

## EFL Students' Vocabulary Development: Using Leveled Texts in Online Reading Instruction

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### ABSTRACT

As technology is continually evolving; this research presents one of its impacts in changing the traditional way of teaching vocabulary. Current technological applications are available for designing and implementing reading instruction in order to effectively develop students' vocabulary knowledge. In this research, online reading instruction was designed to solve EFL students' vocabulary learning problems in my own practice. To design it, readtheory.org as an Learning Management System (LMS) that stores and distributes leveled texts was used as technology (media) to make their vocabulary study easy, interesting, practical, and even enjoyable. The research findings show that the designed instruction help them to read leveled texts a lot and they reap the reward of their reading that is expanding existing vocabulary knowledge and acquiring new vocabulary. Therefore, reading leveled texts a lot cannot only be designed to improve reading skills and strategies. But, it also can be designed into activities for improving or developing EFL students' vocabulary knowledge.

**KEYWORDS:** vocabulary knowledge, graded readers, blended learning, reading instruction, independent word learner

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is needed very much to be developed by EFL students who intend to pursue higher education. It is because rich word knowledge provides opportunities for the students to improve their language proficiency. As well, the four language skills require rich word knowledge in order to make the effective communication. Without vocabulary, nothing can be understood from reading or listening. Moreover, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed through writing or speaking. Therefore, developing the students' vocabulary knowledge becomes an essential factor to help them making better progress in their language learning.

The importance of rich vocabulary knowledge in language learning requires every teacher to design a course that is intended for facilitating word learning effectively. This article presents a result of a classroom action research to investigate the use of leveled texts in online reading instruction in order to develop EFL students' vocabulary development in my own practice. The instruction is designed based on extensive

reading approach and delivered through blended learning activities to effectively integrate technology into their vocabulary learning.

As technology is continually evolving, this research presents some of its impacts in changing the traditional way of teaching vocabulary. Before doing the research, the students were provided with a vocabulary exercise book that contain various exercises to make them practice with all aspects of word knowledge such as form (both oral and written), word roots, meaning, and multiple meanings. The exercises in the book were expected to be effective in developing their vocabulary knowledge. However, not all of them involved in doing the exercises.

Their low involvement in doing the exercises inhibited the development of their vocabulary knowledge during some meetings. Most of them did not acquire some new vocabularies. They were not able to improve their long term vocabulary. They often forget the vocabulary that they have learned. As the consequence, the students' who did not make any progress in their vocabulary learning gave negative effect on the classroom atmosphere. Most of them complained that the course was difficult. Moreover, most of them argued that vocabulary learning exercises were not easy, interesting, practical and enjoyable.

After reflecting on the previous meetings, some problems, which made the vocabulary learning activities were not easy, interesting, practical and enjoyable, were identified. First, having the students to work on vocabulary exercises such as gap filling and word building was not interesting for them. The exercises were aimed to develop their knowledge of word form, meaning, and use. However, the exercise of "Filling in the blanks" was not enough to help them improve their vocabulary knowledge. After interviewing the students, 85% of them argued that the materials of filling in the blanks exercises were not easy. Lack of background knowledge on the topic of vocabulary exercises made them difficult to do the exercises. Therefore, it could be inferred that the previous vocabulary learning materials were not suitable for them.

Second, having the students to memorize definitions of words was a waste of time. They need definitions that make sense to them. Therefore, they need a context for remembering words. A word may have more than one meaning. Contexts are needed to differentiate the meaning of the word. However, previous vocabulary learning activities did not provide this yet. As the result, many students did not fully understand the meaning of words that they have learned. 71.43% of them did not get good result when I administered vocabulary knowledge test to check on how well they have learned new vocabulary during two weeks. The test of vocabulary knowledge measured three areas as suggested by Nation (2001). The areas were knowledge of form, knowledge of meaning, and knowledge of use. The results of the test showed that most of their scores ranged from 50 to 70 points. 66.67% of them did not know the meaning of the words that they had learned contextually. 76.19% of them could not use the words that they had learned in sentences. 71.43% of them did not have knowledge of the words form that they have learned. Therefore, it was implied that improvement was needed.

In addition, a wide variety of topic and language areas were not provided by the vocabulary exercises. Thus, the exercises could not address all the words a student will need. His or her vocabulary needs may different from other students. Therefore, I took some actions since these problems impede their language learning and vocabulary knowledge development. A series of activities which help the students to practice any combination of how to give meaning of new words based on the context, spell and sound them correctly, and use them appropriately should be designed and putted into

action. Besides, I am aware that no single course or vocabulary exercises books that can address all of the words a student will need. Furthermore, the students should leave a class with new strategies and skills for word learning so that they can notice and effectively practice new words as they encounter them. Therefore, it is needed to design vocabulary activities that can help them improve their vocabulary knowledge and also inspire them to be independent word learners.

After reviewing some literatures and recent studies in vocabulary learning, it is found that online reading instruction can be putted into the optimal classroom conditions for facilitating word learning. There is a natural relationship between reading and word learning. Thus, online reading instruction can be designed to use this relationship to best advantages. It is because word learning and reading are increasingly interdependent. Moreover, research studies show that rich word knowledge facilitates reading, and reading facilitates vocabulary comprehension and learning. Therefore, students who read a lot in my designed online reading instruction will get their vocabulary become richer.

Nowadays, many websites are available as media for designing online reading instruction. One of them is [readtheory.org](http://readtheory.org). Reading materials are easy to get there. The materials are authentic and graded. It's system can be used to support the students to read extensively. And of course, they also can be used to improve their vocabulary knowledge. They can learn vocabulary in context when they encounter new words during reading the easy and interesting materials. Furthermore, research studies show that reading extensively develops language learners' positive attitudes toward reading. It can make them become independent readers. And consequently, they become independent word learners.

In conclusion, the students' vocabulary knowledge needs to be developed. To develop it, designing online reading instruction is the best problem solving. It is because research studies show that reading can help language learners improving their vocabulary knowledge. The research was designed to answer this research question: To what extent does the use of leveled texts in online reading instruction improve students' vocabulary knowledge? Therefore, the present research aims at solving students' problem in developing their vocabulary knowledge by designing and implementing online reading instruction. Leveled texts are provided during the instruction so that it support extensive reading approach. In addition, a set of instruction is designed with the use of technology (media) to make the vocabulary study easy, interesting, practical, and even enjoyable.

## 2 METHOD

The type of this research is classroom action research. Stringer et al. (2010) state that this type can be used to enhance the abilities of teaching by assisting teachers to organize and facilitate effective programs of student learning. Furthermore, Yasin (2010) defines classroom action research as a kind of applied research that has purpose to do some changes in the processes of learning in which the researcher is the teacher. Then he adds that, in simply, classroom action research is a study about classroom situation with purpose to solve and improve the value of learning processes. Based on these experts' definitions, it can be concluded that classroom action research is a methodology that teachers do in classrooms for researching the uncovering of problems

in their own classrooms and actions taken to overcome them in order to enhance their teaching abilities.

Classroom action research has some characteristics that make it different from the other types of research. Somekh (2006) states that the type of this research is sometimes characterized by higher education tutors as research focused on the question, 'How can I improve my practice?' (p. 162). Regarding the question, the present research meets this characteristic since I am going to overcome the problem in my own classroom by improving my current teaching environment that is by designing and implementing online reading instruction with leveled texts for improving my students' vocabulary knowledge without annoying the ongoing teaching and learning processes.

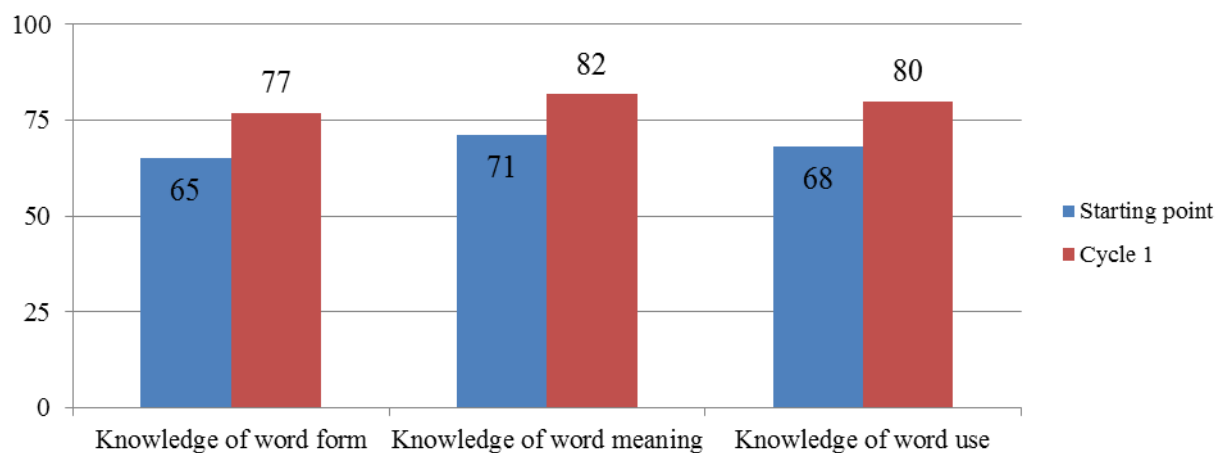
This research was carried out in Language Development Center of UIN Suska Riau. It is a high education institution where the researcher works as one of the English lecturers. The first year students of the university who enrolled English course participated in this research. There were twenty-one (21) students, 15 females and 6 males, who took the course. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 21 years old. In addition, a collaborator and I participated in this research. The collaborator was my colleague. She worked for the language center as an English lecturer.

### 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research was carried out for two cycles. The procedure of the research for each cycle involved plan, action, observation, and reflection. In the step of plan, some activities were planned to improve the students' vocabulary knowledge by designing blended learning where they completed a certain number of online reading activities before meeting in person with me for additional learning activities. Cycle 1 was planned for 5 meetings. By planning, it was easy to prepare the important instruments during the research. The needed instruments during this cycle were lesson plans, field note forms, and vocabulary test for assessing the students' vocabulary knowledge. An interview guide that contained structured questions to elicit the factors influencing the improvement of their vocabulary knowledge was also needed. Then, some discussions with the collaborator on how the planned actions to be taken, how to collect the data, and how to use the research instruments were also done in this step.

Therefore, before the class, I did some activities to put the plans into actions. First, I familiarized myself with the URLs (Uniform Resource Locator, or Internet address) for online reading instruction I planned to introduce, namely <https://readtheory.org>. I created an account as a teacher. Then, an account for each of my students was created. It was done to help me in keeping track of their reading activities and materials (leveled texts). Data from the track and the designed reading instruction were used to create test items for measuring vocabulary that they had studied. In the step of plan and observation, the lesson plans were taken into actions. From the first to the fourth meeting, the actions were divided into three series of teaching activities (pre-, main, and post activities). In the fifth meeting, the action was focused on assessing their vocabulary knowledge. After doing actions and observations, consequently as the last step of a cycle, I did reflection. In reflection, the results of data analysis from all instruments were discussed with the collaborator. The data that were gained from vocabulary knowledge test were analyzed together with the qualitative data that were gained from observation sheets, field notes, and interview. It was intended to understand how the both data (quantitative and qualitative data) were interrelated.

Figure 1 presents the results of vocabulary knowledge test which was administered at the last meeting of Cycle 1. It describes the students' vocabulary knowledge per indicator.



*Fig. 1. Mean Score of the Students' Vocabulary Knowledge per Indicator in Cycle 1*

It can be inferred from Fig. 1 that the students' mean score of word form knowledge increased 12 points. Their mean score of word meaning knowledge increased 11 points. Then, the mean score of knowledge of word use increased 12 points. Thus, it can be concluded that there was improvement on each indicator of vocabulary knowledge.

The figure also shows that their knowledge of word meaning was the highest indicator of their vocabulary knowledge. It means that they are able to give their first language equivalent of the English words that they had learned, and vice versa. Then, it is continued by their knowledge of word use and form. Whereas, their vocabulary knowledge was better after they were taught to read leveled texts and brought their reading which is done out of the class into the classroom activities, there were some of them who did not pass the research's targeted passing grade (the targeted passing grade of this research was 70), especially for the word form indicator.

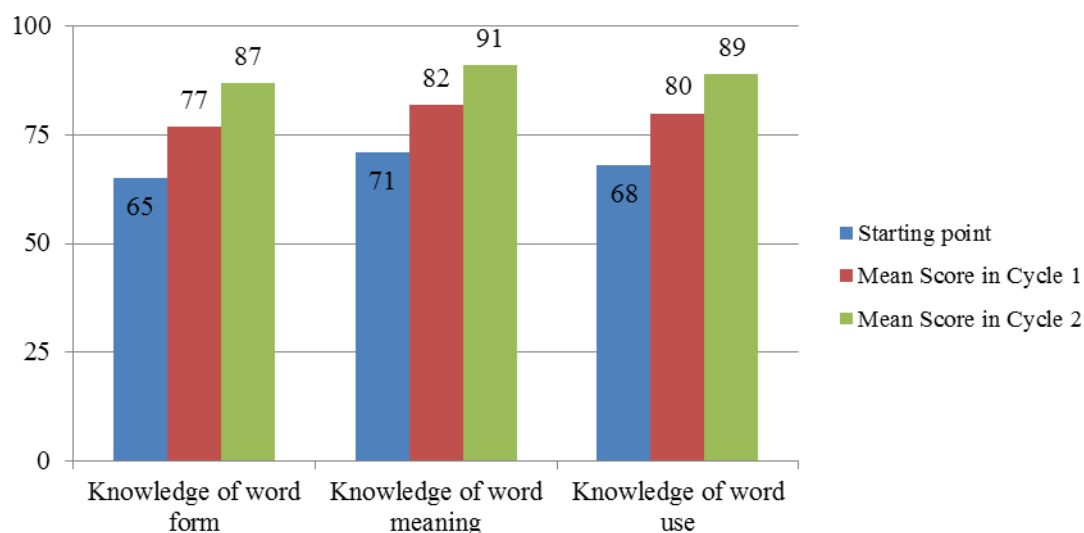
The results of observation and interview showed there were some interrelated factors that caused the improvement of the students' vocabulary knowledge. It was found from the results of observations during Cycle 1 that the designed online reading instruction was taken into actions. All the planned actions were done. However, revisions on the activities needed to be done since the students needed to improve their knowledge of word form. Most of them are competent speakers but poor writers. It can be concluded based on the results of observation, in Cycle 1, during the activities of exchanging their vocabulary cards and orally quizzing each other in front of the class. They can sound the word appropriately because they can read the word's pronunciation which is available on the card. However, the sound may not correspond to the spelling, as knowledge of word form. Therefore, the designed activities need to be revised in order to improve the students' knowledge of word form.

It was also supported by the results of interview which were done with the students who need to improve their vocabulary knowledge of word form. Based on the results of interview during Cycle 1, it was found that the students needed to improve their knowledge of part of speech (e.g. verb, noun, adjective, adverb, etc.).

In conclusion, based on the results of vocabulary test, observations, and interview, I decided to do further cycle (Cycle 2) of the classroom action research to help my students develop their vocabulary knowledge, especially in knowledge of word form.

Cycle 2 was done for 5 meetings. This cycle was done to solve weaknesses found in Cycle 1. As the first step of this cycle, the weaknesses in the previous cycle were planned to be fixed in order to improve the students' vocabulary knowledge through extensive reading activities with virtual storage. In the step of plan, I re-designed the previous reading activities in which they focused on improving the students' vocabulary knowledge, especially in knowledge of word form. Then, the lesson plans were taken into actions in the steps of action and observation. The actions were divided into a set of vocabulary teaching activities for the first to the fourth meeting. In the fifth meeting, the action was focused on assessing the students' vocabulary knowledge. As the last step of Cycle 2, I did reflection. Similar to the step of reflection in Cycle 2, the results of data analysis from all instruments were discussed with the collaborator. Then, the vocabulary knowledge test results were analyzed together with the obtained qualitative data.

The following figure presents the results of vocabulary knowledge test which was administered at the last meeting of Cycle 2. It describes the improvement of the students' vocabulary knowledge per indicator.



*Fig. 2. Mean Score Improvement of the Students' Vocabulary Knowledge per Indicator from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2*

Figure 2 shows that all indicators of vocabulary knowledge are improved from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. It describes to what extent the designed reading activities with leveled texts improve the students' reading vocabulary in Cycle 2. It shows the students' improvement on vocabulary knowledge per indicators at the end of Cycle 2. It can be inferred from the graph that their mean score of knowledge of word-form increased 22 points. It was 65 as the starting point and improved to 77 at the end of Cycle 1 and improved again to 87 at the end of Cycle 2. Then, their mean score of knowledge of word meaning increased 20 points. It was 71 as the starting point and improved to 82 at the end of Cycle 1 and then improved to 91 at the end of Cycle 2. Also, their mean score of knowledge of word use increased 21 points, from 68 before researching then improved 80 at the end of Cycle 1 and then improved again to 89 at the end of Cycle 2.

In conclusion to the results, the designed reading activities improve their vocabulary knowledge. It can be inferred that the aim of this research is achieved. As well, the results of observations and interviews showed that the students enjoyed the designed reading activities and gave positive responses toward the activities that they had done in this cycle. For that reason, this research was decided to end at the end of Cycle 2.

The finding is in line with other research findings on the use of leveled texts. Waring and Takaki (2003) who did a study to examine the rate at which vocabulary was learned from reading 400 headword graded readers (leveled texts). Three tests (word-form recognition, prompted meaning recognition and unprompted meaning recognition) were administered immediately after reading, after one week and after a three month delay. The results showed that words could be learned incidentally but that most of the words were not learned. More frequent words were more likely to be learned and were more resistant to decay. By the results, they concluded that graded readers help develop and enrich already known vocabulary. Their study only used graded readers as reading materials during the reading instruction.

Then, Pigada and Schmitt (2006) did a case study to explore whether reading program with leveled texts can enhance vocabulary knowledge. Their study assessed a relatively large number of words, and examined whether one month of the reading instruction with leveled texts enhanced knowledge of these target words' spelling, meaning, and grammatical characteristics. The measurement procedure was a one-on-one interview that allowed a very good indication of whether learning occurred. The study also explores how vocabulary acquisition varies according to how often words are encountered in the texts. The results showed that knowledge of 65% of the target words was enhanced in some way, for a pickup rate of about 1 of every 1.5 words tested. Spelling was strongly enhanced, even from a small number of exposures. Meaning and grammatical knowledge were also enhanced, but not to the same extent. Overall, their study indicates that more vocabulary acquisition is possible from reading leveled texts a lot.

Furthermore, Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008) examined the rate at which English vocabulary was acquired from the 3 input modes of extensive reading (with leveled texts), reading-while-listening, extensive listening to stories. The results of their study showed that new words could be learned incidentally in all 3 modes. The data demonstrated that, on average, when subjects were tested by unprompted recall, the meaning of only 1 of the 28 items met in either of the reading modes and the meaning of none of the items met in the listening-only mode, would be retained after 3 months. Finally, they concluded that the study has shown that more vocabulary knowledge was acquired from the extensive reading with leveled texts.

Similarly, Kweon and Rim (2008) also found that vocabulary can be learned incidentally while the learner is engaged in extensive reading with leveled text. They did a study to see how and which unknown words can be incidentally learned and retained while Korean learners of English read extensively substantial amounts of authentic text. Their participants were 12 students (11 male and 1 female) who were taking the intermediate English reading course. The participants were tested on their knowledge of vocabulary before reading (pretest), immediately after reading (Posttest 1), and 1 month after Posttest 1 (Posttest 2). The results showed a significant word gain between the pretest and Posttest 1 and that most gained words were retained at Posttest 2. Therefore, their findings are beneficial in carrying out this research since their study

has determined that such incidental vocabulary learning is possible while the learner is engaged in reading leveled texts a lot.

To conclude, reading leveled texts a lot cannot only be designed to improve reading skills and strategies. But, it also can be designed into activities for improving or developing students' vocabulary knowledge. The present study and the reviewed research studies show this.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The research findings during the two cycles show that the designed online reading instruction improves the participants' vocabulary knowledge. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the use of leveled text in online reading instruction can develop their vocabulary knowledge. The extents of improvements are on all indicators of vocabulary knowledge. Their mean score of knowledge of word-form increased 10 points. It was 77 at the end of Cycle 1 as the starting point and improved to 87 at the end of Cycle 2. Then, their mean score for knowledge of word meaning increased 3 points. It was 88 at the end of Cycle 1 as the starting point and improved to 91 at the end of Cycle 2. Also, their mean score for knowledge of word use increased 9 points, from 80 at the end of Cycle 1 as the starting point to 89 at the end of Cycle 2. Therefore, the designed instruction can help them to read a lot and they reap the reward of their reading that is expanding existing vocabulary knowledge and acquiring new vocabulary.

Regarding the conclusion, the decision of using leveled texts and designing online reading instruction (blended learning) for teaching vocabulary as actions to solve teaching and learning problems in my own practice not only helped my students improved their vocabulary but also helped them becoming independent readers during their study. Furthermore, the activities could create a language- and word-rich environment. The language- and word-rich environment is learning environment in which the students' opportunities to read, use, and talk about new vocabulary are many and varied. Thus, it could be implied that there is a logical relation between the use of leveled texts in the online reading instruction and the development of vocabulary knowledge.

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