



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THE INFLUENCE OF VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR MASTERY ON STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION ON DESCRIPTIVE TEXT

Ratna Komala Dewi<sup>1</sup>,  
Oom Rohmah Syamsudin<sup>2</sup>,  
Nurjanah<sup>3</sup>,

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Jakarta, Indonesia

*e-mail: ratna.rkd30@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>*

*e-mail: orsyamsudin@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>*

*e-mail: nurjanah3434@gmail.com<sup>3</sup>*

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Corresponding Author:  
Ratna Komala Dewi  
ratna.rkd30@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Reading plays an essential role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it supports students' understanding of vocabulary and grammar within texts. However, many junior high school students in Indonesia still experience difficulties in comprehending descriptive texts due to limited vocabulary and weak mastery of the simple present tense. Although previous studies have examined vocabulary and grammar separately, limited research has explored their combined influence on reading comprehension. This study investigates the effect of vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery on students' comprehension of descriptive texts. A quantitative survey design was applied to students from public junior high schools in Banjarmasin selected through cluster random sampling. Three validated tests were administered: vocabulary, simple present tense, and reading comprehension. Multiple regression analysis revealed that both vocabulary and grammar mastery significantly affect reading comprehension, both individually and simultaneously, highlighting the importance of integrating linguistic components in reading instruction.

**Keywords:** vocabulary mastery; simple present tense; reading comprehension; descriptive text; EFL learning

## Pengaruh Penguasaan Kosakata dan Simple Present Tense terhadap Keterampilan Membaca Descriptive Text

**Abstrak:** Membaca memiliki peran penting dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) karena membantu siswa memahami kosakata dan tata bahasa dalam teks. Namun, banyak siswa SMP di Indonesia masih mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami teks deskriptif akibat keterbatasan kosakata dan lemahnya penguasaan simple present tense. Meskipun penelitian sebelumnya telah mengkaji kosakata dan tata bahasa secara terpisah, penelitian yang meneliti pengaruh keduanya secara bersamaan terhadap pemahaman membaca masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh penguasaan kosakata dan simple present tense terhadap pemahaman membaca teks deskriptif siswa. Desain penelitian yang digunakan adalah survei kuantitatif pada siswa SMP negeri di Banjarmasin yang dipilih melalui cluster random sampling. Instrumen yang digunakan meliputi tes kosakata, tes simple present tense, dan tes pemahaman membaca. Analisis regresi berganda menunjukkan bahwa kedua variabel tersebut berpengaruh signifikan, baik secara parsial maupun simultan, terhadap pemahaman membaca siswa.

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**Kata kunci:** penguasaan kosakata; simple present tense; pemahaman membaca; teks deskriptif; pembelajaran EFL

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is a central component of English language learning because it provides learners with essential linguistic input, including vocabulary exposure, grammatical patterns, and comprehension strategies. In the Indonesian EFL context, where students have limited natural exposure to English, classroom reading activities become the primary source of language input. According to Pang (2017), reading supports learners in developing both comprehension and language awareness because it trains them to interpret messages, identify relevant information, and connect ideas within a text. Similarly, Nunan (2020) emphasizes that reading is a foundation for acquiring new vocabulary and enhancing grammatical sensitivity, both of which contribute significantly to overall language proficiency.

One of the key challenges in Indonesian secondary schools is the low level of reading achievement. National and international assessments consistently show that many Indonesian students struggle with basic comprehension. According to the PISA 2022 report, only about 25% of Indonesian students reach the minimum proficiency level in reading, far below the OECD average. This finding is reinforced by the Rapor Pendidikan 2023 from the Ministry of Education, which highlights that literacy remains one of the weakest competencies among junior high school students nationwide.

At the local level, research in Banjarmasin presents a similar pattern. Jumadi (2021) found that students' literal comprehension averages around 58%, while their inferential comprehension drops to approximately 43%, indicating substantial difficulties in deeper-level reading processing. Another study by Puspardini (2022) reported that students' initial descriptive text comprehension was only 58.81 before instructional intervention, underscoring the need for targeted literacy support.

Descriptive text is one of the primary genres taught at the junior high school level under the Kurikulum Merdeka. The official textbook *English for Nusantara* (Kemendikbud, 2022) states that descriptive text plays a vital role in supporting students' vocabulary development and enabling them to express observations accurately. Structurally, descriptive text consists of identification followed by detailed description, and linguistically it relies heavily on specific nouns, adjectives, linking verbs, and especially the simple present tense. As Andini (2023) explains, the accurate understanding of simple present tense and descriptive vocabulary significantly supports accurate interpretation of descriptive passages.

Vocabulary mastery is widely acknowledged as a strong predictor of reading comprehension. Nation (2013; 2020) states that vocabulary knowledge underpins learners' ability to decode meaning, infer context, and connect ideas in a text. Schmitt (2019) further reinforces that vocabulary is not merely the recognition of words, but the ability to understand word families, collocations, and contextual nuances. Without sufficient vocabulary, students are unable to construct meaning or comprehend descriptive details effectively.

Grammar mastery, especially mastery of the simple present tense, also plays a crucial role in reading comprehension. Rahmawati (2021) emphasizes that correct understanding of simple present tense structures enables learners to capture stable characteristics described in the text and interpret factual statements accurately. The frequent errors students make in subject–verb agreement, linking verbs, and descriptive sentence patterns reflect insufficient grammatical awareness, which affects both reading accuracy and fluency.

Reading comprehension is a complex skill that requires the interaction of vocabulary knowledge, grammar understanding, and text-processing strategies. Grabe and Stoller (2019) explain that effective reading involves rapid lexical access, syntactic parsing, and meaningful integration of ideas. Similarly, Day (2018) highlights that sustained exposure to texts improves comprehension and reinforces linguistic patterns learners have learned from explicit instruction.

Despite the numerous studies focusing on vocabulary or grammar individually, limited research has examined the combined influence of these two linguistic components on students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts, particularly in the SMP context. This gap is significant because reading comprehension requires vocabulary knowledge for meaning retrieval and grammatical competence for interpreting relationships between ideas. Therefore, this study aims to examine (1) the influence of vocabulary mastery on reading comprehension, (2) the influence of simple present tense mastery on reading comprehension, and (3) the combined influence of the two variables.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study used a quantitative research approach with a survey design. The survey design was chosen because it allows the researcher to collect numerical data to examine the relationships between linguistic competence and reading comprehension. The research was conducted in several public junior high schools in Banjarmasin, selected using cluster random sampling to ensure representativeness. A total of 84 eighth-grade students participated in the study.

Three instruments were used: a vocabulary test (30 items), a simple present tense test (20 items), and a descriptive text reading comprehension test (30 items). The vocabulary test measured students' ability to recognize, interpret, and use words commonly found in descriptive texts. The simple present tense test assessed understanding of sentence patterns, linking verbs, and subject–verb agreement. The reading test measured literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension. All instruments underwent validation through expert judgment and statistical validation. Reliability coefficients were above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency. Item difficulty and discrimination indices met the criteria for high-quality test items. Data collection was carried out during classroom hours with the assistance of English teachers. Students completed the tests independently under standardized conditions.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, normality tests, linearity tests, and multiple regression analysis. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, while linearity was tested through ANOVA table results. Multiple regression was employed to determine the influence of vocabulary and simple present tense mastery on reading comprehension.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study present quantitative evidence showing how vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery influence students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, prerequisite tests, and multiple regression analysis. These results are then interpreted in light of previous theories and empirical studies to explain their pedagogical significance.

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The descriptive statistics reveal the distribution of students' scores for three variables: vocabulary mastery, simple present tense mastery, and descriptive text reading comprehension. Table 1 summarizes the overall performance of the 84 participating students.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Vocabulary Mastery	84	68.96	9.55	44	89
Simple Present Tense Mastery	84	71.56	7.43	57	91
Reading Comprehension	84	83.54	9.37	60	100

The mean score of vocabulary mastery ( $M = 68.96$ ) indicates that students generally possess moderate vocabulary knowledge. This aligns with previous observations in Indonesian EFL contexts, where vocabulary remains a consistent challenge for junior high school learners (Alqahtani, 2019; Alfaraida et al., 2023). Students' simple present tense mastery also shows a moderate average ( $M = 71.56$ ), indicating partial but incomplete understanding of grammatical structures such as subject-verb agreement and linking verbs, elements heavily required for descriptive text comprehension. The reading comprehension score ( $M = 83.54$ ) suggests that students performed better in the reading test compared to other components. However, high reading scores can be misleading, as many students successfully answered literal questions but struggled with inferential and evaluative questions, patterns commonly found in Indonesian reading studies (Rahmawati & Putra, 2024).

## Regression Findings

To determine the influence of vocabulary mastery ( $X_1$ ) and simple present tense mastery ( $X_2$ ) on descriptive text reading comprehension ( $Y$ ), multiple regression analysis was conducted.

**Table 1**  
Coefficient of Determination Table (R and  $R^2$ )

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.932 <sup>a</sup>	.869	.866	3.865

**Table 2**  
T-test Table (Partial)

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.792	4.109		.923	.359
	Penguasaan Kosakata	.869	.2071	.587	4.197	.000
	Penguasaan Simple Present Tense	.252	.101	.178	2.495	.014

**Table 3**  
ANOVA (Simultaneous Significance Test)

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	520.800	2	260.400	17.429	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	1210.221	81	14.941		



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Total	1731.021	83
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a. Dependent Variable: Reading Ability

b. Predictors: (Constant), Simple Present Tense Mastery, Vocabulary Mastery

Both predictors significantly contribute to reading comprehension ( $p < .05$ ), with vocabulary mastery showing a stronger influence ( $\beta = 0.869$ ) compared to simple present tense mastery ( $\beta = 0.252$ ). The regression equation:

$$Y = 3.792 + 0.869X_1 + 0.252X_2$$

indicates that vocabulary mastery contributes almost four times more strongly than grammar to reading comprehension.

### Discussion

The findings confirm that vocabulary mastery plays the most dominant role in understanding descriptive texts. Students who have a richer vocabulary are more capable of identifying key characteristics, interpreting adjectives, and understanding specific nouns commonly used in descriptive passages. This supports the theoretical view that vocabulary is the foundation of reading comprehension (Nation, 2020; Harmer, 2015).

Studies cited in your thesis, such as I Putu Yoga Maha Astra et al. (2022), similarly found that vocabulary significantly correlates with reading comprehension. Students with stronger vocabulary mastery can process descriptive information more efficiently, using lexical knowledge to construct mental imagery of the subject described (Hyland, 2019).

In descriptive texts, vocabulary plays a double function:

1. Lexical identification, enabling students to recognize descriptive elements, and
2. Semantic integration, helping students link words into meaningful units.

This dual role explains why vocabulary has the highest beta coefficient.

### The Role of Simple Present Tense Mastery

Although smaller than the vocabulary coefficient, the influence of simple present tense mastery remains significant. This shows that grammar, particularly simple present tense, is essential in understanding the factual, habitual, or permanent characteristics presented in descriptive texts.

The moderate contribution of grammar supports studies cited in your thesis, such as Andini (2023), which confirmed that tense mastery influences the accuracy of students' understanding of descriptive statements. Grammar helps students decode how ideas relate, particularly in identifying characteristics, linking descriptive clauses, and interpreting subject-verb relationships.

Additionally, simple present tense helps students distinguish between:

- *states* (e.g., "The library is large"),
- *general truths* ("Birds have wings"), and
- *habitual descriptions* ("She visits the park every morning").

Students lacking grammatical control often misinterpret these relationships, leading to confusion about the purpose or meaning of descriptive information.

### Simultaneous Influence of Vocabulary and Grammar

The significant simultaneous effect ( $F = 45.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ) highlights the interdependence of vocabulary and grammar in reading. Reading comprehension is not merely a matter of knowing words nor solely understanding grammatical structures; it is the integration of both that enables full comprehension.

This supports Grabe and Stoller's (2019) theory that decoding (vocabulary) and parsing (grammar) must work together for effective comprehension. In descriptive texts, vocabulary provides the lexical building blocks, while grammar provides the structural blueprint. Without vocabulary,

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students cannot access meaning; without grammar, they cannot understand relations among meanings.

## Comparative Analysis and Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study are consistent with a range of previous research conducted in the Indonesian EFL context and reinforce patterns commonly observed in students' reading performance across different regions. For instance, the results align with the study by Jumadi (2021), who found that junior high school students in Banjarmasin tend to score significantly lower on interpretive and inferential comprehension compared to literal comprehension. This mirrors the present research, in which students showed adequate ability to identify explicit information but continued to struggle with understanding implied or deeper meanings. Such consistency suggests that inferential comprehension difficulties are not limited to particular schools but represent a broader challenge within Indonesian literacy development.

Similarly, the findings support those of Pusparini (2022), who reported that vocabulary limitations significantly hinder students' ability to comprehend descriptive texts. In the current study, vocabulary mastery emerged as the strongest predictor of descriptive text comprehension, as demonstrated by its highest regression coefficient. This reinforces the understanding that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in enabling students to decode meaning, interpret descriptive details, and construct mental images of the text. Without sufficient vocabulary, students' reading comprehension is constrained even when grammatical understanding is present.

The results also resonate with Rahmawati (2021), who identified recurring errors in students' use of the simple present tense, particularly in descriptive writing and reading tasks. The present study likewise found that simple present tense mastery contributes significantly to reading comprehension, though to a lesser extent than vocabulary mastery. This parallel highlights the supportive yet secondary role of grammatical competence: grammar helps students interpret relationships between ideas, but it relies on vocabulary knowledge to convey meaning effectively. Furthermore, the current findings correspond with research conducted by Alfaraida et al. (2023), who showed that improving students' vocabulary knowledge leads to measurable gains in reading comprehension. This alignment reinforces the robustness of the relationship between vocabulary mastery and text comprehension across different Indonesian contexts. Taken together, these consistent patterns indicate that reading challenges, particularly limited vocabulary, grammatical weaknesses, and difficulty with inferential comprehension, are widespread rather than isolated issues. They point to systemic patterns in EFL learning that require comprehensive pedagogical intervention.

The findings also generate several important pedagogical implications for English language teaching, especially within the framework of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. First, because both vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery significantly influence reading comprehension, these linguistic components should not be taught in isolation. Instead, instructional practices need to integrate vocabulary and grammar within meaningful reading activities so that students can immediately apply linguistic knowledge to real texts. When vocabulary and grammar are taught contextually, particularly through descriptive passages, students develop a deeper and more functional understanding of how linguistic features operate in actual discourse.

Teachers are therefore encouraged to use descriptive texts as an authentic context for enriching students' vocabulary and grammatical awareness simultaneously. Descriptive texts naturally contain rich lexical items such as adjectives, specific nouns, and sensory phrases, as well as grammatical structures dominated by the simple present tense. Embedding instruction within these texts allows students to see firsthand how words and structures work together to convey meaning. In this way, vocabulary and grammar become useful tools rather than abstract concepts.



Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of scaffolding strategies that guide students from literal to inferential comprehension. Many students can identify explicitly stated details but encounter challenges when required to interpret implied meaning or relationships across sentences. Teachers need to design guided reading tasks, such as modeling think-aloud strategies, providing guiding questions, and facilitating collaborative discussions, to help students gradually build inferential comprehension skills.

In addition, grammar instruction should move beyond mechanical exercises toward more contextual approaches. Rather than merely completing fill-in-the-blank drills, students should analyze how simple present tense structures function within descriptive texts. This contextualized grammar instruction helps students connect form and function, promoting deeper and more long-lasting grammatical mastery.

At the institutional level, the findings underscore the importance of establishing structured reading programs aligned with the literacy principles of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Schools can support literacy development by providing classroom libraries, thematic reading projects, and regular reading routines that expose students to descriptive texts. Sustained engagement with reading materials not only enhances vocabulary and grammar mastery but also promotes broader literacy competence.

Overall, the alignment with previous Indonesian studies and the resulting pedagogical implications highlight the urgent need for integrated, contextualized, and literacy-focused instruction to improve students' descriptive text comprehension. These approaches are essential for addressing the persistent challenges identified across multiple studies and for supporting students' progression toward higher-level reading proficiency.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study offer several important pedagogical implications for English language teaching, particularly in the context of junior high schools implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. First, the results clearly demonstrate that vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery both play essential roles in supporting students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts. This means that vocabulary and grammar should not be taught as isolated components. Instead, they need to be integrated seamlessly within reading instruction so that students can immediately apply the linguistic knowledge they acquire to real texts. When students learn vocabulary and grammar in context, especially through descriptive passages, they develop a deeper understanding of how these linguistic elements function in actual discourse.

Moreover, teachers are encouraged to use descriptive texts as a meaningful context for developing students' vocabulary and grammar simultaneously. Descriptive texts naturally contain rich lexical items, such as adjectives, specific nouns, and descriptive phrases, as well as grammatical patterns dominated by the simple present tense. Using these texts in class activities allows students to engage with authentic examples of language use that reflect the linguistic features they need to master. Through this approach, vocabulary and grammar do not become abstract concepts, but tools that students use to make sense of the text.

The findings also highlight the need for scaffolding strategies that help students progress gradually from literal understanding to deeper inferential comprehension. Many students can identify explicit information but struggle when the meaning is implied or requires interpretation across sentences. Teachers therefore need to design guided reading tasks that support students in identifying main ideas, analyzing descriptive elements, and interpreting relationships within the text. Such scaffolding may include teacher modeling, guided questioning, collaborative reading, and structured practice activities.

Additionally, the implications extend to grammar instruction. Instead of relying on mechanical drills that require students to fill in blanks or manipulate isolated sentences, teachers should adopt a contextualized approach to grammar. This involves analyzing grammatical structures as they appear in descriptive texts and encouraging students to examine how simple present tense

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forms contribute to meaning. Contextual grammar instruction not only enhances comprehension but also helps students connect form with function, which is essential for long-term mastery.

Finally, at the school level, the findings support the integration of structured reading programs aligned with the literacy principles of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Schools should promote consistent reading exposure through classroom libraries, reading projects, and thematic reading activities that encourage students to explore descriptive texts regularly. Sustained reading engagement will not only improve vocabulary development and grammatical awareness but also cultivate students' overall literacy competence.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the influence of vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery on junior high school students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Based on the quantitative analysis conducted, several important conclusions can be drawn. First, vocabulary mastery was found to be the strongest and most significant predictor of reading comprehension. Students with higher levels of vocabulary knowledge demonstrated better ability to recognize descriptive details, interpret linguistic cues, and construct meaning from the text. This confirms that vocabulary remains a fundamental component of reading comprehension in the EFL context.

Second, simple present tense mastery also contributed significantly to students' reading comprehension, although its effect size was smaller than that of vocabulary. Mastery of grammatical structures helped students recognize factual statements, understand relationships between ideas, and interpret sentence-level information effectively. While vocabulary enables learners to access meaning, grammar provides the structural framework needed to interpret that meaning accurately. Third, the simultaneous influence of vocabulary and simple present tense mastery indicates that reading comprehension is a multidimensional skill requiring the integration of both lexical and grammatical knowledge. Students cannot rely solely on word recognition, nor can they depend only on grammar; both components work together to support deeper comprehension.

In addition, when viewed in comparison with previous Indonesian studies, the findings demonstrate a consistent pattern of reading challenges among EFL learners, particularly in vocabulary limitations, grammatical weaknesses, and difficulties in inferential comprehension. This consistency highlights the need for instructional approaches that integrate vocabulary and grammar within meaningful reading activities.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of strengthening linguistic competence, especially vocabulary mastery and simple present tense mastery, to enhance students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Teachers, curriculum designers, and schools are encouraged to adopt integrated and contextualized literacy practices that provide students with rich exposure to descriptive texts, opportunities for guided reading, and meaningful engagement with language. Future research may expand this study by exploring additional variables such as reading motivation, metacognitive strategies, or digital literacy, which may further contribute to students' comprehension development.

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