

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Reading is widely recognized as one of the most essential and valuable skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It serves as a fundamental tool for acquiring knowledge, developing language proficiency, and achieving academic success. According to Nation (2020), reading is not merely a process of recognizing written words; it is a complex cognitive activity that involves interpreting, analyzing, and constructing meaning from texts. It plays a crucial role in language development because it exposes learners to authentic language use, diverse sentence structures, and various vocabulary items that cannot be easily obtained through other skills. Through reading, students are able to expand their linguistic competence, improve their grammar awareness, and develop the ability to express their ideas both orally and in writing.

In educational contexts, reading acts as a foundation for learning across all subjects. Most learning materials, textbooks, examination questions, and reference sources are presented in written form, so students who possess good reading comprehension skills tend to perform better in their studies. They can understand instructions more clearly, process information efficiently, and master new concepts more easily. Conversely, students who experience difficulties in reading often face challenges not only in English lessons but also in other subjects that require understanding written information. Therefore, the ability to

read and comprehend texts effectively is considered a key competency that every EFL learner should develop.

At An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh, English is taught as a core subject at the senior high school level, and reading is one of the main skills emphasized in the curriculum. The purpose of teaching reading is to help students understand various types of texts, extract important information, and interpret the messages conveyed by the writers. In daily teaching and learning activities, students are guided to read different kinds of texts, answer comprehension questions, and discuss the content with their teachers and peers. They are expected to be able to understand the meaning of words, follow ideas in sentences and paragraphs, identify main points, and grasp the overall content of the texts they read.

Furthermore, reading instruction at this school also supports the development of other language skills. When students read English texts, they learn correct grammar usage, appropriate vocabulary, and effective communication patterns. These elements can then be applied when they speak or write, helping them become more proficient in using the language as a whole. Reading also contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, as students learn to analyze information, evaluate ideas, and draw logical conclusions based on what they have read. For these reasons, reading holds a very important position in the English language curriculum and is closely related to students' academic achievement and language development.

Despite its importance, many EFL students still encounter significant difficulties when learning to read and understand English texts. This problem is particularly noticeable in countries where English is learned as a foreign language and where exposure to the language outside the classroom is very limited, such as in Cambodia. At An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh, observations and initial interactions with teachers and students have shown that Grade X students often face challenges when dealing with English reading materials. Some of the difficulties they experience include not understanding the meanings of many words, having trouble understanding sentence structures, and being unsure about how to find important information in texts. These issues are similar to those reported in many previous studies conducted in other EFL contexts in Southeast Asia, where students commonly struggle with reading due to limited language exposure and instructional constraints (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Nguyen, 2021).

Based on early interviews conducted with English teachers at the school, it was revealed that the most common problem faced by students is limited vocabulary knowledge. Many students do not know the meanings of many words found in the texts they read, which makes it difficult for them to understand the content. When they encounter unfamiliar words, they often stop reading, guess the meaning incorrectly, or rely too much on translation, which slows down their reading process and reduces their ability to comprehend the text. In addition to vocabulary problems, students also lack effective reading strategies. Most of them read texts word by word without trying to understand the general meaning first,

and they do not know how to use techniques such as skimming or scanning to find information quickly. As a result, they take a long time to finish reading and often do not understand the main ideas of the texts.

Another issue identified is the low level of motivation and interest among students. Many students consider reading English texts as a difficult, boring, and time-consuming activity. They do not see the practical value of learning English, so they are not willing to put effort into practicing reading. Some students also have very little or no prior knowledge of English before entering Grade X. This means that they start learning from the very basic level, which makes it harder for them to understand more complex texts and grammatical structures. When they encounter long sentences or different grammar patterns, they often feel confused and lose confidence in their ability to learn.

Apart from problems related to students themselves, there are also external factors that contribute to these difficulties. The educational context in Cambodia, including in private and religious schools, often faces challenges such as limited resources, insufficient facilities, and traditional teaching methods that focus too much on memorization. At An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh, these challenges are also present. The learning materials used are mostly textbooks that are not updated regularly, and they do not provide enough variety or interesting content to attract students' attention. There are also limited opportunities for students to use English outside of class, so they do not have enough exposure to the language to improve their skills naturally. The lack of adequate facilities such

as libraries, reading rooms, or multimedia resources also makes it difficult for students to practice reading regularly.

Many previous studies have been conducted to investigate the difficulties that EFL students face in reading. For example, Alhaisoni (2017) found that the main obstacles encountered by students are limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical knowledge, and poor reading strategies. Similarly, Fitriani and Apriani (2020) reported that students in Islamic senior high schools often have problems understanding word meanings, identifying main ideas, and understanding text structures. In a more recent study, Nguyen (2021) stated that students in Vietnam face similar challenges, including limited vocabulary, insufficient reading practice, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. These studies show that reading difficulties are a common problem among EFL learners in many countries, including in the Southeast Asian region.

Other research has also emphasized the importance of vocabulary as the foundation of reading comprehension. According to Nation (2020), readers need to know at least 95% of the words in a text to understand it well. If students do not have enough vocabulary knowledge, they will not be able to understand the message conveyed by the writer. This shows that vocabulary mastery is not only one of the difficulties faced by students but also the main factor that determines their success in reading. Therefore, it is very important to pay attention to students' vocabulary learning and find ways to help them master words effectively.

The present study shares similarities with previous research in that it focuses on the difficulties experienced by EFL students in reading English texts, with special attention to vocabulary mastery. Like other studies, it recognizes that reading is a complex process influenced by various factors related to students, teaching methods, and learning materials. However, this study also has differences from previous research. It is conducted specifically at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh, which has its own unique educational environment, cultural context, and student characteristics. Unlike some studies that focus on general reading skills, this study specifically analyzes students' vocabulary mastery and the different aspects of vocabulary knowledge that they find difficult. It also combines data from tests, interviews, and documentation to provide a more complete picture of the problems and factors involved.

Based on all the problems and issues described above, it is clear that Grade X students at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh still face many challenges in understanding English reading texts, especially related to vocabulary mastery. These difficulties affect not only their ability to understand texts but also their overall performance in English and other subjects. Therefore, this study is conducted to analyze the level of students' vocabulary mastery, identify the specific types of difficulties they face, and determine the factors that cause these problems. The findings of this study are expected to provide useful information for English teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers to improve

teaching methods, select better learning materials, and create learning activities that can help students overcome their difficulties and improve their reading ability.

B. Identification of the Study

Based on initial observations, interviews with English teachers, and preliminary interactions with students at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh, several specific problems have been identified regarding students' ability to understand English reading texts. These problems can be described as follows:

1. Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

Many Grade X students have a very small range of English vocabulary. They only know basic words and struggle to recognize or understand more common and important words used in daily texts. This lack of vocabulary knowledge becomes the main barrier when they try to read and understand written materials.

2. Difficulty Understanding Word Meanings

Students often face challenges when trying to understand the meanings of words and phrases in sentences and paragraphs. They frequently encounter words they do not know, and because of this, they cannot grasp the exact message or idea being conveyed by the writer. When they meet unfamiliar words, they tend to stop reading or guess the meaning incorrectly, which disrupts their understanding of the whole text.

3. Lack of Understanding in Vocabulary Relationships

Students also experience difficulties in recognizing relationships between words, such as synonyms, antonyms, and word groups. They are not familiar with words that have similar meanings or opposite meanings, and they do not understand how words are related to each other in meaning. This makes it hard for them to understand texts that use different words to express the same ideas or to follow the flow of information.

4. Confusion with Word Forms and Contextual Usage

Many students know only the basic form of words but do not understand different forms, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. In addition, they find it difficult to understand how words change their meanings depending on the context in which they are used. They can understand words when they are seen alone, but they cannot interpret them correctly when they appear in sentences or different situations.

5. Low Motivation and Interest

Most students consider reading English texts as a difficult, boring, and time-consuming activity. They do not see the importance or practical use of learning English, so they are not motivated to put effort into reading practice. This low interest leads them to avoid reading activities and results in poor performance in understanding written materials.

These identified problems show that students at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh face various difficulties related to vocabulary mastery

when learning to read English texts. If these problems are not addressed properly, they will continue to affect students' learning achievement and their ability to develop English language skills effectively.

C. Limitation of the Study

This study has several limitations that need to be recognized:

1. Limited Number of Participants

The study was conducted only on 32 Grade X students at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh. Due to the small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to all students in other schools, regions, or different grade levels. The results are only applicable to students who have similar characteristics and learning backgrounds as the participants.

2. Limited Type of Text

The research only used descriptive texts as the material. It did not cover other types of texts such as narrative, argumentative, procedural, or report texts. Since each type of text has different characteristics, vocabulary, and structures, the results may not accurately represent students' vocabulary mastery when dealing with other kinds of texts.

3. Limited Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through tests, interviews, and documentation.

Each method has its own constraints:

- 1) Test results only show students' performance at a specific point in time, so they may not reflect their actual ability in different situations

- 2) Responses from interviews can be influenced by the participants' feelings, opinions, or conditions at the time of the discussion
- 3) Other methods such as classroom observation or long-term assessment were not included due to time and practical reasons, which could have provided more detailed information

4. Specific Research Context

This study was carried out in a specific educational environment in Cambodia, where the learning conditions, available resources, teaching methods, and cultural context have unique features. Therefore, the findings may not be fully applicable or relevant to EFL students in other countries or different learning settings.

5. Focus Only on Vocabulary Mastery

The study concentrates only on analyzing vocabulary mastery in reading comprehension. It does not cover other aspects of language skills such as grammar, speaking, writing, or listening. Consequently, the results only provide information related to vocabulary and its role in reading, and do not represent the overall language proficiency of the students.

D. Formulation of the Problem

Based on the background of the study, identification of the problem, and the purpose of the research, the research questions of this study are formulated as follows:

1. What is the level of students' vocabulary mastery in understanding English reading texts at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh Cambodia?
2. What types of vocabulary difficulties do Grade X students experience when understanding descriptive texts?
3. What factors cause difficulties in students' vocabulary mastery when understanding descriptive texts at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh?

E. Purpose of the Study

Based on the research questions that have been formulated, the main purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To describe and determine the level of students' vocabulary mastery in understanding English reading texts at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh Cambodia.
2. To identify and analyze the types of vocabulary difficulties experienced by Grade X students when understanding descriptive texts.
3. To examine and explain the factors that cause difficulties in students' vocabulary mastery when understanding descriptive texts at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh.

F. Definition of Key Terms

To avoid misunderstanding and clarify the meaning of important concepts used in this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

1. Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary mastery refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and use words correctly in various contexts. It covers several aspects including knowing the meaning of words, understanding different forms of words, recognizing relationships between words such as synonyms and antonyms, and being able to use words appropriately in sentences and texts. In this study, it is measured through students' performance in tests that assess their knowledge of word meanings, contextual usage, and vocabulary relationships.

2. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of understanding and interpreting written texts. It involves decoding words, understanding their meanings, connecting ideas, and constructing the overall message or information presented by the text. In this research, reading comprehension refers to students' ability to understand English texts, which depends heavily on their knowledge and mastery of vocabulary.

3. English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language refers to the learning and use of English in countries where English is not the primary language used in daily communication. In this study, EFL describes the context in which students at An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah Phnom Penh learn English, where English is taught as a school subject and is not the main language used in the surrounding community.

4. Descriptive Text

Descriptive text is a type of text that provides detailed information about a specific person, place, object, or situation. Its purpose is to describe characteristics, features, and qualities clearly so that readers can form mental images and understand the subject being discussed. The text used in this study is titled “My School Environment”, which describes places, objects, and activities related to the school setting.

5. Difficulties

In this study, difficulties refer to the problems, challenges, or obstacles experienced by students when learning and applying vocabulary knowledge to understand English reading texts. These include problems related to understanding word meanings, recognizing word forms, understanding words in context, and other issues that make it hard for students to master vocabulary and comprehend texts effectively.

UIN IMAM BONJOL
PADANG