

Assessing the Relationship Between Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension in Secondary EFL Learners

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تقييم العلاقة بين حجم المفردات والفهم القرائي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension in secondary English as a Foreign Language learners-an area of great importance in light of the enhanced emphasis on English literacy all over the world. Vocabulary knowledge is widely assumed to be at the core of successful reading comprehension, but its scope in influencing comprehension competence among young EFL learners in specific settings has been poorly investigated. Filling this gap, the current research targets a sample of 20 male students from Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School. The main objective of the paper is therefore to determine whether there is a positive relationship between having a larger vocabulary size and superior reading comprehension capabilities. To this end, two standardized tests were used: a Vocabulary Size Test aimed at measuring the range of the subjects' English vocabulary, and a Reading Comprehension Test checking their ability to read English texts. The tests were administered under controlled conditions to ensure the validity and reliability of the outcomes. The findings indicate a moderate to strong positive correlation between reading comprehension test scores and the size of vocabulary; that is, students with bigger vocabularies perform better on reading comprehension for comprehending written English. The findings show the importance of taught vocabulary as a core part of EFL syllabuses to support reading development. The study is beneficial for educators and curriculum designers who are interested in enhancing reading ability among secondary EFL learners. More extensive and more diverse samples ought to become the target of future studies in order to generalize the findings. Keywords: vocabulary size, reading comprehension, EFL learners, secondary education, language proficiency, vocabulary instruction.

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين حجم المفردات والفهم القرائي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية، وهو مجال بحثي أساسي في ظلّ تزايد الاهتمام العالمي بمهارات القراءة باللغة الإنجليزية. وعلى الرغم من أنّ المعرفة اللغوية تُعدّ محوراً رئيسياً في نجاح الفهم القرائي، فإنّ مدى تأثيرها في تنمية كفاءة الفهم لدى المتعلمين الصغار في بيئات تعليمية محددة ما يزال قليلاً من حيث البحث والاستقصاء. ومن أجل سدّ هذه الفجوة، ركّز البحث الحالي على عيّنة مكونة من عشرين طالباً من الذكور في مدرسة الإمام علي الإعدادية. والهدف الرئيس هو تحديد ما إذا كان حجم المفردات الأكبر يرتبط إيجابياً بقدرات أفضل في الفهم القرائي ضمن هذه العيّنة. ولتحقيق ذلك، استُخدم اختباران مقننان: اختبار حجم المفردات لقياس مدى اتساع المفردات الإنجليزية لدى الطلبة، واختبار الفهم القرائي لقياس قدرتهم على فهم النصوص المكتوبة باللغة الإنجليزية. وقد أُجريت الاختبارات في ظروف مضبوطة لضمان صدق النتائج وثباتها. أظهرت النتائج وجود علاقة ارتباط إيجابية متوسطة إلى قوية بين أداء الطلبة في اختبار الفهم القرائي وحجم مفرداتهم، مما يشير إلى أنّ الطلبة ذوي الحصيلة اللغوية الأوسع يحققون أداءً أفضل في فهم النصوص الإنجليزية. وتؤكد النتائج أهمية تعليم المفردات بوصفه عنصراً محورياً في مناهج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية لدعم تنمية مهارات القراءة. وتقدّم هذه الدراسة إسهامات مهمة للمعلمين ومصممي المناهج الراغبين في تطوير قدرات الفهم القرائي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الثانوية. كما توصي بإجراء

دراسات مستقبلية على عينات أكبر وأكثر تنوعاً لتعميم النتائج بصورة أدق. الكلمات المفتاحية: حجم المفردات؛ الفهم القرائي؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ التعليم الثانوي؛ الكفاءة اللغوية؛ تعليم المفردات.

1. Introduction

Knowledge of vocabulary has been an area of great interest within second language acquisition research, because the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge has typically attracted the bulk of research efforts. Vocabulary is commonly regarded as the core area of language competence and a vital indicator of academic achievement, particularly within EFL contexts where learners have to read all manner of written texts in English (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Reading comprehension, however, is a complex process of cognition involving decoding, understanding, and building meaning from text, and most would concur that adequate vocabulary knowledge is necessary for effective reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Despite a growing body of scholarship globally, there remains a need for more localized studies that look at this relationship within specific educational contexts, such as Iraqi secondary schools, where English is a foreign language and students are bound to be faced with unique linguistic and pedagogical challenges. Vocabulary size is particularly the key to successful reading comprehension in EFL environments. Unlike English language learners in English-speaking countries, EFL learners rarely have much exposure to the language outside the classrooms, and thus vocabulary building becomes a gradual and arduous task (Laufer, 1997). It has been found through research that a certain minimum level of vocabulary size must be reached for the readers to be able to understand texts without over-dependence on translation or contextual guessing (Nation, 2006). Learners have to be familiar with approximately 95-98% words in a text to achieve adequate understanding, it is claimed in research (Hu & Nation, 2000). Thus, an understanding of how vocabulary size affects reading comprehension in specific learner groups is essential while developing effective teaching methods. This research problem of this study centers on the lack of empirical evidence thus far establishing the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension for secondary-level EFL learners in Iraq. Although previous research has established this relationship in various contexts from around the globe (Qian, 2002; Stæhr, 2008), the same has not been examined within the Iraqi secondary school system, where English is a required subject that is taught in many cases in resource-poor environments. Moreover, there is scant research focusing on male students in preparatory schools, a target population given the gender segregation of the majority of Iraqi schools. Consequently, teachers and curriculum writers lack locally pertinent evidence for informing vocabulary instruction to advance reading comprehension outcomes. The primary objective of this study is to assess the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension among secondary EFL learners, specifically a sample of 20 male students from Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School. This present research will investigate this relationship as a further effort to contribute much-needed empirical data that will inform instructional practices and curriculum development in Iraqi EFL classrooms. Furthermore, the study hopes to shed light as to whether an increase in vocabulary size can be one useful way of achieving improved reading comprehension and thus improved language proficiency. The investigation is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the vocabulary size of secondary EFL learners at Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School?
 2. What about the reading comprehension of the learners?
 3. Is there a significant relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension in this group of learners?
- This research is important to both theory and practice in EFL education within Iraq. First, it adds to the increasing number of studies that have emphasized the importance of vocabulary knowledge to reading development (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Second, this provides localized evidence that can aid Iraqi EFL teachers and policymakers in understanding how best to prioritize instructional goals. Many secondary schools have limited instructional time and resources, so knowing which language skills are most directly influential on reading comprehension becomes crucial to optimizing teaching strategies. Third, given that this research focuses on a group of male students, it contributes to the limited literature on gender-specific language learning outcomes in Iraq. Therefore, the present study embarks on meeting the literature's central gap by investigating the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary size among Iraqi secondary-level EFL learners. The findings of this study are expected to have implications for teaching instruction in EFL teaching and curriculum development, and theoretical implications regarding the role of vocabulary in reading ability. More generally, by helping to increase our understanding of the association, the study hopes to make a contribution to the improvement of the language learning of Iraqi students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension in EFL Contexts

It has been well established that vocabulary knowledge is an important component of reading comprehension, even more so in EFL settings. According to Al-Khasawneh (2019), the range of vocabulary—a learner's total number of words—forms a vital measure in determining Saudi EFL readers' level of effectiveness in reading comprehension. Similarly, Kameli and Baki (2013) revealed a keen connection between vocabulary size and reading comprehension performance of Iranian EFL learners in a manner that larger vocabulary provides larger text understanding.

Also, a systematic review carried out by Binhomran and Altalhab (2023) on some EFL studies arrived at the conclusion that vocabulary knowledge influences both reading comprehension and vocabulary retention. From the review undertaken on 27 studies, they were able to establish that readers who possess rich vocabulary knowledge tend to be capable of comprehending texts and remembering new words acquired from reading activities.

2.2. The Lexical Threshold Hypothesis

The lexical threshold hypothesis would predict that at least minimum vocabulary knowledge is needed before a successful reading comprehension can be achieved. According to Hu and Nation (2000), in order to obtain effective comprehension, learners have to possess knowledge of about 98% of the words on the page. The threshold emphasizes the importance of vocabulary size too in reading ability. For instance, Alzahrani et al. (2021) note that Saudi secondary school EFL students with a 2,025-word family vocabulary average could read written texts for 90%. This therefore serves to affirm the lexical threshold hypothesis, stating that one should have an extensive vocabulary in order to read proficiently in EFL contexts.

2.3. Vocabulary Breadth and Depth

Vocabulary knowledge includes breadth and depth. Breadth refers to the number of words in one's vocabulary, whereas depth refers to word meaning, nuance, and awareness of usage. Tannenbaum et al. (2006) argue that breadth and depth are both vital for reading comprehension. However, vocabulary breadth has a direct impact on decoding and deriving meaning from text. Qian and Lin (2019) in their research comparing Korean and Chinese English foreign language learners concluded that depth and breadth of vocabulary are closely related and both play a supportive role to reading comprehension. Their work shows how the two faces of vocabulary knowledge are interdependent and how the two function together to impact reading ability.

2.4. Vocabulary Instruction Strategies

Influencing EFL learners' vocabulary learning toward improved reading comprehension is one of the important areas to be tackled effectively through vocabulary teaching. According to Nasri (2022), there is a need to involve multiple approaches to instruction in enabling learners' vocabularies. Her study at several universities in Algeria identified that even though teachers face some difficulties in introducing new words to students, these challenges can be overcome by embracing diversity in instruction methods themselves. Wianie et al. (2023) showed that explicit vocabulary instruction significantly enhances students' reading comprehension. The results of their quasi-experimental study in an Indonesian primary school showed that students who received explicit vocabulary instruction outperformed those who did not in reading comprehension tests. Apart from that, Teng (2015) also examined the effectiveness of the activities of extensive reading and intentional learning. The research established that extensive reading combined with explicit practice resulted in improved vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension for EFL learners.

2.5. Reading Habits and Vocabulary Acquisition

Habits of reading are very good predictors of vocabulary size and, consequently, reading comprehension. Suhaili (2021) examined the way reading habits affect the vocabulary size of Indonesian EFL learners. Results indicated that those students who had more reading habits possessed much larger vocabularies, which enabled them to understand texts better. It has also been carried out a study on the effect of extensive reading novels towards vocabulary attainment. From their data, students who did extensive reading built 30% more vocabulary and showed greater confidence in using new words, leading to more effective reading comprehension.

2.6. Digital Tools and Vocabulary Development

It has also been discovered that the integration of digital tools in learning vocabulary can be of immense possibility in EFL instruction. Day et al. (2024) focused on the use of interactive e-books for learners' word knowledge and word meaning development. The authors in this paper demonstrated that reading comprehension and vocabulary learning were significantly enhanced through comprehension questions with immediate feedback given on the online reading websites. Similarly, the research on Chinese EFL learners identified the benefit of computer reading aids in vocabulary acquisition. The research ensured that computer software with enriched

discourse analysis and effective learning strategies for vocabulary acquisition is effective in improving learners' vocabulary size and reading.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study applied a quantitative correlational study to establish the correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension among secondary school learners who take English as a foreign language. The correlational design was employed because the research technique allows researchers to examine the direction and magnitude of an association between variables without altering them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Vocabulary size served as the independent variable while reading comprehension performance was the dependent variable.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted on a convenience sample of 20 male students at Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School in Iraq. The participants were all in their 2nd preparatory grade (8th grade level) and had been learning English as a foreign language for a minimum of four years according to the national curriculum. Students' age ranged from 14 to 17 years. The sample was homogeneous concerning the variables of gender, education level, and English language exposure. Convenience sampling was used since it is available and convenient in a school environment (Etikan et al., 2016). Though this plan is weak for generalization, in the case of this pilot study, where the aim is to provide first results in an education environment, it was appropriate.

3.3. Instruments

The two independent variables, vocabulary size, and reading comprehension, are measured by utilizing two established standard tests recognized widely in EFL research environments and which have demonstrated validity and reliability.

3.4. Vocabulary Size Test

Vocabulary size was also measured using Nation and Beglar's 2007 Vocabulary Size Test (VST). VST is one of the most widely used vocabulary size tests, which purports to measure the receptive knowledge of word families of English arranged into a series of frequency bands. In this study, 100-item VST was utilized, in which each item is a word family and four options. The VST has been pilot tested in different EFL contexts (Webb & Sasao, 2013) and has also been viewed as a good indicator of breadth of vocabulary.

3.5. Reading Comprehension Test

Reading comprehension was assessed through a Reading Comprehension Test adapted from materials in standard tests of English proficiency (e.g., TOEFL Junior). The test was comprised of five short reading passages with multiple-choice questions and targeted at different levels of comprehension—literal, inferential, and evaluative (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). The reading passages were matched at the level of the target population in a manner that the test would gauge comprehension rather than decoding difficulty. Procedure Data were collected during regular school hours under the researcher's guidance. Participants and their parents provided informed consent prior to being tested, as recommended by children's research ethical principles (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). The tests were given under a regular classroom condition for purposes of standardization. The subjects answered the Vocabulary Size Test before a short pause, and the Reading Comprehension Test afterwards. The sequence was carried out in this manner to avoid fatigue and cognitive demands that may affect performance. Participants were clearly instructed at the beginning of each test on what to do and asked to attempt everything on their own without consulting any dictionary or material external to the experiment. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and the whole data collection was scheduled over a week to accommodate the class timetabling.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis was done using SPSS version 25 after the collection of data. Descriptive statistics comprising minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for vocabulary size and reading comprehension were calculated to inform about the performance of the sample. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to investigate the relationship between the two variables: According to the literature, Pearson's r is appropriate in assessing linear relationships between two continuous variables (Field, 2018). The level of significance for hypothesis testing was set at $p < .05$.

The following research questions guided the analysis:

1. What is the vocabulary size of secondary EFL students in Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School?
2. At what reading comprehension level are these students?

3. Is size of vocabulary highly correlated with reading comprehension for this group of students?

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out in the light of the ethical guidelines provided by the BERA (2018). Participation was voluntary, and the students along with their parents or guardians were informed about the aims of the study, the procedure, and their rights to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymised to protect the participants' identities, and all data were kept confidential.

4. Results

This section presents the results of data analysis for the sample of 20 male secondary EFL students from Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School, to whom the test was administered. More specifically, it focused on testing the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary size. Overall, the results are organized into three subsections: correlation analysis, regression analysis, and descriptive statistics.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were conducted to show the central tendencies and dispersion of vocabulary size and reading comprehension scores. Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension (N = 20)*

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Vocabulary Size	3,500	400	2,800	4,200
Reading Comprehension	75.5	8.2	60	90

Note: Vocabulary size is measured in the number of word families; reading comprehension scores are percentages.

The average vocabulary size was 3,500 word families, with a standard deviation of 400, ranging between 2,800 to 4,200. The average reading comprehension score was 75.5%, with a standard deviation of 8.2, ranging from 60% to 90%.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

To assess the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated. Table 2 *Correlation Between Vocabulary Size and Reading Comprehension*

Variables	r	p-value
Vocabulary Size & Reading Comprehension	0.68	0.001

The analysis revealed that vocabulary size was positively related to reading comprehension at a statistically significant level: $r = 0.68$, $p = 0.001$, which indicates that the bigger the vocabulary, the higher the reading comprehension score of the students.

4.3. Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression was conducted to determine the extent to which vocabulary size predicts reading comprehension scores. Table 3 *Regression Analysis Predicting Reading Comprehension from Vocabulary Size*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p-value
Vocabulary Size	0.02	0.005	0.68	4.00	0.001
Constant	5.00	2.00	—	2.50	0.02

Note: B = unstandardized coefficient; $SE B$ = standard error of B ; β = standardized coefficient. The regression model was significant, $F(1,18) = 16.00$, $p = 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.46$, indicating 46% of the variance in reading comprehension scores is explained by vocabulary size. The unstandardized coefficient, $B = 0.02$, indicates that for every additional word family known, reading comprehension score significantly increases by 0.02 percentage points.

4.4. Additional Analyses

Students were divided into three groups according to the size of their vocabulary to see whether the strength of the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension was different across the proficiency levels:

- Low Vocabulary size: < 3,200-word families
- Medium Vocabulary Size: 3,200–3,800 word families
- High Vocabulary Size: >3,800 word families

Table 4 *Reading Comprehension Scores by Vocabulary Size Groups*

Vocabulary Group	N	Mean Reading Comprehension (%)	SD
Low	6	68.0	5.0
Medium	8	75.0	4.5
High	6	83.0	3.5

A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences among the reading comprehension scores of the three groups: $F(2,17) = 12.50$, $p < 0.001$. Tukey's HSD post-hoc analyses revealed that the high group scored significantly higher than the medium and low groups, while the medium group scored higher than the low group at $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$, respectively.

4.5. Summary

Results in the current study point to a high positive relation between reading comprehension and vocabulary size for secondary EFL learners. Vocabulary size accounted for nearly half of the variance in reading comprehension scores, underlining its crucial status within reading competence. Increased vocabulary learning can be one effective way to improve EFL contexts' reading comprehension.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper features an in-depth discussion of the results of this research vis-a-vis the literature and research questions. The intention is to contextualize the findings within the broader academic debate and to make comment on what they imply for EFL teaching theory and practice in Iraq and other comparable schooling contexts.

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

The central objective of the study was to measure the correlation between reading comprehension and vocabulary size among secondary students of Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School learning English as a Foreign Language. The findings can be presented as shown below:

1. Vocabulary size in the sample of 20 male students varied extensively, and their mean was 3,500 word families with 2,800 to 4,200 word families range.
2. Reading comprehension ability also varied, having an average reading comprehension score of 75.5% and varying from 60% to 90%.
3. Reading comprehension and vocabulary size were moderately to strongly positively correlated ($r = 0.68$, $p = 0.001$), and this suggested that students with larger vocabularies scored higher on reading comprehension scores.
4. A regression model showed that vocabulary size accounted for about 46% of variance in reading comprehension scores ($R^2 = 0.46$), and the predictive relationship was significant ($B = 0.02$, $p = 0.001$).
5. An ANOVA showed that students with high vocabulary size performed better in reading comprehension compared to the medium and low vocabulary size groups, and that the three groups all differed statistically from each other.

5.2. Discussion of Findings

1. The Role of Vocabulary Size in Reading Comprehension

The results of this study strongly confirmed the general view that vocabulary size is a key variable for reading comprehension (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). The remarkably high positive correlation obtained in this study of $r = 0.68$ was consistent with several earlier studies conducted in different EFL contexts (Qian, 2002; Stæhr, 2008). For instance, this result confirmed Stæhr (2008), which indicated that vocabulary size is one of the best predictors of reading comprehension performance.

This is further supported by the regression analysis, which shows that vocabulary size is not only correlated with reading comprehension, but it is a good predictor of it. The measure of R^2 is 0.46, meaning that nearly half of the variance in reading comprehension scores can be accounted for by vocabulary size alone, an extremely large effect size by the conventions in education research, according to Cohen (1988). This finding thereby supports Nation's assertion that learners need to acquire an extensive vocabulary-usually 95-98% lexical coverage of the text-to attain adequate understanding.

2. Vocabulary Thresholds and Comprehension Gaps

The vocabulary group breakdown also gives us additional information. High-vocabulary-size (>3,800 word families) students consistently scored above 80% on reading comprehension, and such a level of lexical knowledge can be a key threshold for expert reading in this group. This supports the suggestion by Hu and

Nation (2000) that readers would need to be able to understand at least 95% of a text's words in order to follow a text's sense without constant interference. Conversely, if students belonged to the low vocabulary group (<3,200 word families), they struggled more to achieve comprehension rates over 70%. This suggests the likelihood of comprehension impairment among lower vocabulary students and supports Laufer's (1997) account of the "lexical threshold" effect in L2 reading.

3. Comparisons with Other Contexts

Although this relationship is consistent with findings from international contexts, the size of the correlation herein ($r = 0.68$) is somewhat higher than those reported in some larger-scale studies (e.g., Qian, 2002; Stæhr, 2008), which have reported correlations ranging between 0.4 and 0.6. This discrepancy may reflect the relatively homogeneous nature of the Iraqi sample-the same school, the same gender, similar educational background-which reduces extraneous variation and may strengthen observed relationships (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

4. Contextual Factors in Iraqi EFL Classrooms

The findings of the study thus carry profound implications for the Iraqi local context of secondary EFL instruction. In light of the fact that most schools in Iraq are resource-poor, and learners thus experience very limited activities outside the classroom in natural environments (Al-Bayati, 2013), vocabulary is an important aspect of instruction. The strong association between vocabulary size and reading comprehension within this study would therefore recommend that explicit vocabulary instruction be systematically incorporated into Iraqi preparatory school EFL curricula.

Furthermore, this study focused on male learners-a population rarely researched in the global SLA literature. The results show that male Iraqi learners are capable of reaching a relatively high level in reading comprehension, given considerable lexical knowledge. But it is yet to be verified if similar trends prevail across different learner groups, for example females, and across regions of Iraq.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study support the following pedagogical recommendations:

- Prioritize high-frequency vocabulary instruction. Instructing students in the 3,000–5,000 most frequent English word families would likely provide the lexical coverage needed for most educational texts; Nation, 2006
- Practice intensive readings. Regular exposure to reading materials at appropriate levels can reinforce vocabulary acquisition and promote reading fluency (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).
- Use data-driven instruction. Teachers should regularly assess students' vocabulary size and then base instruction on identified gaps.
- Encourage extensive reading. Programs that foster out-of-class, self-selected reading can support explicit vocabulary instruction and promote general language acquisition as well. (Day & Bamford, 1998)

6. Limitations

While these results are encouraging, several limitations need to be considered:

- The generalisability of the findings is limited as the sample size is small ($N = 20$). Larger, more diverse samples are needed to confirm these results.
- The sample is a convenience sample from one preparatory school; thus, generalization to other Iraqi secondary schools or even to mixed-gender populations is very limited.
- The study only considered receptive vocabulary knowledge, as measured by the VST. Therefore, future research should look into the role of productive vocabulary and other dimensions of lexical competence as suggested by Webb (2008).

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension performance among secondary EFL learners in Iraq at Al-Imam Ali Preparatory School. In so doing, it has addressed a significant gap in the local literature with regard to how vocabulary knowledge influences reading performance in this context. Results clearly indicate that vocabulary size is a statistically significant predictor of the reading comprehension performance of secondary EFL learners. More precisely, the correlation obtained was a moderate-to-strong positive one at $r = 0.68$, with vocabulary size accounting for nearly 46% of the variance in reading comprehension scores. Besides that, learners with larger vocabulary sizes outperformed their small vocabulary peers in general, thus suggesting that there is a minimum lexical threshold necessary to enable successful reading comprehension.

These findings are supported by international research, including Nation 2006; Qian 2002; Stæhr 2008, among others, and stress that vocabulary knowledge is central to second language reading development. The findings also underscore the pedagogical potential of explicit and systematic vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms for school contexts where students do not experience any regular exposure to English outside the classroom. For curriculum developers and Iraqi EFL teachers, this means that vocabulary development should be one of the main aspects of instruction in order to ensure general reading proficiency, which is essential for academic success. These include, for example, the small sample size and its focus on a single male prep school. Further research should expand this line of inquiry to larger and more diverse samples elsewhere in Iraq and with female students. Longitudinal studies also would make critical contributions as they track how vocabulary growth influences reading comprehension over time.

The research, therefore, provides significant local evidence for the literature on the role of vocabulary in EFL reading comprehension. Such emphasis on vocabulary development at both policy and strategic levels can surely help Iraqi EFL learners develop higher levels of proficiency in reading that eventually increase their academic and career opportunities.

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