
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Saudi EFL Students' Perceptions of Language Mindsets and Vocabulary Learning

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| ABSTRACT

This study explored Saudi EFL students' perceptions of language mindsets and vocabulary learning in an EFL reading course. The study aimed to understand how students viewed their ability to develop vocabulary through reading and how their beliefs about language ability shaped their learning experiences. A qualitative case study design was used. The participants were students enrolled in a Saudi university reading course in which vocabulary development was one of the course learning outcomes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that many students believed vocabulary learning could improve through effort, practice, and repeated exposure to words in reading texts. However, some students also expressed mixed beliefs, suggesting that vocabulary learning was influenced by both effort and individual ability. The results further showed that students' beliefs were related to their effort, persistence, and emotional responses when dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. In addition, the students viewed the reading course as an important source of vocabulary development because it exposed them to new words in meaningful contexts. The study concludes that language mindset is an important psychological factor in students' vocabulary-learning experiences in EFL reading courses. The findings may help teachers better understand how students think about vocabulary learning and may support the improvement of reading and vocabulary instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms.

| KEYWORDS

Language mindsets, vocabulary learning, Saudi EFL students, reading course, ability, psychology, confidence, emotion

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is vital when learning English as a foreign language because it involves reading comprehension, communication, and language acquisition in general. Vocabulary is necessary for comprehending written texts, inferring the meaning of unknown words, and identifying the gist of what one reads. Earlier research on vocabulary has established that vocabulary knowledge is highly correlated with reading comprehension in an EFL setting (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Masrai, 2019).

According to Aljasir, (2025) and Almabrouk, (2022), vocabulary learning in Saudi EFL classrooms continues to be a challenge for many students. Although some studies have examined vocabulary learning strategies and vocabulary instruction in the Saudi context. However, less attention has been given to psychological factors that may influence how students learn vocabulary in reading courses and what may obstruct them from advancing in vocabulary knowledge.

Language mindset is one of these factors, which refers to students' beliefs and perceptions about whether effort and practice can improve language. Research has shown that language mindsets can influence students' motivation, responses to challenges,

and language proficiency (Khajavy et al., 2021; Lou & Noels, 2016). However, little is known about how Saudi EFL students perceive language mindsets in relation to vocabulary learning, especially in reading courses.

Therefore, this study aims to explore Saudi EFL students' perceptions of language mindsets and vocabulary learning in an EFL reading course. It seeks to understand how students view their ability to develop vocabulary through reading and how their beliefs may shape their learning experiences. This study may help teachers better understand students' needs and improve vocabulary learning in Saudi EFL classrooms.

2. Problem Statement

Vocabulary knowledge is essential for second and foreign language reading comprehension and for understanding new words and written texts (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Masrai, 2019; Read, 2022). For Saudi EFL learners, vocabulary acquisition continues to be a challenging task (Aljasir, 2025). Although previous studies have examined issues related to vocabulary instruction and learning strategies, little research has been conducted on psychological beliefs associated with language learners, such as language mindset. Language mindsets are shown to be associated with motivation, coping with failures, goal orientations, and language achievement (Lou & Noels, 2016; Khajavy et al., 2021). Moreover, various mindsets are reported to be held simultaneously among language learners (Oruç, 2025). Thus, the current study will attempt to fill this gap and explore the beliefs of Saudi EFL students about their ability to improve vocabulary learning through effort and practice.

3. Research Questions

- 1- What beliefs do Saudi EFL students hold about language mindset and vocabulary learning in a reading course?
- 2- What are the beliefs of Saudi EFL students concerning enhancing their vocabulary through practice and effort in a language classroom?
- 3- What are the perceptions of Saudi EFL students regarding the impact of their language mindset on their motivation, challenges, and vocabulary acquisition experience in a reading class?

4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines Saudi EFL students' perceptions of language mindsets and vocabulary learning in reading courses, an area that has received limited attention. Although previous studies have explored vocabulary learning and reading comprehension, fewer have focused on how students' beliefs about language ability shape their learning experiences of vocabulary (Khajavy et al., 2021; Oruç, 2025). The findings may help teachers better understand students' vocabulary-learning beliefs and provide insights for improving vocabulary instruction in Saudi EFL classrooms. They also support further research on the relationship between psychological factors and language learning.

5. Scope and Limitations of the Study

The current study focuses on the perceptions of Saudi English Foreign Language students taking a course in reading regarding the impact of language mindsets on vocabulary learning. This research does not cover other linguistic skills, such as writing, speaking, listening, or grammar. Since this research follows a qualitative method, results are only valid for the specific context and cannot be generalized to Saudi EFL contexts. Additionally, the participants may report positive attitudes because they are enrolled in the same course taught by researcher. Therefore, they may provide complementary and subjective beliefs, which may be influenced by personal biases.

6. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Vocabulary knowledge is an essential factor in second and foreign language reading comprehension. It helps learners retain unfamiliar words, guess meaning through context, and understand written texts. Research has shown a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and L2 reading comprehension (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Masrai, 2019). In addition, research on L2 reading continues to consider vocabulary as a major element in reading development (Read, 2022)

Reading is considered the most effective source for vocabulary development. Texts provide encouraging contexts for students to experience vocabulary, especially if the texts are close to the student readers' level (Feng et al., 2020). Consequently, reading courses offer a good environment for learners to practice reading and develop their vocabulary through discussions, tasks, and drills that the textbook includes.

In the Saudi EFL context, vocabulary learning remains a meaningful area of concern in classrooms. Recent research has examined vocabulary learning strategies among Saudi EFL learners, (Aljasir, 2025). However, most of this work has focused on strategies, instruction, or performance rather than on students' beliefs about their own language-learning ability.

From a psychological perspective, second language acquisition is highly influenced by language mindset of learners. Language mindset refers to people's belief systems regarding how they think about their capability to learn a second language. Lou and Noels (2016) showed that language mindsets are related to learners' goal orientations and responses to failure. Similarly, Khajavy et al. (2021) found that language mindset was a significant predictor of foreign language achievement. More recently, Oruç (2025) concluded in a systematic review that research on language mindsets is growing, but that further context-specific studies are still needed.

Language mindset has been studied in relation to achievement and general language development. However, less is known about how students perceive its role in vocabulary learning success or failure, especially in the context of a reading course. This gap is significant because it shows if learners' views about their language ability might influence the way they deal with new words, the amount of time they devote to vocabulary acquisition, and the strategies they use to overcome reading problems. Hence, investigating Saudi EFL students' attitudes towards language mindsets and vocabulary acquisition in a reading class can help shed some light on the psychological aspect of vocabulary acquisition.

The present study gains its strength from two main ideas. First, vocabulary learning is closely connected to reading development. Second, students' beliefs about their language ability may shape how they experience vocabulary learning. Bringing these ideas together allows the study to explore how Saudi EFL students understand vocabulary learning in relation to their language mindsets within a real classroom setting or during the course.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative case study research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the purpose of the study is to explore students' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences rather than to measure variables statistically. The case study method is appropriate because the researcher conducts an in-depth analysis of the bounded system in a real-life context. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rashid et al., 2019).

7.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study will be conducted in a Saudi university EFL reading course that includes 28 students. Vocabulary development is one of the stated course objectives or learning outcomes. Since the study is qualitative and context-specific, the course itself forms the case to be investigated. The participants will be selected from this class. Because the study focuses on students' perceptions, a purposive sampling approach will be used for the interviews. This means that students will participate and share their beliefs based on their willingness. Although the course includes 28 students, a smaller number of students may be interviewed in depth, which is common in qualitative research where the goal is rich and detailed data rather than broad generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

7.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews will be the main instrument of data collection for this study. Interviews are suitable because they allow the researcher to ask focused questions while also giving students a chance to explain their views in detail. Also, the interview questions will discuss difficulty, and progress in the reading course and learning vocabulary. In addition to interviews, the researcher may review the course syllabus or outline to confirm that vocabulary development is one of the course outcomes. This will help connect students' responses to the actual instructional context of the course.

7.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the collected interview data will be done using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a technique used for the identification, classification, analysis, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. Their six-phase approach includes becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this case, transcription and multiple readings of the interviews will be done in the first place. Codes will be generated from the recurrent themes associated with language proficiency, effort, confidence, reading problems, and vocabulary acquisition. These codes will later be sorted into larger themes that will address the research questions.

In this study, the interviews will first be audio-recorded and transcribed and then read several times. Initial codes will then be developed based on emerging ideas related to language ability, effort, confidence, reading difficulties, and vocabulary learning. After that, similar codes will be classified into broader themes that answer the research questions. This process will help reveal how students perceive the relationship between language mindsets and vocabulary learning in their reading course.

7.5 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research will be ensured by carefully aligning the questions with the research questions, having an auditable trail of codes, and using quotations from the respondents when presenting the results. The aforementioned techniques may enhance the transparency of the research process and contribute to its credibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

7.6 Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting any research, ethical approval must first be obtained. The students must be informed of the aims of the experiment and be asked for their consent to take part in the experiment. It is essential to emphasize the voluntary nature of the experiment and to assure them that they may withdraw anytime and without consequences on their grades or status within the class. Their confidentiality will be ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

8. Findings

After finishing thematic analysis of the interview data, the researcher classified the data into four major themes. These themes include (a) personal efforts and insistence on new words; (b) personal reaction to difficult words; (c) personal beliefs regarding the possibility of vocabulary development; and (d) personal beliefs regarding activities that can help in developing vocabulary. Thematic analysis works effectively for qualitative data as mentioned by Braun & Clarke (2006).

8.1 Belief in the Possibility of Vocabulary Improvement

One important theme that came out of the interviews is that some students felt that they were able to develop their vocabulary by constant exposure and effort. Some participants noted that vocabulary development is something that is developed gradually. It needs time, patience, and hard work. One student said, "I think I can improve my vocabulary if I read more and review new words." This means that there were some students who held growth-oriented beliefs towards vocabulary development.

A smaller group indicated that certain students have an innate ability to learn vocabulary. While they felt there was potential for improvement, these students considered this to be something that is easier for certain individuals than others. This would seem to indicate that the beliefs students held did not necessarily fall into either of these categories.

8.2 Effort and Insistence with Unfamiliar Vocabulary

The second theme that arose had to do with effort and insistence during reading. The students felt that when they came across new vocabulary words while reading, they would make attempts at figuring out what they meant based on context or by reading the sentences again or asking teachers and then later on looking the words up. On the other hand, some of the students have

also confirmed that they felt reluctant to continue reading due to the continuous challenges they faced regarding vocabulary usage.

8.3 Self-Reflection to Difficult Words

Moreover, the interviews indicated that the learning process of vocabulary was highly correlated with self-feelings of the students they have towards vocabulary learning. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they felt encouraged and motivated whenever they could comprehend new vocabulary through reading; otherwise, they would feel stressed or embarrassed.

It can be inferred from the findings of the research that vocabulary acquisition in a reading class not only involves linguistic issues and cognition but also an emotional process. One student stated, " When I see many difficult words, I feel frustrated and lose focus." This shows that if the learners could comprehend the words' meanings, remember them, and use them appropriately, then they became motivated to continue learning. On the other hand, if the vocabulary words were challenging, difficult to understand, and too hard, some learners felt discouraged and hesitant to learn more.

8.4 Reading as a Source of Vocabulary Development

Another important theme evolving from the data was the notion that the reading class itself facilitated vocabulary learning for the students. Many students pointed out that through the reading passages, they were introduced to new words, thus facilitating their comprehension of meanings and usages. Similarly, some students reported that trying to identify the meanings of words from the context was more effective than just memorizing words from word lists.

It is also evident that students emphasized the importance of class discussion in learning vocabulary. They said that learning new words became more effective when the reading was followed by discussion, explanations, repetition, and related exercises in the classroom. This helped them understand the meaning of difficult words. It also gave them more chances to remember and use the new vocabulary correctly.

8.5 Summary of Findings

Overall, the results imply that the students perceived their vocabulary acquisition to be an area that could improve, but there were variables in terms of beliefs and attitudes. This study implies that the students' views were not always consistent because some of them had inconsistent beliefs regarding their language ability. It is also evident from the interviews that the reading class was an environment that played a crucial role in vocabulary learning through reading.

To summarize the relationship between students' beliefs, their vocabulary-learning behaviors, and classroom implications, Table 1 presents a simple model based on the main themes of the study.

Mindset belief	Student behavior / response	Classroom implication
Vocabulary can improve through effort and repeated exposure.	Students are more likely to reread, guess meaning from context, ask questions, and review new words.	Teachers should reinforce the idea that vocabulary develops gradually through practice, reading, and repeated use.
Some students are naturally better at learning vocabulary.	Students may compare themselves with others, lose confidence, or believe vocabulary learning is easier for only certain learners.	Teachers should avoid fixed-ability labels and remind students that difficulty with vocabulary is normal and can be improved with support.
Difficult vocabulary causes frustration, anxiety, or embarrassment.	Students may lose focus, avoid difficult texts, or become less willing to participate in reading activities.	Teachers should create a supportive classroom environment and treat vocabulary difficulty as part of the learning process.

Mindset belief	Student behavior / response	Classroom implication
Reading helps vocabulary growth by giving words meaningful context.	Students learn words through passages, examples, discussion, and repeated classroom exposure.	Reading instructors should use contextualized vocabulary tasks, class discussion, and follow-up activities that require students to reuse new words.
Effort, practice, and classroom support work together.	Students become more persistent when they feel that improvement is possible and when activities help them understand new words.	Vocabulary instruction should combine mindset support with practical strategies such as rereading, guessing from context, note-taking, and word recycling.

Table 1. Relationship Between Language Mindset Beliefs, Vocabulary-Learning Behaviors, and Classroom Implications

9. Discussion

The first major finding of this study is that the majority of participants perceived vocabulary acquisition as an activity that could be improved through hard work, practice, and reading. This finding is relevant to the theory of growth language mindsets, where learners consider language proficiency as a flexible construct, not a static one. According to Lou and Noels (2016), language mindsets are strongly associated with how individuals perceive difficulties and failures, whereas Khajavy et al. (2021) state that language mindset is a critical predictor of foreign language success. Both perspectives are supported by the results of the current study since participants who considered improvement possible reported exerting more effort when encountering new words. At the same time, the findings suggest that students' beliefs were not strictly one-dimensional. Some participants expressed both growth-oriented and fixed-oriented views, such as believing that effort matters while also thinking that some students are naturally better at vocabulary learning. This pattern is consistent with more recent research showing that learners may demonstrate growth, fixed, or mixed mindset profiles, rather than fitting neatly into only one category (Oruç, 2025).

Another significant result from this study is the relationship that the learners had with themselves about their ability and effort and insistence on making those beliefs true. The students who claimed to have believed in their ability to learn vocabulary applied various learning strategies, such as making guesses, re-reading, word meanings, and studying words. Other students thought that they should work harder in order to improve their competence in vocabulary learning achievement. Theoretically speaking, framework reviewed earlier, this finding suggests the influence of students' beliefs on their abilities. Previous studies have confirmed that growth mindsets towards languages lead to adaptive learning behavior when students encounter challenges. Conversely, students whose language mindsets are static have shown lower effort and avoided difficulties and challenges (Lou & Noels, 2016).

In this study, emotional reactions appeared to influence how students dealt with vocabulary difficulty and whether they continued reading the text. Several students reported that they felt satisfied, confident, and motivated when they understood words successfully, while others reported that they felt anxious, frustrated, or embarrassed when they met difficult words. The emotional theme emerging from this study has a clear impact on students' feelings towards vocabulary learning.

A third important result targeted the course itself. Reading course was perceived by the students as an important source for vocabulary learning. This is consistent with other research that the practice of reading has an impact on vocabulary acquisition when learners have constant and contextual exposure to new vocabulary (Feng et al., 2020; Read, 2022). In the present study, students appeared to value contextualized exposure more than isolated memorization, particularly when classroom tasks included explanation and reuse of target vocabulary.

Overall, the findings suggest instructional context and learners' beliefs in their abilities that vocabulary learning in an EFL reading course is shape vocabulary learning in EFL reading courses. Since EFL learners experience several factors affecting their language learning, in general, and vocabulary learning, in particular, language exposure to EFL learners may not be viewed as the only main source they need. Vocabulary development is also influenced by how learners think about their own ability, how they react to difficulty, and how they perceive success and failure. This supports the argument in the language mindset literature that psychological beliefs play a meaningful role in language learning outcomes and experiences (Lou & Noels, 2016; Oruç, 2025).

10. Conclusion

This study explored Saudi EFL students' perceptions of language mindsets and vocabulary learning in an EFL reading course. Based on the results of the interviews, learners believed that vocabulary can be developed through hard work and repeated reading and practice. Nevertheless, some students seemed to hold contradicting beliefs, which indicates that the learners have both growth mindsets and fixed mindsets toward vocabulary learning. These results support the claim that students' beliefs about language learning are quite complex and not one-dimensional (Oruç, 2025).

The findings revealed that students' beliefs about language learning determined their reactions to vocabulary learning difficulty. Those learners who had growth beliefs about vocabulary learning showed high engagement in the process of reading and exerted more effort to fulfill their beliefs. For example, they worked hard to improve vocabulary by reading the text again, making guesses and clarifying the meaning of unfamiliar words. Meanwhile, some students reported negative feelings and less engagement while encountering new words in a reading task. Such findings support other studies that revealed a relationship between learners' language mindsets and motivation and behavioral responses (Khajavy et al., 2021; Lou & Noels, 2016).

Additionally, Students viewed the reading course as useful for vocabulary learning because they could experience new words in meaningful contexts. This has helped them understand how words are used in real texts, which supports previous research on reading as a source of vocabulary growth (Feng et al., 2020; Read, 2022). Overall, the study's most significant finding was the impact of students' language mindset on language development. Beside in-course activities, which are important, the student's beliefs about their own ability in vocabulary learning, in particular, cannot be underestimated.

12. Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made based on the findings of this. First, EFL teachers should motivate their learners to perceive vocabulary learning as a task that can be improved by practice, hard work, and exposure. Self-confidence of the students on their ability supports them when experiencing unknown vocabulary items (Lou & Noels, 2016). Second, teachers are supposed to provide vocabulary assistance. It could involve such techniques as pre-teaching selected vocabulary, teaching students how to guess meanings based on context, giving learners possibilities of repeated exposure, and assigning additional tasks which would allow them to apply their newly acquired vocabulary (Feng et al., 2020; Read, 2022).

Third, since language mindset plays a major role in students' attitudes towards language learning, teachers should pay attention to the emotional side of vocabulary learning. Due to a language mindset, some students may feel anxious or discouraged when they think they cannot understand new words. Teachers should react to this situation and create a supportive classroom environment where they let students deal with difficulty as a normal part of learning.

Finally, due to the limitations of this research, future research about EFL learners in a Saudi context may build on this research to examine language mindsets and vocabulary learning in other Saudi EFL contexts, with larger samples or mixed-methods designs. Also, Future studies may explore the relationship between language mindsets and other language skills such as writing or speaking. Furthermore, other studies may measure the relationship between language mindsets and EFL learners' use of AI-generated vocabulary applications or platforms.

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