

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of The Problem

Reading is a fundamental skill in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it functions as a receptive skill that allows learners to receive and process language input through written texts (Harmer, 2010). Through reading, students are exposed to various linguistic elements, including vocabulary, grammar, and discourse patterns, which contribute to overall language proficiency. Grabe & Stoller (2002) state that reading is an active process of constructing meaning from written texts, requiring readers to integrate textual information with their background knowledge.

In higher education, students are required to engage with increasingly complex academic texts that contain a substantial amount of complex vocabulary. Previous studies have consistently shown that vocabulary knowledge plays an important role in supporting reading comprehension among EFL learners. Masrai (2019) found that vocabulary knowledge was a strong predictor of reading comprehension among tertiary-level learners, while Brooks et al. (2021) reported that vocabulary knowledge explained more variation in reading comprehension than several other language-related factors. These findings suggest that difficulties in vocabulary knowledge may hinder students' ability to understand academic texts effectively.

This challenge is further intensified by shifting media consumption patterns in the digital era, where visual content and short-form videos increasingly dominate over written texts. As a result, students may develop lower reading stamina and become less accustomed to processing lengthy texts. Consequently, when faced with academic reading materials at the university level, students often experience difficulties related to critical

analysis, inferential comprehension, and the understanding of technical vocabulary (Laila et al., 2024).

For many EFL learners, limited vocabulary knowledge remains one of the major challenges in reading English texts. Although students may understand the general topic of a text, they often encounter unfamiliar words that interrupt the reading process and make it difficult to construct meaning effectively. These unfamiliar words frequently cause readers to stop and focus on individual vocabulary items rather than engaging with the text as a whole. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge is a crucial component of reading because readers need sufficient knowledge of surrounding words to interpret written texts accurately. Although dictionaries are commonly used to address this problem, excessive reliance on dictionaries can slow down reading and reduce comprehension fluency.

Laufer (1996) explains that constant dictionary consultation may distract learners from the overall meaning of the text, especially during reading activities. Similarly, Nation (2001) suggests that while dictionaries are useful learning tools, readers also need strategies that allow them to infer word meanings without disrupting the reading process. Therefore, the difficulty of unfamiliar vocabulary highlights the need for effective reading strategies that support meaning construction during reading.

To cope with the problem of unfamiliar vocabulary during reading, learners often rely on contextual information available in the text to infer word meanings. One common strategy used by readers to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary is the use of context clues, which refers to hints or information surrounding an unknown word that help readers infer its meaning.

According to Baumann et al. (2003), context clues may appear in various forms, such as definitions, examples, synonyms, contrasts, or general contextual information within a sentence or paragraph. This strategy encourages readers to actively engage with the text and focus on meaning

construction rather than isolated word recognition. In the context of EFL learning, the ability to use context clues is considered important because it allows learners to continue reading without frequent interruptions and supports vocabulary development through meaningful exposure to language in use.

Although context clues serve the same general purpose of helping readers infer unfamiliar word meanings, different types of clues vary in the kind of contextual support they offer and the cognitive demands they place on readers. Definition and synonym clues tend to provide relatively direct semantic information, whereas antonym and general context clues require readers to interpret contrastive relationships or synthesize broader textual information (Blanchard & Root, 2005; Nassaji, 2003). This variation suggests that students may utilize different types of context clues in different ways when interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary.

Previous studies on context clues have primarily examined the effectiveness of context clue instruction or students' achievement in vocabulary learning through quantitative approaches. While these studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of context clues, they provide limited information about how students actually utilize different types of context clues when interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, studies that explore students' use of definition, synonym, antonym, example, and general context clues in higher education contexts remain relatively limited. Therefore, further investigation is needed to provide a more detailed description of how students utilize various types of context clues when interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary in reading texts.

In the English Tadris Program at Imam Bonjol State Islamic University Padang, context clues are commonly introduced in reading courses to support vocabulary interpretation during reading activities. However, students' use of different types of context clues when interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary has not been sufficiently described. Therefore, this

study aims to analyze the types of context clues used by students in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary in reading texts, based on their written explanations in context clue interpretation tasks, using a descriptive qualitative approach.

B. Identification of The Problem

Based on the background of the problem, several issues can be identified:

1. Students encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in reading texts.
2. Students use context clues, but their use of different types of context clues has not been sufficiently described.
3. Previous studies focus more on effectiveness and achievement than on students' actual use of context clues.

C. Focus of The Research

This study focuses on students' use of context clues in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. The study examines five types of context clues proposed by Baumann et al. (2003), namely definition clues, synonym clues, antonym clues, example clues, and general context clues. The participants of the study are fourth-semester students of Class A of the English Tadris Program at Imam Bonjol State Islamic University Padang in the 2025/2026 Academic Year. The data are obtained from students' responses and written explanations collected through context clue interpretation tasks consisting of unfamiliar vocabulary items embedded in reading passages adapted from TOEFL and IELTS materials. The analysis focuses on describing students' use of five types of context clues in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary based on their responses and written explanations.

D. Formulation of The Research

Based on the background of the problem above, the question of this research is formulated into: What types of context clues are used by students in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary?

E. Purpose of The Research

Related to the formulation of the research, the purpose of the research is: To describe the types of context clues used by students in interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary.

F. Significance of The Research

This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical significance in the field of English language education. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how different types of context clues support students' ability to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary during reading activities, particularly regarding which types are more accessible and which present greater challenges for EFL learners. The findings may enrich existing references related to vocabulary learning and reading strategies, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Practically, the results of this study are expected to be beneficial for students, lecturers, and future researchers. For students, this research may raise awareness of which types of context clues are more reliable and which require more careful attention when inferring word meanings, thereby reducing excessive reliance on dictionaries. For lecturers, the findings may provide insights into the specific types of context clues that students find most challenging, which can inform the design of more targeted reading instruction. For future researchers, this study may serve as a reference for conducting further studies on specific types of context clues, vocabulary learning, and reading strategies.