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Teachers' Experiences in Teaching Reading Comprehension Using Word Walls in Middle Schools

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Abstrak

This study explores an English teacher's experience implementing a Word Wall strategy to improve reading comprehension in a secondary school in East Java, Indonesia. Vocabulary limitations were identified as a major barrier to student reading comprehension. The study employed a descriptive qualitative design with a narrative inquiry approach, allowing for in-depth exploration of the teacher's personal, professional, and reflective experiences. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and then analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that the Word Wall was systematically integrated into three stages of reading instruction: pre-reading (introducing key vocabulary with visual cues), during reading (identifying vocabulary in context), and post-reading (discussing meaning and applying vocabulary in sentences). This strategy improved vocabulary retention, comprehension test scores, self-confidence, and students' self-regulated learning. Challenges faced included limited classroom space and time to update materials; these were addressed through vocabulary rotation and student engagement. This study confirms that the effectiveness of the Word Wall depends not only on its presence but also on its creative integration into reflective teaching practices.

Keywords: Teacher Experience, Word Wall, Reading Comprehension

1. Introduction

In learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading comprehension is one of the important skills that need to be mastered by secondary school students.[1] This skill is not only about recognizing words, but also understanding meaning, making inferences, and developing critical thinking.[2] Reading is a complex cognitive process that requires active interaction between the reader, the text, and the purpose of reading. Therefore, appropriate and meaningful learning strategies are very important to help students achieve the expected reading skills.[3] Initial observations in a secondary school in East Java showed that many students had difficulty understanding English texts.

Major challenges include limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding sentence structure, and inability to interpret implied meaning.[4] Non-linguistic factors such as low motivation and monotonous teaching methods also contribute to ineffective and uninteresting reading lessons.[5] Teachers report that many students lack confidence when reading English texts, with some even avoiding reading altogether.

Previous research confirms that adequate vocabulary knowledge is a key factor in reading comprehension. Puji Astuti stated that integrated learning is needed that combines vocabulary development in the process of learning to write and read. Differentiation strategies and holistic assessment are also needed to meet the diverse learning needs of students. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the failure to account for other variables such as reading interest or learning motivation.[6] Therefore, a holistic approach to vocabulary teaching is needed through the integration of contextual literacy activities, digital game-based learning, and active family involvement. In addition, the use of technology such as augmented reality and interactive media is believed to be able to enrich children's vocabulary and overcome motivational barriers.[7] Nodika found that consistent use of Word Walls significantly improved students' vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension. When combined with interactive activities such as word games, group discussions, and creative writing, Word Walls not only support retention but also strengthen the semantic relationship between words and their meanings.[8]

Although existing research demonstrates the benefits of Word Walls, most of it focuses on student learning outcomes, rather than on teachers' lived experiences implementing the strategy. Teachers' experiences are crucial because they influence how strategies are planned, adapted, and reflected upon in practice. Bintz emphasized that

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the success of Word Wall implementation depends heavily on teachers' ability to creatively adapt them to students' needs and classroom contexts. This review uncovered two major research gaps: (1) the paucity of research exploring teachers' lived experiences implementing Word Walls for reading instruction in secondary schools, and (2) the limited research in the Indonesian context that uses a phenomenological perspective to examine how teachers design, implement, and reflect upon this strategy. Therefore, this study aims to explore in-depth English teachers' experiences using Word Walls to teach reading comprehension at the secondary school level. The guiding research question is: What are teachers' experiences using Word Walls in teaching English reading.

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design that integrated narrative inquiry and case study approaches.[9] The narrative inquiry framework allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, perspectives, and reflections, while the case study approach focused on a limited context: the implementation of the Word Wall strategy in reading instruction at SPM Ulya Al Mashduqiah, Kraksaan, Probolinggo, East Java.

Data collection was conducted through three main methods. First, classroom observations were conducted to document how the Word Wall was implemented, how students interacted with it, and how vocabulary was reinforced during reading and discussion activities. Second, in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with teachers to gather detailed insights into the planning, implementation, perceived benefits, and challenges of using the Word Wall.[10]

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through several stages. First, data from observations, interviews, and documents were compiled. Next, the data were organized and described according to the research focus. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and findings were presented in narrative form supported by direct quotations and visual evidence. Finally, recurring patterns and themes were identified to answer the research questions. To ensure the credibility of the findings, four criteria were used. Credibility was maintained through member checking, the inclusion of verbatim quotations, and in-depth interviews. Transferability was achieved by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the school context, student characteristics, and the Word Wall implementation process.[11]

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study stem from teachers' consistent observation that a major barrier to students' reading comprehension is limited vocabulary mastery. Although students can read or spell individual words, they often struggle to grasp the overall meaning of a text due to a lack of lexical knowledge to connect ideas and draw inferences. Based on their experience, the teachers believe that repeated exposure to topic-relevant, high-frequency vocabulary, when presented in an accessible, visual format, can improve student retention and comprehension. This belief led the teachers to integrate the Word Wall strategy into their lessons, with the additional goal of shifting the learning approach from teacher-centered to more interactive and student-centered.

The integration of Word Walls into reading comprehension lessons is carried out through three systematic stages. In the pre-reading stage, teachers select key vocabulary from the text to be used and display it on colored cards, sometimes accompanied by illustrations or synonyms to aid recognition.[12] Students study the vocabulary, discuss its possible meanings, and predict its occurrence in the text. In the reading stage, students identify and highlight the vocabulary in the text, connecting it with contextual clues. In the post-reading stage, students engage in meaning-focused activities such as paraphrasing definitions, providing synonyms or antonyms, and constructing their own sentences.

SPM Head Ulya Al Mashduqiah explained that the implementation of Word Walls is part of the school's efforts to improve students' literacy skills, particularly in English comprehension. "We view Word Walls as a simple yet effective medium. They don't require expensive technology, yet they have a significant impact on students. We fully support them because they align with the school's vision of building students' literacy and communication skills." She also added that the school facilitates the need for simple tools and materials, such as colored cards, markers, and special boards, despite classroom space limitations.

Over time, teachers observed positive changes in student behavior. Students began using the Word Wall independently while reading and in other classroom activities, demonstrating increased confidence and independence in vocabulary use. However, teachers faced challenges maintaining the Word Wall display due to limited wall space and busy teaching schedules. This challenge was addressed through a vocabulary rotation system, where old or rarely used words were replaced with new ones, and by designating students as "word keepers" responsible for organizing and updating the display.

This resonated with the classroom teacher who implemented this strategy, who explained the steps for implementing the Word Wall in her classroom. She explained that the process involved three stages: "In the pre-reading stage, I select vocabulary words from the text. I write them on colorful cards, sometimes adding pictures or synonyms to make them easier to recognize. Then, students guess the meaning and predict when the word will appear in the text. While reading, students look up the words and connect them to the context. After reading, they paraphrase, use synonyms, antonyms, or create their own sentences."

Teachers also reported positive changes: "Now students don't have to wait to be told. They come to the Word Wall themselves to look up words while reading or working on assignments. They even suggest new words from readings or movies they watch." Challenges included limited wall space and busy schedules. Teachers addressed these by using a basic comprehension system and designating student "word keepers" to update the display.

Teachers also noted that the Word Wall had an indirect positive impact on students' speaking and writing skills. Students used a wider variety of vocabulary in essays and spoke more fluently in group discussions. Confidence in using new words increased, especially among students who had previously been hesitant to try a new language. The collaborative nature of this strategy also strengthened the classroom culture, as students began suggesting vocabulary from additional reading or English-language media they consumed. This voluntary participation demonstrated a shift from passive vocabulary learning to active vocabulary collection and sharing.

A similar sentiment was expressed by the homeroom teacher, who observed the development of students' behavior and overall language skills: "We see students becoming more confident when speaking, especially in discussion groups. They are using a wider variety of vocabulary, and they are also confident in writing essays using vocabulary they rarely used before." She also noted that the collaborative nature of this strategy strengthens relationships among students: "They share understanding, not only from the lesson but also from reading at home or other media. This shows that learning has gone beyond the textbook."

Finally, the teacher reflected on her professional development during this process. She became more careful in selecting vocabulary that is relevant to the reading material and the students' real-life contexts. She also experimented with additional activities such as word games, peer-teaching, and formative quizzes, reinforcing the principle that effective vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms requires adaptation, creativity, and responsiveness to classroom dynamics.

These results align with previous research emphasizing the central role of vocabulary in reading comprehension, particularly in EFL contexts. Fitri highlighted the importance of repeated exposure to vocabulary in various contexts so that learners can internalize its meaning and usage. The integration of the Word Wall into the pre-, during-, and post-reading stages provided repeated and contextualized exposure, in line with Nation's principle of vocabulary recycling through varied engagement.[13] The increasing independence of students in utilizing the Word Wall reflects Vygotsky's 1978 concept of scaffolding, where learners gradually move from guided learning to independent language use.[14] Consistent with the findings of Harmon and Fikri, this study shows that the integration of gamification elements into the Word Wall created a more engaging learning environment, supported student-centered learning, and improved students' vocabulary knowledge, confidence, and communication skills.[15]

This study also extends the literature by documenting teachers' reflective adaptations to address contextual constraints such as space limitations and time management. The vocabulary rotation system and student engagement as "word keepers" are context-responsive innovations that ensure the relevance of the Word Wall while fostering a sense of ownership among students. These practices align with Farrell's concept of reflective practice, which states that effective teaching is achieved through ongoing planning, implementation, evaluation, and revision.[16]

Based on this research discussion, it is clear that Word Walls have much broader potential than simply displaying vocabulary in the classroom. For teachers, this strategy can be a flexible learning tool, capable of supporting reading comprehension while honing other language skills. When Word Walls are designed with clear learning objectives, each word displayed on the wall becomes more than just passive information, but also sparks active interaction in the classroom. For example, students who are asked to add new vocabulary to the Word Wall tend to be more enthusiastic about learning because they feel they are making a real contribution to the learning process. This activity also opens up opportunities for collaborative learning, where students help each other understand word meanings, share example sentences, or even create illustrations that reinforce understanding.

Meanwhile, for researchers, these findings open up ample room for further exploration. Technological advances offer opportunities to adapt Word Walls into digital or hybrid formats, so their use is no longer limited to physical classrooms. Future research could also examine the long-term impact of Word Walls on students' retention of

reading comprehension and skills across different educational levels. Furthermore, we will seek to apply this implementation strategy to different types of schools and cultural contexts to identify the most effective implementation patterns. Thus, the study of Word Walls will not be limited to a single classroom, but can serve as a relevant and useful reference in a variety of learning situations.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that consistent and planned implementation of a Word Wall strategy can improve students' reading comprehension by enhancing vocabulary retention, developing independent study habits, and increasing student engagement in class. Integrating Word Walls into pre-, during-, and post-reading activities provides students with ample opportunities to encounter and apply target vocabulary, resulting in deeper understanding and more confident use in oral and written communication. The results of this study indicate that Word Walls are most effective as interactive and evolving learning resources, whose benefits are enhanced by active student participation. Implementing this strategy remains feasible in resource-limited contexts through creative adaptations, such as rotating vocabulary and involving students in its maintenance. These findings highlight the potential of Word Walls as a sustainable and adaptive vocabulary learning tool in EFL classrooms. Further research could examine the long-term effects of Word Walls on vocabulary retention, compare results across different learner profiles, or explore their adaptation to digital and blended learning environments to expand their relevance and scalability.

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