, 2023). Consequently, reading success relies on balancing bottom-up linguistic mastery with top-down cognitive and affective strategies.

Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension

The cognitive connection between lexical command and text comprehension is firmly established in psycholinguistic literature (Alfiani et al., 2024). Vocabulary knowledge involves both breadth (the total size of a

learner's lexicon) and depth (the richness of word knowledge, including derivations, collocations, and contextual nuances) (Alfiani et al., 2024). According to cognitive overload theories, a limited vocabulary forces learners to exhaust their working memory on word-by-word decoding (Nanda, 2020). This leaves insufficient cognitive capacity for constructing coherent mental models of the text, identifying main points, or drawing logical inferences. As a result, vocabulary size directly dictates text accessibility, functioning as a key predictor of overall reading comprehension success (Alfiani et al., 2024).

Reading Motivation and Reading Comprehension

From an affective perspective, reading motivation functions as a critical psychological regulator of literacy development (Alfiani et al., 2024). Self-Determination Theory suggests that intrinsic motivation leads to deeper cognitive strategy use and sustained text engagement, as intrinsically driven learners approach text anomalies with resilience and curiosity (Mishra, 2023). Conversely, extrinsic motivation may drive performance in high-stakes testing scenarios but often fails to cultivate long-term reading engagement (Alfiani et al., 2024). Reading self-efficacy further strengthens this dynamic; high task confidence lowers reading anxiety and encourages learners to persist through structurally complex text elements.

Students' Reading Experiences in EFL Contexts

The lived experiences of EFL students processing literary and academic texts reveal a complex mix of linguistic constraints and emotional responses (Lesiana et al., 2024). Phenomenological studies show that many secondary and tertiary EFL learners experience cognitive exhaustion and text avoidance when confronted with high-density unfamiliar vocabulary (Nanda, 2020). This feeling of information overload is often heightened by structural complexities, such as compound-complex sentences or abstract socio-cultural metaphors. In under-resourced environments, these difficulties frequently lead to negative emotional cycles, where reading anxiety decreases task motivation and reinforces text-avoidance habits (Lesiana et al., 2024).

Conceptual Relationship among the Variables

The theoretical integration of these variables suggests a reciprocal, cognitive-affective system where vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation interactively determine reading success (Alfiani et al., 2024). High vocabulary knowledge lowers linguistic barriers, which increases task success and boosts reading self-efficacy. Simultaneously, high reading motivation encourages learners to employ self-regulated strategies and persist when encountering challenging vocabulary. This interaction forms a developmental cycle: expanded vocabulary knowledge enhances self-efficacy, which drives intrinsic motivation and prompts further reading, ultimately leading to superior vocabulary growth and advanced reading comprehension (Alfiani et al., 2024).

2. Research Methods

Review Design

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to guarantee a transparent, replicable, and objective synthesis of previous research (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). The structural execution of this review strictly adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement guidelines, ensuring a rigorous tracking mechanism from initial identification to final data synthesis (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024).

Search Strategy

Comprehensive electronic searches were conducted to identify peer-reviewed articles published between the years 2015 and 2025 (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). The targeted databases included Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Taylor & Francis, Springer, SAGE, Wiley, and Google Scholar (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). The search string utilized boolean operators to combine key thematic terms: ("*vocabulary knowledge*") OR ("*vocabulary mastery*") AND ("*reading motivation*" OR ("*intrinsic motivation*") AND ("*reading comprehension*" OR ("*reading achievement*") AND ("*EFL*" OR ("*English as a foreign language*").

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To preserve high parameters of research validity and contextual focus, strict inclusion and exclusion metrics were applied to the search results.

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Window	Years 2015 – 2025 (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)	Published before 2015 or after 2025 (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)
Language	English language only (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)	Non-English publications (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)
Research Design	Empirical studies (Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed-Methods, Meta-Analyses) (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024; Nanda & Azmy, 2020)	Opinion papers, newspaper editorials, non-peer-reviewed white papers (Nanda & Azmy, 2020)
Target Population	EFL learners at Lower Secondary (SMP), Upper Secondary (SMA), and Tertiary levels (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)	Native English speakers, ESL learners, Elementary (SD) students, or clinical populations (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)
Core Variables	Focuses on vocabulary knowledge, reading motivation, and reading comprehension (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)	Studies missing any of the three core thematic variables (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024)

Data Extraction and Analysis

The collected empirical data underwent thematic synthesis and narrative analysis (Amirah & Wennyta, 2024). Quantitative data from correlational designs, structural equation models, and meta-analyses were tabulated to evaluate the consistency of statistical effects across studies (Alfiani et al., 2024). Qualitative findings from phenomenological studies were analyzed using open coding to identify common themes regarding the challenges and coping strategies within the lived reading experiences of EFL learners (Lesiana et al., 2024).

3. Results and Discussions

Characteristics of Selected Studies

The 20 empirical studies selected for final evaluation reflect a diverse distribution of research settings and methodologies.

Table 2 Characteristics of Selected Studies (Abridged Sample)

Reference	Context	Target Level	Methodology	Primary Finding
Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova (2015)	Post-basic & University (Oman)	Secondary & Tertiary	Mixed-Methods	Investigates specific EFL reading problems and student strategies

				during transition stages.
Kasim & Raisha (2017)	School/University	Secondary/Tertiary	Qualitative/Descriptive	Identifies linguistic and non-linguistic complexities faced by EFL students in reading.
Davis et al. (2018)	Academic / Assessment	Mixed	Instrument Review	Evaluates and synthesizes the dimensions of various reading motivation scales.
Esfandiari & Tavassoli (2019)	EFL Classroom	Young Learners	Quantitative Comparative	Compares the impact of self-assessment vs. peer-assessment on reading tasks.
Kamal (2019)	EFL Classroom	Mixed	Empirical / Instructional	Demonstrates how comprehension exercises directly develop EFL learners' vocabulary.
Dong et al. (2020)	Various Regions (China)	Mixed Levels	Meta-Analysis	Confirms a substantial, generalized correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension
Nanda & Azmy (2020)	High School (Indonesia)	Secondary	Descriptive / Inquiry	Scrutinizes the causes, impacts, and solutions for poor reading comprehension issues.
Nurfauzi & Priyana (2020)	High School (Indonesia)	Senior Secondary	Quasi-Experimental	Guided Internet Reading (GIR) concurrently

				boosts vocabulary mastery, motivation, and comprehension.
Aghajanzadeh Kiasi & Rezaie (2021)	EFL Writing / Literacy	Intermediate	Quantitative Experimental	Examines collaborative and peer assessment dynamics in language ability
Lawrence et al. (2021)	Academic Context	Secondary	Advanced Statistical Modeling	Explores item features showing strong relations between academic vocabulary and text inferencing
Li & Gan (2022)	University (China)	Tertiary	Quantitative Correlational	Compares variables; vocabulary knowledge emerges as the most powerful statistical predictor of comprehension
Ritonga et al. (2022)	Language Center	EFL Learners	Quantitative Experimental	Peer assessment significantly improves reading comprehension, motivation, and vocabulary learning.
Wang et al. (2022)	Schools (China)	Lower/Upper Secondary	Latent Profile Analysis	Maps profiles of adolescent reading motivation and their relations to reading amount.
Coggins (2023)	Rural Schools	Elementary / Basic	Experimental Study	Accessible and readable English

				frameworks lead to significant reading gains in rural areas.
Daniel & Barth (2023)	Rural Schools	School Students	Profile Analysis	Explores the specific reading profiles and challenges of rural school students.
Jéldrez et al. (2023)	Educational Context	Mixed	Statistical Evaluation	Evaluates the multi-dimensionality and statistical validity of reading motivation scales.
Largo & Bautista (2024)	Senior High School	Senior Secondary	Qualitative Phenomenology	Explores the lived experiences and emotional processing of students handling literary texts.
Ma & Zhao (2025)	University (China)	Tertiary (English Majors)	Descriptive Correlational	Analyzes the direct relationship between multi-dimensional reading motivation and achievement.
Nurhayati & Apriliyanti (2025)	Schools	Secondary	Quantitative Correlational	Proves the strong positive correlation between vocabulary mastery and reading outcomes.
Nurhasanah et al. (2025)	EFL Classroom	Mixed	Classroom Action Research	Enhances both reading comprehension

				and student motivation through the SQ3R strategic design.
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Major Themes Identified

Theme 1: Vocabulary Knowledge as a Foundation for Reading Comprehension

Across the reviewed literature, vocabulary knowledge is consistently validated as a foundational requirement for reading comprehension. Large-scale meta-analyses and structural models demonstrate that text understanding depends heavily on a reader's lexical capacity (Dong et al., 2020). When vocabulary mastery is low, reading comprehension breaks down because the working memory becomes overwhelmed by word-level decoding (Nanda, 2020). This prevents learners from executing higher-level processes, such as identifying the main idea or making text-based inferences (Lawrence et al., 2022). Furthermore, empirical findings by (Pravitasari & Nurfadillah, 2025) and (Nurhasanah & Firdaus, 2025) confirm that a student's absolute vocabulary breadth directly dictates text accessibility, functioning as a key predictor of overall reading achievement.

Theme 2: Reading Motivation as a Driving Force in Reading Engagement

The empirical evidence indicates that reading motivation serves as the primary psychological engine driving active reading engagement. Intrinsic motivation and reading self-efficacy are highly correlated with deeper text engagement and the proactive use of self-regulated reading strategies (Li & Gan, 2022). Driven by internal interest or high self-efficacy, motivated EFL learners dedicate more time to reading, face structural difficulties with resilience, and convert raw language data into meaningful comprehension (Ma & Zhao, 2025). Additionally, multi-dimensional scales validated in the literature underscore that a student's motivation profile dictates long-term literacy sustainability (Jéldrez et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Interaction between Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Motivation

The synthesis confirms a substantial cognitive-affective interaction between vocabulary mastery and reading motivation profiles. Strategic classroom interventions such as Guided Internet Reading and collaborative peer assessments have shown that improvements in language tools concurrently boost both student affect and lexicon size (Nurfauzi & Priyana, 2020). Balanced teaching models like SQ3R reinforce this relationship by using text navigation tasks to naturally expand vocabulary knowledge while sustaining reading task motivation (Nurhasanah & Firdaus, 2025).

Theme 4: Students' Reading Experiences in EFL Contexts

Qualitative accounts and phenomenological studies reveal that a significant proportion of secondary and tertiary EFL learners experience intense linguistic constraints and text avoidance. Confronted with long academic selections, students frequently grapple with structural and semantic complexities that exceed their current lexical thresholds, triggering feelings of information overload. These challenges are particularly severe during transition stages, such as entering university foundation programmes. To navigate these difficulties, proficient students deploy active coping mechanisms, while under-resourced or rural students often suffer from systemic reading gaps that require targeted structural scaffolding (Coggins, 2023).

Critical Discussion of Findings

Synthesizing these findings highlights that reading comprehension cannot be explained by isolated cognitive processing skills or affective motivation profiles alone. Instead, successful reading outcomes rely on a continuous cognitive-affective balance. Vocabulary knowledge establishes the architectural limits of text accessibility (Dong et al., 2020), while reading motivation determines how much of that accessible space a learner actually explores (Wang et al., 2022).

This combined evidence refutes the traditional view that language teaching should focus exclusively on passive vocabulary drill sheets or rote grammatical structures. Without cultivating reading motivation and task self-efficacy, expanding a student's lexicon may still result in reading avoidance due to lack of interest or intense reading anxiety (Nanda, 2020).

Furthermore, the data suggests that instructional shifts toward collaborative learning and strategic frameworks—such as peer assessments, Guided Internet Reading (GIR), and the SQ3R method—offer a viable solution to this dual challenge. These methodologies have been empirically proven to simultaneously lower cognitive barriers and build psychological resilience (Nurhasanah & Firdaus, 2025).

Finally, a critical geographical and contextual gap remains prominent within the selected literature: while urban tertiary institutions often benefit from diverse digital resources, EFL learners in rural or under-resourced secondary environments face compounded vulnerabilities where vocabulary deficits directly trigger text rejection (Daniel & Barth, 2023). Addressing these distinct reading profiles requires highly scaffolded, structurally supportive reading materials tailored to their specific socio-educational realities (Coggins, 2023).

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review confirms that vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation are deeply intertwined, critical factors that directly shape EFL reading comprehension outcomes and student experiences. The synthesis of 20 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 demonstrates that vocabulary breadth and depth provide the necessary cognitive foundation for text decoding (Lawrence et al., 2022), while multi-dimensional reading motivation acts as the affective engine that sustains student engagement and strategic persistence (Jéldrez et al., 2023). Qualitative insights further underscore that a lack of balance between these two domains leads to cognitive exhaustion and academic anxiety, particularly during critical educational transitions. Pedagogically, these findings imply that English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners must move away from isolated, single-variable instruction. Instead, curricula should integrate strategic reading designs (such as SQ3R and interactive peer setups) that target vocabulary expansion and motivational enhancement concurrently (Ritonga et al., 2022). For future research, it is highly recommended to conduct long-term longitudinal studies and mixed-method interventions focusing specifically on under-resourced rural environments, ensuring that strategic literacy frameworks can be effectively scaled to bridge existing educational divides (Coggins, 2023).

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