

Exploring Students' Experiences in Developing Vocabulary through Reading Classic English Literature: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This research investigates the vocabulary development experiences of 30 fourth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at STKIP Al Maksum Langkat through their engagement with classic English literature. Although these students have received foundational English instruction, many still struggle to expand their vocabulary due to the limited contextual depth in their academic materials. To explore this issue, the study employed a qualitative design, gathering data through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals written after reading selected literary works by authors such as Shakespeare, Austen, and Dickens. The data were analyzed using open coding, category grouping, triangulation, and member checking procedures. Three major findings emerged. First, most participants (80%) relied on contextual cues, such as interpreting meanings from sentence structure and recording unfamiliar terms as key strategies for understanding new vocabulary. Second, a considerable number of students (73%) reported improvements in their vocabulary knowledge and linguistic sensitivity, including familiarity with idiomatic expressions and nuanced word meanings. Third, many learners (63%) encountered challenges, especially due to outdated vocabulary, lengthy sentence construction, and culturally unfamiliar content. These findings suggest that classic literature, when paired with reflective engagement and contextual support, can serve as a valuable medium for vocabulary enrichment in English language learning. The study recommends incorporating such texts into EFL curricula to foster deeper lexical acquisition and intercultural awareness.

Keywords: Vocabulary Development, Classic English Literature, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in the process of acquiring English as a foreign language. It is essential not only for reading comprehension but also for effective speaking, writing, and listening. Despite its importance, many students in the English Education Study Program at STKIP Al Maksum Langkat, particularly those in the fourth semester, continue to experience difficulties in expanding their vocabulary. This issue arises partly because the instructional materials provided during coursework tend to rely on simplified texts that lack contextual variety and linguistic richness. As a result, students are not adequately exposed to authentic language use or challenged to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

One potential solution to this limitation lies in the use of classical English literature. Works by authors such as William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens are

characterized by a broad lexical range, stylistic complexity, and embedded cultural narratives. These texts may help learners develop more sophisticated reading strategies, including inferring meaning from context and recognizing varied forms and functions of vocabulary. In addition, literary reading encourages reflection and engagement, both of which are conducive to deeper language learning.

Although some previous research supports the role of literary texts in vocabulary development, relatively few studies have investigated how learners in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia, personally experience reading classical literature. Furthermore, there is a lack of qualitative exploration into the strategies students employ when encountering challenging vocabulary, as well as the obstacles they face, such as unfamiliar cultural references or archaic expressions.

This study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning experiences of fourth-semester students through their engagement with selected classical English texts. It examines how they interpret new vocabulary, the linguistic benefits they gain, and the difficulties they encounter throughout the reading process.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What strategies do students apply to understand unfamiliar vocabulary while reading classical English literature?
2. How does the reading of classical literary texts affect students' vocabulary growth and language awareness, including their familiarity with idiomatic expressions?
3. What challenges do students face in comprehending vocabulary in classical texts, particularly with regard to outdated language, sentence structure, and foreign cultural content?

METHOD

This Participants and Sampling

This study involved 30 fourth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at STKIP Al Maksum Langkat. Total sampling was employed due to the small and accessible population, ensuring the inclusion of all individuals who met the selection criteria. The participants had prior exposure to literary studies and had completed basic courses such as Introduction to Literature. Participation was voluntary, and all students provided informed consent. Inclusion criteria required participants to be active students in the fourth semester and to have read at least one selected classical English literary work.

Reading Activity Duration and Text Selection

The reading activity was conducted over a six-week period during the academic semester. A curated list of classical texts was developed in collaboration with literature instructors, ensuring representativeness of different genres and linguistic complexity. Texts included excerpts from Shakespeare's plays, chapters from Jane Austen's novels, and passages from Dickens's narratives. Students selected one or more texts from the list based on their reading level and interest.

Instruments

Two instruments were used: semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. Interviews explored students' reading practices, vocabulary strategies, perceptions of

classic literature, and encountered challenges. Reflective journals documented unfamiliar vocabulary, contextual interpretations, and personal reflections. All instruments were validated through peer review by experts in language pedagogy and qualitative research.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in nine stages: (1) transcription of interviews, (2) initial comprehension through repeated reading, (3) open coding of emerging responses, (4) grouping codes into categories, (5) theme identification, (6) journal verification, (7) triangulation between interviews and journals, (8) member checking for validation, and (9) thematic narrative writing.

FINDINGS

This study identified three main patterns that encapsulate the experiences of fourth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at STKIP Al Maksum Langkat in developing their English vocabulary through the reading of classic literary works. The data, collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, were analyzed using open coding, thematic categorization, triangulation, and member checking.

1. Contextual Strategies for Vocabulary Comprehension

Students frequently relied on contextual clues within the text to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary. This tendency was strongly evident, as 80% (24 out of 30) of the participants stated that they preferred to infer meanings from sentence context rather than immediately resorting to a dictionary. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of vocabulary within authentic discourse and encouraged long-term retention.

Additionally, 67% (20 students) recorded new vocabulary in journals, indicating a habit of metacognitive engagement and active monitoring of their language development. Although 60% (18 students) utilized digital dictionaries, this typically occurred after attempting contextual interpretation, reflecting a layered strategy of initial deduction followed by confirmation.

A smaller group, 30% (9 students), engaged in discussions with peers or instructors to decipher challenging vocabulary, demonstrating the value of collaborative meaning-making. The predominance of contextual guessing can be interpreted as a compensatory learning strategy in response to minimal direct vocabulary instruction and as an adaptation to the interpretative nature of classic texts.

Representative reflections:

- a. "I didn't know the word 'melancholy' before, but from the situation in the story, I guessed it means something sad." (WS, journal)
- b. "Some words like 'shall' or 'thou' are confusing, but I try to understand the meaning from the conversation." (FL, journal)

2. Vocabulary Enrichment and Linguistic Awareness

Many students reported significant vocabulary growth and increased awareness of language use through their exposure to classic literature. About 73% (22 students) noted a marked improvement in academic vocabulary acquisition. This increase was often

associated with the encounter of precise, elegant language embedded in complex literary contexts.

Furthermore, 63% (19 students) described a greater sensitivity to semantic nuances, as they began to understand words with multiple or subtle meanings. Half of the respondents (50%, or 15 students) became more familiar with idiomatic and figurative expressions. Additionally, 40% (12 students) experienced increased confidence in applying newly acquired words in both written and spoken discourse.

These insights suggest that reading literary texts not only adds to students' lexical inventory but also cultivates their appreciation for the expressive depth and stylistic richness of language.

Representative reflections:

- a. "After I looked up the meaning of 'amiable', I started seeing how often it is used to describe someone's character." (MA, journal)
- b. "Reading 'Pride and Prejudice' made me realize how rich the vocabulary in classic literature is." (HL, journal)

3. Linguistic and Cultural Challenges

Despite the overall benefits, students encountered several obstacles while engaging with classic texts. The most frequently reported difficulty, cited by 63% (19 students), was the presence of obsolete vocabulary that is no longer in common usage. Words such as 'thou' or 'henceforth' often created confusion and hindered comprehension.

Another common challenge was syntactic complexity. About 47% (14 students) mentioned struggling with unusually long or intricately structured sentences that required careful parsing to understand meaning. Moreover, 37% (11 students) expressed difficulty in interpreting cultural references that were either outdated or unfamiliar within the Indonesian context.

Interestingly, 20% (6 students) reported minimal difficulty, attributing their ease to previous experience with similar readings or familiarity with literary conventions. These findings underscore the need for guided support when using classical texts in language learning, particularly to bridge gaps related to time-bound language and cultural references.

Representative reflections:

- a. "I sometimes feel stuck because the sentence is too long and I don't know which part is important." (MS, interview)
- b. "I enjoyed finding new expressions, especially when they sound poetic. It makes English more beautiful." (SC, interview)

DISCUSSION

This study provides comprehensive insights into how fourth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at STKIP Al Maksu Langkat experience vocabulary development through reading classic English literary texts. The findings reveal three main dimensions: strategic use of context for vocabulary comprehension, lexical and linguistic gains, and the challenges posed by linguistic and cultural unfamiliarity. These findings not only align with but also expand upon previous scholarly work concerning

incidental vocabulary acquisition and the pedagogical application of literature in English language learning.

1. Contextual Strategies for Vocabulary Comprehension

A significant proportion of students employed contextual strategies to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words while reading classic literature. This finding resonates with the research conducted by Hosseini et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of contextual guessing in enhancing learners' inferencing abilities. In this study, learners demonstrated a tendency to derive meaning from sentence structure and narrative flow, often using contextual cues before consulting dictionaries. This approach indicates not only a reliance on inferencing but also the cultivation of deeper textual engagement and interpretive skills.

Moreover, Webb and Chang (2022) observed that learners who interact with context-rich literary texts tend to experience more durable vocabulary retention and more meaningful lexical acquisition. In the current study, students enhanced their vocabulary learning through a combination of methods, including personal journaling, use of online dictionaries, and peer or lecturer consultations. These strategies illustrate a multi-modal approach to learning that promotes metacognitive awareness and learner autonomy. The reflective statements from students, such as interpreting the word "melancholy" based on narrative tone, further illustrate a maturing literacy competence where students are actively constructing meaning.

2. Vocabulary Enrichment and Linguistic Awareness

Exposure to classic literary texts contributed substantially to students' vocabulary enrichment and heightened linguistic awareness. Approximately 73% of participants reported acquiring more advanced vocabulary items, and many demonstrated the ability to understand polysemous words and idiomatic expressions in varying contexts. These findings are consistent with the conclusions drawn by Webb and Chang (2022), who emphasized the role of repeated contextual exposure in fostering vocabulary growth and retention.

Additionally, Hosseini et al. (2021) noted that literary texts serve as effective tools in promoting depth of lexical knowledge. Students in this study reported recognizing vocabulary items that reappeared in multiple reading contexts, which contributed to stronger recall and reinforced learning. For example, one student mentioned increased familiarity with the adjective "amiable" after encountering it repeatedly, an observation that aligns with the notion of semantic reinforcement across texts. The reflective nature of this process implies a gradual internalization of word meanings, thus validating the literature's capacity to support long-term lexical development.

3. Linguistic and Cultural Challenges

Despite the benefits, students encountered several linguistic and cultural barriers while engaging with classical literature. Archaic vocabulary, intricate syntactic structures, and unfamiliar cultural references were consistently cited as obstacles. These findings corroborate those of Hosseini et al. (2021), who emphasized the demanding cognitive

processing required to navigate such texts. Words like “thou,” “shall,” and idiomatic expressions rooted in historical or cultural contexts often hindered comprehension.

Webb and Chang (2022) highlighted that while classical literature has potential for vocabulary development, it necessitates pedagogical support to be effective. In the current study, the lack of background knowledge about the cultural setting of the texts and the complexity of old English forms resulted in reduced comprehension for some students. This underlines the necessity for complementary instructional strategies, including cultural glossaries, contextualized vocabulary exercises, and guided reading discussions, to bridge comprehension gaps.

The synthesis of these findings with prior literature indicates that while classical literature presents distinct challenges, it also offers a potent environment for deep vocabulary learning. When learners are supported with the appropriate scaffolding, such texts become valuable educational tools. In the Indonesian EFL context, the strategic and reflective behaviors demonstrated by students reveal a promising trajectory for integrating literary texts into vocabulary pedagogy. This suggests that classical literature, when approached with adequate instructional design, holds significant potential for enhancing both linguistic competence and cultural literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of vocabulary acquisition through the reading of classical English literature among EFL students. Theoretically, the findings support the view that incidental vocabulary learning especially in a constructivist learning framework can be effectively achieved through exposure to authentic and linguistically rich materials such as classic literary texts. The research confirms that when students engage deeply with narratives, they build word knowledge not only through dictionary definitions but also through contextual interpretation, thematic resonance, and reflective reading.

From a practical perspective, this study underscores that classic literature, despite its linguistic and cultural complexity, can be a powerful medium for vocabulary enrichment if students are guided appropriately. The use of contextual guessing, peer discussions, vocabulary journaling, and digital dictionary tools appeared as effective strategies employed by students. These practices foster independent learning, critical thinking, and language awareness. However, the study also identifies considerable barriers, including archaic vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and unfamiliar cultural references. These challenges highlight the urgent need for structured pedagogical interventions, such as pre-reading orientation, guided annotations, cultural background sessions, and thematic glossaries to support comprehension and maximize learning outcomes.

In terms of future research, several directions are recommended. First, studies should explore the implementation of classical literature-based vocabulary instruction across different educational levels, including secondary school and postgraduate contexts. Investigating how learners at various developmental stages interact with classical texts can offer insights into the scalability and adaptability of this approach. Second, integrating classical literature with digital tools such as AI-powered reading platforms, interactive

glossaries, or gamified vocabulary trackers may provide enhanced scaffolding and engagement, particularly for learners who find such texts linguistically challenging. Third, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term retention and transfer of vocabulary learned through literature into productive language use. Finally, future work could compare the impact of classical versus contemporary literature on vocabulary development to determine the specific advantages each type of text offers for different learner profiles. Through these future explorations, researchers and educators can continue to refine the role of literature in language education, ensuring it remains both linguistically beneficial and pedagogically inclusive.

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