

The Effectiveness of Reading in Vocabulary Learning in EFL: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The current systematic literature review (SLR) aims to explore the effectiveness of reading with regard to vocabulary learning. It addresses the gap of teaching reading among English language learners. A systematic literature review is the main methodology followed in the current study. Scopus, Google Scholar and ERICs databases are used to identify, classify and retrieve the articles based on many inclusion and exclusion criteria. The use of the keywords the effectiveness of reading on vocabulary yielded 2,543 results on Sci-Space a varying number of studies on Google Scholar, ERICs and Scopus from 2019 to 2022. Thirty-two studies were included in the current review. The inclusion criteria include recency (over the last three-five years) and relevance (related to reading, vocabulary learning and English language education). Thirty-two studies are reviewed for the current study. The exclusion criteria include recency and relevance. The results demonstrate that reading has a positive effect on the learning of English vocabulary, especially in terms of width and breadth. The potential research gaps that are identified in the current systematic literature review revolve around which influences which reading or vocabulary. Most studies in the current systematic literature review demonstrated that there is a co-influence positive relationship between the two in the vast majority of recent studies.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), lexicon, receptive language skills, reading skill, vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary learning

Introduction

Reading is a crucial receptive skill of language learning when it comes to English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) learners as it allows them to be exposed to the written input. Despite its significance, teaching reading at different levels has received limited attention (Saragi, 1978; Waring & Nation, 2004). This systematic literature review (henceforth SLR) aims to address the gap by investigating the effectiveness of reading on vocabulary learning. The study employs a systematic literature review and uses many databases and search engines like Google Scholar, Sci-Space, ERICs and Scopus to identify and retrieve relevant articles based on inclusion and exclusion criteria such as recency and relevance to reading, vocabulary learning, and English language education. The results of the review indicate that reading mostly has a positive effect on vocabulary learning, with regard to the breadth and width of the lexical knowledge. However, there are potential research gaps related to the reading strategies, online, PDF, and hard copy reading materials, as well as spaced and distributed reading and ChatGPT reading. The current article consists of a literature review section, methodology and results in addition to discussion of the main findings in light of the research question and conclusions.

Literature review

A plethora of empirical studies have been carried on examining the reading effectiveness on vocabulary. According to Teng (2015), forty-six business English majors took part in a study that examined some effects of extensive reading on EFL vocabulary learning along with the measured impact of two instruction methods on receptive as well as productive vocabulary knowledge. The results indicated that both instruction methods (explicit output-pushed activities in addition to extensive reading, versus just extensive reading) produced significant gains in vocabulary knowledge, with the former resulting in greater vocabulary gains. Students' vocabulary size was also proved to be a factor in acquiring vocabulary knowledge.

The study by Vidal (2011) tested the comparative effects of reading and listening on incidental acquisition and retention of vocabulary. The sample size comprised two hundred and thirty EFL students who participated by reading academic texts, watching lectures, or completing vocabulary measures without input. The results showed that reading led to greater and perceivable vocabulary gains than listening across all proficiency levels, with the difference in gains between the two modes decreasing as proficiency increased. Retention tests administered one month later also favored reading, with the exception of the students with highest proficiency in EFL.

The study by Webb (2005) measured the effects of receptive and productive vocabulary learning with regard to word knowledge for Japanese learners who are learning English. Participants learned target words through reading or sentence production tasks, and their vocabulary knowledge was measured in multiple ways. The results indicated that reading was superior to writing when both tasks took the same amount of time, but when the writing task required more time, it was more effective. The study concluded that productive vocabulary learning tasks may be preferable in authentic learning contexts.

The paper by Laufer (2003) challenged assumptions that underlie the claim related to the fact that reading is the primary source of acquiring vocabulary in second language learning, including the "noticing" assumption, the "guessing ability" assumption, the "guessing-retention link" assumption, and the "cumulative gain" assumption. It reported on three experiments comparing gains of vocabulary from reading with word-focused tasks' gains, such as sentence completion and composition writing. The results showed that more words were acquired through the word-focused tasks than through reading.

This study by Nation & Wang (1999) measured the effects of graded readers on vocabulary acquisition for EFL learners. Participants were divided into three groups and read different levels of graded readers, while their vocabulary knowledge was measured through a variety of tests. The results demonstrated that the graded readers led to significant vocabulary gains for all levels of readers, with the greatest gains seen at lower.

Krashen (1989) based on the input hypothesis in the observation that spelling and vocabulary are acquired based on the reading. EFL learners complain about the shortage of vocabulary. Therefore, they keep dictionaries with them and not books on grammar. Dictionaries are used whenever some unfamiliar word is encountered. Learners resort to skimming and looking for specific details on dictionaries. Nowadays, dictionaries are in the form of applications and even websites. Learners can simply type the word so as to locate its meaning and form. The skill building hypothesis (SBH) assumes that skills are

developed through conscious practice. Skill-based learning is deductive in nature, whereas output plus feedback is inductive in nature. “More comprehensible output, in the form of reading, is associated with greater competence in vocabulary and spelling” (Krashen, 1989, p.441). Those who do leisure reading score higher in vocabulary according to the same author. Therefore, the question that raises itself is to what extent reading impacts vocabulary learning.

Methodology

The current study is a systematic literature review of the various studies on the measured effects of vocabulary on EFL reading over a decade of research work from 2012 to 2022 with an emphasis on the last three years (2019-2023). The rationale behind identifying, summarising and synthesising these studies is to push the knowledge frontier in this new area, especially with the initiatives and emerging tools in artificial intelligence (AI) that facilitates the collection, management and analysis.

Inclusion criteria

Search strings include the role, effect or relationship of reading and vocabulary. The studies were sorted by time. Some studies that investigated reading along with other language skills like listening in vocabulary in separate ways are also included.

The tools used for current systematic literature review are mostly databases like GoogleScholar, Scopus, Web of Sciences and Semantic Scholar in addition to some famous publishers like Sage, Springer, Wiley. The Artificial Intelligence tools used for the study include Elicit, Typeset and ChatGPT. These websites were used to collect relevant studies, sort them in terms of publication years.

Table 1. Research databases

Databases	Number of studies	Main finding
GoogleScholar	04	Effective
ERICs	02	Effective
Scopus	26	Dialectical relationship

The use of the search string “role of reading in vocabulary” over the custom time range of 2012 and 2022 yielded four relevant studies out of seventeen on Google Scholar (Azizzadeh, & Bazargani, 2022; Contreras Carreño, 2019; Imene & Helaimia 2020; Payá & Esteban 2015). The ERIC database or education resource information system has few sources (n=02) on the investigated keywords. Scopus is the only database that contains many studies based on keyword search (n=26). Moreover, the access to the Scopus database using the institutional emails allowed to have some features like personalized search along with the ability to download the abstracts of the most recent studies in csv format. The total number of the reviewed studies is 32 spanning the period from 2019 to 2022.

Exclusion criteria

Studies that investigate the role played by vocabulary in learning reading are excluded unless the relationship is that of co-influence. Moreover, studies whose meta data cannot be retrieved or verified are excluded. One study was excluded from the relevant Google Scholar studies because it was a draft

paper since it is published only on ResearchGate. In addition, the use of keywords, by default, excluded many studies that do not address reading and vocabulary in EFL.

Iteration

Forward and backward research helped us with finding other relevant research articles. The suggestions bring relevant studies in addition to citation disclosure. The differentiation of the databases and publisher websites resulted in various studies that are published in many peer-reviewed journals. Background and standalone literature reviews also appeared in the research results, but they are mostly dealing with studies from 2000 to 2010.

Data extraction and analysis

Different data extraction techniques and tools were used. Elicit produced some search results sorted by year of publication and downloadable in csv format. Zotero standalone version 6.22 was also used to arrange the files, extract the data and generate the APA style citations. Sci-Space was used in the same way as Elicit. However, these two AI literature review tools are still suffering from many limitations like irrelevance in terms of data retrieval and lack of accessibility to most content. Overall, for each study, the data was extracted revolving on this question of the role of reading on vocabulary.

Results

All the recent studies on the role of reading in vocabulary highlight the positive effects of reading and explicit instruction on vocabulary development in EFL learners. Payá and Esteban (2015) found that both narrow reading along with reading in addition to vocabulary-enhancement tasks and activities were effective in improving the vocabulary of Spanish students learning English. Carreño (2019) demonstrated that explicit instruction of highly frequent vocabulary items using Paul Nation's model of form emphasis, meaning emphasis, and use emphasis helped to develop learners' understanding and retention of new vocabulary. Azizzadeh and Bazargani (2022) found that narrow reading was a significantly effective method for improving Iranian EFL learners' lexical depth. Imene and Helaimia (2020) showed that theatrical texts and activities can facilitate vocabulary learning and improve learners' self-confidence in using new vocabulary in different real-life situations. Overall, the studies emphasize the importance of incorporating a variety of instructional approaches, such as reading, explicit instruction, and theatrical activities, to enhance EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.

Budianto et al (2022) have proposed that the scope and depth of one's vocabulary have an impact on reading comprehension, especially when evaluated through summarization. The sources obtainable through ERICS have become outdated, and therefore, they are not completely considered in the current research. The upcoming four reviewed studies are extracted mostly from Google Scholar and the rest from Scopus.

In a study conducted by Raudszus, Segers, and Verhoeven (2019), the distinct role of textbase memory and situation model building capacity in reading comprehension was explored among EFL learners whose first language (L1) is very different from their second language (L2). The findings indicate that situation model building capacity predicted reading comprehension in both groups, surpassing the other cognitive and linguistic predictors.

Verhoeven, Voeten, and Vermeer (2019) investigated the extra role of early lexical quality in anticipating reading comprehension, either through direct or indirect influence via word decoding or listening comprehension. The findings showed that the early reading achievement of both L1 and L2 learners is mostly determined by the quality of their early lexicons.

O'Brien, Mohamed, Yussof, and Ng (2019) conducted the third study, which examined the association between phonological awareness and early reading in English for three groups of simultaneous bilingual children, differing in their known language structures. The phonological awareness levels and patterns in predicting early English reading skills differed among these bilingual language groups.

Another study conducted by O'Brien, Mohamed, Yussof, and Ng (2019) focused on the correlation between phonological awareness and early English reading ability in three groups of simultaneous bilingual children with varying language structures. The study found that the levels and patterns of phonological awareness in predicting early English reading skills differed across the bilingual groups.

Follmer and Sperling (2019) investigated how executive function affects the ability of adult readers to understand scientific texts and the extent to which vocabulary skills play a role in this relationship. The study revealed that executive function was a strong predictor of comprehension, even after considering other reader traits. Additionally, vocabulary skills were found to mediate the link between executive function and both basic and advanced levels of comprehension.

Recent studies published on Scopus suggest that vocabulary is a crucial component of reading comprehension. Zhou (2022) discovered that having an understanding of word structure contributes to one's vocabulary knowledge, which in turn predicts how well someone can comprehend Chinese as a second language or English as a foreign language. Xie et al. (2022) also found that vocabulary plays a significant role in reading comprehension, primarily through decoding and listening comprehension, while morphological awareness contributes partially through vocabulary and decoding. Additionally, Wawire and Zuilkowski (2021) identified receptive vocabulary and the ability to read made-up words as crucial factors affecting reading comprehension. Finally, Phillips Galloway, McClain, and Uccelli (2020) suggested that academic language comprehension is a complex, context-dependent process that develops gradually during adolescence and significantly contributes to reading comprehension. They recommended exploring innovative research and teaching methods to expand our understanding of the relationship between language and reading comprehension.

Tock, Goodwin, and Petscher (2020) conducted a study that explored how knowledge of word structure (morphology) can aid reading comprehension in middle school students who have a limited vocabulary. The authors evaluated the morphological knowledge of 1,140 students using a computerized game-like test, and identified four specific morphological skills that enhance reading comprehension: Morphological Awareness, Syntactic Morphological Knowledge, Phonological / Orthographic Morphological Knowledge, and Semantic Morphological Knowledge. The study indicates that Syntactic Morphological Knowledge and Phonological/Orthographic Morphological Knowledge are especially beneficial for students with restricted vocabulary, whereas Semantic Morphological Knowledge may have an adverse effect on their reading comprehension. The authors also examine the consequences of their findings for theoretical comprehension, future research, and practical use.

Coloma et al. (2020) investigated the influence of vocabulary, grammar, and decoding on the reading comprehension of Spanish-speaking children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). The study's findings indicated that vocabulary and sentence structure complexity were the most dependable predictors of reading performance, while decoding and grammatical correctness had a minor or negligible effect. Md Yunus et al. (2020) employed a mixed method triangulation design to explore the relationship between vocabulary and reading motivation of primary school students. Their study yielded positive results from the three methods that demonstrated the effectiveness of reading in vocabulary. Vocalens Aziez et al. (2020) studied the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading skills among Indonesian prospective EFL learners. Their findings indicated that vocabulary knowledge had a greater impact on scanning skills than on skimming skills. Brehm et al. (2020) examined the role of word frequency and morpho-orthography in agreement processing. The study revealed that lexical retrieval played a role in attraction.

Additional research emphasizes the significance of vocabulary in reading. According to Martin et al. (2020), differences in comprehension and vocabulary learning are affected by the ability to actively retain pertinent information while disregarding irrelevant information. Troseth et al. (2020) demonstrated that an interactive eBook with a character that prompts dialogue encouraged parents and children to communicate during shared reading, leading to improved language input and expressive vocabulary in children at risk. McKeown (2019) stressed the importance of effective vocabulary instruction, which includes selecting words to teach, providing morphological information, and encouraging student interaction with words to promote understanding, application, and acquisition. Finally, Taha (2019) investigated the part of semantic activation in word recognition among native Arabic readers and discovered that reading semantic pseudowords with actual meaning resulted in the highest accuracy levels and shorter reading times compared to phonological pseudowords and unfamiliar pseudowords. These studies demonstrate the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge in successful reading comprehension and suggest effective strategies for promoting vocabulary learning and use in different contexts.

Van der Wilt et al. (2019) conducted a study to examine the impact of three interactive reading methods on language proficiency in early childhood education. The study included 73 children between 4-6 years old from three different early childhood education classrooms, randomly assigned to one of three reading approaches: traditional interactive reading, interactive reading with more focused attention, and interactive reading with the use of a mindmap. The researchers hypothesized that the mindmap approach would have a greater impact on the children's language skills than the other two approaches. The researchers assessed the children's productive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, listening comprehension skills, and narrative skills. However, the findings revealed no significant differences in the effects of the three reading approaches. Nonetheless, the study demonstrated that each approach had a positive impact on children's language ability, even after a brief intervention of four weeks.

Raudszus et al. (2019) examined the distinctive contributions of textbase memory and situation model building skills in reading comprehension for first (L1) and second (L2) language readers. The study revealed that situation model building skills predicted reading comprehension in both L1 and L2 readers to the same extent, even when considering other cognitive and linguistic predictors.

Verhoeven et al. (2019) investigated the role of early lexical quality in predicting reading comprehension in both L1 and L2 learners. The results indicated that both word decoding and listening comprehension predicted later reading comprehension for both L1 and L2 learners, while early morphological and vocabulary knowledge also directly predicted later reading comprehension.

O'Brien et al. (2019) studied the association between phonological awareness and early reading in English for three groups of bilingual children. The results showed that the size of phonological awareness varied across languages, and the patterns of phonological awareness levels in predicting early English reading skills differed among the bilingual language groups. However, the role of vocabulary in the relationship between phonological awareness and reading was not consistently observed.

Overall, the first set of studies highlighted the positive effects of reading and explicit instruction on vocabulary development in EFL learners. The studies recommended incorporating a variety of instructional approaches to enhance vocabulary acquisition, such as reading, explicit instruction, and theatrical activities. In contrast, the second set of studies focused on the relationship that holds between vocabulary development and reading. They explored various factors that contribute to reading comprehension, such as text base memory, situation model building capacity, early lexical quality, phonological awareness, executive function, and morphological knowledge. The studies found that vocabulary is a crucial component of reading comprehension, and knowledge of word structure can aid reading comprehension, particularly for students with a limited vocabulary. Overall, both sets of studies emphasize the significance of the dialectical relationship of reading and vocabulary in learning English among different groups of learners and recommend a variety of instructional approaches to enhance vocabulary acquisition through reading.

Discussion

The collection of studies from Google Scholar, ERICs and mainly Scopus during mostly 2019 and 2022 presented here provide insight into the relationship between reading and vocabulary acquisition, as well as effective strategies for promoting vocabulary learning and use. The studies cover a range of topics, from the impact of early lexical quality on reading comprehension to the role of morphological awareness in L2 Chinese reading comprehension.

Several studies suggest that morphological awareness is an important factor in vocabulary knowledge and L2 reading comprehension. Xie et al. (2022) report that morphological awareness contributes partially to reading comprehension through vocabulary and decoding. Similarly, Zhou (2022) found that morphological awareness is predictive of L2 Chinese reading comprehension. Tock et al. (2020) investigate the role of morphological knowledge in supporting reading comprehension for middle school students with limited reading vocabulary.

Other studies focus on the impact of various factors on reading comprehension. Verhoeven et al. (2019) examine the impact of early lexical quality on predicting reading comprehension in L1 and L2 learners. O'Brien et al. (2019) investigate the relationship between phonological awareness and early reading in English for bilingual children. Wawire and Zuilkowski (2021) demonstrate that receptive vocabulary and pseudo-word reading skills are significant factors in reading comprehension.

Effective strategies for promoting vocabulary learning and use are also explored in several studies. McKeown (2019) emphasizes the importance of effective vocabulary instruction, including choosing words to teach, including morphological information, and engaging students in interactions around words. Troseth et al. (2020) showed that an enhanced eBook with a dialogic questioning character facilitated parent-child talk during shared reading, resulting in increased language input and expressive vocabulary in at-risk children.

Overall, these studies suggest that vocabulary plays a crucial role in reading comprehension, and that effective strategies for promoting vocabulary learning and use can lead to improved reading comprehension outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reviewed studies reveal a positive and strong interconnection between reading and vocabulary. The role of various factors, such as morphological awareness, early lexical quality, phonological awareness, and receptive vocabulary, in predicting and supporting reading comprehension, has been examined. The findings suggest that effective vocabulary instruction and interactive reading approaches are crucial for promoting vocabulary learning and use. Furthermore, the studies emphasize the importance of considering the unique linguistic and cognitive characteristics of bilingual and multilingual learners in understanding the relationship between reading and vocabulary. Overall, these insights can inform instructional practices and support language development for learners of all ages and linguistic backgrounds.

The implications for theory and research based on the current study are various. The relationship nature between reading, on the one hand, and vocabulary, on the other hand, is bidirectional and crucial for comprehension in L1 and L2 learners. Morphological awareness is an essential component of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, particularly in L2 learners. Early lexical quality and phonological awareness are significant predictors of later reading comprehension, highlighting the importance of early interventions. Receptive vocabulary, pseudo-word reading skills, and executive function are essential factors in reading comprehension, particularly in academic contexts. Effective vocabulary instruction and interactive reading approaches can foster vocabulary learning and use in various contexts, enhancing reading comprehension. Maintaining active information and disengaging from irrelevant information are critical for reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Dialogic questioning during shared reading can increase language input and expressive vocabulary in at-risk children. Word frequency and morpho-orthography are critical for agreement processing. Semantic activation plays a crucial role in the process of word recognition among native Arab readers.

The study does not escape many limitations that need to be considered in light of the results. Firstly, the search terms used to identify relevant studies were limited to specific keywords related to the role, effect, or relationship of reading and vocabulary, which may have excluded studies that used different terminology or focused on different aspects of the relationship between these two factors. Secondly, the study only used a few databases and publishers, which may have limited the scope of the search and excluded relevant studies published in other sources. Thirdly, the study only included studies published between 2012 and 2022, with a focus on the last three years, which may have excluded important studies published outside of this timeframe. Fourthly, the study excluded studies that investigated the role of vocabulary in learning reading, which may have limited the scope of the analysis and excluded relevant

studies. Moreover, the study used several AI tools for data retrieval and analysis, but these tools may suffer from limitations in terms of data retrieval and accessibility to content, which may have impacted the accuracy and completeness of the results. Finally, the study did not assess the quality and accuracy of the reviewed research papers, which may have impacted the validity of the findings and conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Further research is further needed to examine the complex interplay between vocabulary and reading comprehension and develop effective interventions for diverse populations of learners.

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