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Enhancing Eighth-Grade Students' English Vocabulary Mastery Through The Use Of Realia

Moh. Fuadul Matin[(1)], Chyntia Heru Woro Prastiwi[(2)], Muhamad Miftahur Rozaq[(3)]
[1,2,3] IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro
email: [1]fuadul_matin@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id, [2]chyntia_heru@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id, [3]muhroza01@gmail.com
corresponding: [1]fuadul_matin@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id

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Abstract

Preliminary classroom observations at SMP Islam Bojonegoro indicated that many eighth-grade students had difficulty understanding and using English vocabulary and that instruction was largely teacher centered. This classroom action research examined whether the use of realia could support vocabulary learning in one class of 20 students during the 2025/2026 academic year. The study comprised two iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Vocabulary achievement was evaluated at the end of each cycle, while classroom participation was documented through structured observation sheets and field notes. The class mean increased from 43.5 in Cycle I to 77.5 in Cycle II, and the proportion of students meeting the Minimum Mastery Criterion increased from 5% to 80%. Classroom records also indicated more visible participation and willingness to respond during the second cycle, although these behavioral observations were not measured using a validated motivation scale. The findings show meaningful improvement within this specific classroom after the instructional procedures were revised and realia was used more systematically. Because the study involved a single class, had no comparison group, and used teacher-developed assessments with limited documented psychometric evidence, the results should be interpreted as context-specific classroom improvement rather than definitive causal evidence of general effectiveness.
Keywords: realia, vocabulary mastery, classroom action research

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INTRODUCTION

English functions as an important language of international communication, education, science, technology, and professional exchange. For Indonesian junior secondary students, English instruction is expected to develop not only declarative knowledge about language but also the capacity to understand and use language in meaningful situations. Sahnan (2024) notes that English proficiency can broaden access to information and intercultural communication. Within this broader goal, vocabulary knowledge is fundamental because learners require an adequate lexical repertoire to understand input, express ideas, and participate in spoken and written interaction.

Vocabulary mastery is therefore closely associated with overall language performance. Berliani and Katemba (2021) describe vocabulary as a foundation for comprehension and

communication, while Ahmadova (2025) emphasizes that words are learned more effectively when they are encountered in meaningful, real-world contexts rather than as isolated lists. At the junior secondary level, vocabulary instruction should help students recognize word meanings, retrieve words when needed, and use them appropriately in simple communicative tasks.

Despite its importance, vocabulary learning remains challenging for many Indonesian learners of English as a foreign language. Preliminary observations in the participating class at SMP Islam Bojonegoro showed that students often relied on memorizing decontextualized word lists, had difficulty recalling previously taught words, and hesitated to use new vocabulary during classroom activities. Similar difficulties have been reported in Indonesian EFL contexts, including limited lexical knowledge and challenges in selecting effective vocabulary-teaching strategies (Ardiyanti et al., 2021; Fasikh, 2018).

These difficulties may be reinforced by instructional practices that provide limited opportunities for learners to manipulate, classify, describe, and repeatedly use new words. Teacher explanation and textbook exercises can support learning, but when they dominate instruction, students may have insufficient exposure to contextualized vocabulary use. Mulis (2025) argues that interactive and contextual teaching strategies can deepen vocabulary learning by increasing opportunities for active processing and meaningful practice.

Instructional media can help make lexical meanings more concrete. Realia refers to authentic physical objects from everyday life that are brought into the classroom and used as teaching resources. Through realia, learners can connect a word with its referent, perceptual features, and practical use. Such experiences are consistent with contextual and experiential learning because new lexical information is linked to familiar objects and actions. Setianingsih et al. (2021) and Sitepu and Kurniawati (2021) describe realia as a medium that can support multisensory engagement and provide concrete referents for language learning.

The pedagogical rationale for realia is also consistent with dual-coding and depth-of-processing perspectives. A lexical item that is presented verbally and simultaneously associated with a visible, tangible object may be encoded through more than one representational route. Learners may also process the word more deeply when they identify, compare, categorize, describe, and use the object in interaction. These mechanisms provide a plausible explanation for why contextualized object-based activities may support recall and appropriate word use, although the present classroom action research was not designed to test these mechanisms directly.

Previous empirical studies have generally reported favorable outcomes from realia-mediated vocabulary instruction. Bhatti et al. (2021) found that realia-supported teaching assisted young learners' vocabulary development, Rahmayani (2022) reported improved vocabulary acquisition in a young-learner context, and Muliyah et al. (2023) showed that combining realia with structured instructional activities could support vocabulary learning. However, differences in participant age, instructional duration, test design, and classroom context mean that findings should not be generalized automatically across settings.

At SMP Islam Bojonegoro, the practical use of realia had been limited despite the availability of familiar classroom and household objects. This created a local practice-based gap: evidence from prior research suggested that authentic objects could support vocabulary learning, but the approach had not been systematically incorporated into instruction in the participating class. Classroom action research was therefore appropriate because it allowed the teacher-researcher to introduce the strategy, examine the first implementation, revise the procedures, and evaluate improvement in a subsequent cycle.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine changes in the English vocabulary achievement of 20 eighth-grade students across two classroom action research cycles in which realia was used as the primary instructional medium. A secondary aim was to document observable changes in

classroom participation during the intervention. The study did not seek to establish population-level causal effectiveness; rather, it investigated whether a structured and progressively refined use of realia was associated with meaningful improvement in this particular classroom.

The study's practical contribution lies in documenting an iterative classroom response to a clearly identified instructional problem. In addition to reporting achievement scores, the analysis distinguishes between quantitative evidence of vocabulary performance and qualitative classroom observations. This distinction is important because statements about motivation, confidence, or engagement require stronger measurement than informal impressions alone.

The research question was: How did students' vocabulary achievement and observable classroom participation change across two cycles of realia-mediated instruction in one eighth-grade class at SMP Islam Bojonegoro? The findings are intended to inform teachers considering low-cost, contextually relevant media for vocabulary instruction while also identifying methodological issues that future controlled studies should address.

METHODS

This study used Classroom Action Research (CAR) because the purpose was to improve an identified instructional problem through iterative classroom intervention rather than to estimate a population-level treatment effect. The study followed the four recurring stages commonly associated with the Kemmis and McTaggart model: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Two action cycles were completed. The evidence reported in the manuscript consists of a qualitative classroom baseline and achievement results from Cycle I and Cycle II; no separate numerical pre-test dataset was available. References to a pre-test/post-test design were therefore removed to maintain consistency between the design and the reported evidence.

The participants were 20 eighth-grade students enrolled at SMP Islam Bojonegoro during the 2025/2026 academic year. The intact class was selected purposively after preliminary observation indicated persistent difficulty with vocabulary meaning, recall, and classroom use. The study was conducted in the students' regular English classroom, and all participating students received the same instructional activities as part of normal teaching. The available source records did not preserve students' age distribution, gender distribution, exact calendar dates, or other demographic characteristics; this limits the precision with which the participant context can be described.

The intervention was implemented in two cycles. Each cycle included planning, instructional action, observation, achievement assessment, and reflection. The original classroom documentation stated that each cycle consisted of several meetings, but it did not retain the exact number of meetings, meeting dates, or lesson duration. For the same reason, the precise sequence of vocabulary topics and the complete inventory of objects used in every meeting cannot be reconstructed reliably. These omissions are reported transparently rather than supplemented with assumed details.

During planning, the teacher-researcher prepared lesson plans, vocabulary tasks, authentic objects available in the students' environment, an observation sheet, field-note prompts, and an end-of-cycle achievement test. The instructional materials were aligned with the vocabulary content being taught in the regular course. Realia served as the central medium: students observed objects, listened to and repeated target words, matched words with referents, identified and named objects, described visible characteristics or functions, and used the target vocabulary in short oral or written tasks.

During the action stage, the teacher-researcher introduced target vocabulary through direct presentation of authentic objects and guided students through progressively more active tasks. The collaborating teacher acted as observer, recorded the implementation of the lesson, and noted

visible student responses using the observation sheet and field notes. The observer did not assign achievement scores. The teacher-researcher administered and scored the vocabulary assessments and used the observation records during reflection.

Cycle I functioned as the initial implementation of the realia-mediated approach. Reflection on this cycle indicated that object presentation alone did not provide sufficient structured practice for most students. For Cycle II, the instructional procedures were revised by increasing guided repetition, providing clearer modeling, organizing more direct object-word matching and identification practice, allowing students more opportunities to handle and describe the objects, and giving more immediate corrective feedback. The second cycle therefore represented a refined version of the strategy rather than an identical repetition of Cycle I.

Vocabulary achievement was measured using teacher-developed end-of-cycle tests aligned with the words taught in each cycle. Scores were reported on a 0-100 scale. The school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC) was 75; students scoring 75 or higher were classified as achieving mastery. The mean score was calculated as the sum of individual scores divided by the number of students. The mastery percentage was calculated as the number of students achieving the MMC divided by the total number of students and multiplied by 100.

The available research records do not document the complete test blueprint, number of items, item formats, scoring rubric by item type, item-level content-validation procedure, reliability coefficient, or formal equating procedure across cycles. Consequently, the manuscript does not claim that the assessments were standardized or psychometrically validated. The tests were treated as curriculum-aligned classroom assessments, and comparability was based on their use of the same 0-100 scoring scale and alignment with the vocabulary taught in each cycle. This instrument limitation is considered when interpreting the magnitude of improvement.

Classroom participation was documented through structured observation sheets and field notes completed by the collaborating teacher. The records focused on visible behaviors such as responding to teacher prompts, volunteering answers, handling or identifying objects, participating in pair or class activities, and attempting to use target words. Because no validated motivation, confidence, engagement, or retention scale was administered and no numerical observation results were retained, these constructs are described only as classroom observations rather than confirmed measured outcomes.

Quantitative analysis was descriptive. The study compared the class mean, highest score, lowest score, number of students achieving the MMC, and mastery percentage across Cycle I and Cycle II. No inferential statistical test was applied because the study involved one intact class and was designed for iterative instructional improvement. Qualitative observation notes were reviewed descriptively during reflection to identify difficulties in implementation and to guide modifications for the next cycle.

The action was considered successful when at least 75% of the students achieved the MMC of 75 at the end of a cycle. Observable classroom participation was used as supplementary process evidence but not as a separately validated outcome criterion. When Cycle II reached 80% mastery, the classroom action was concluded because the predetermined quantitative success indicator had been met.

Ethical considerations. The activity was conducted in the students' regular school setting with permission from the school. The manuscript source materials do not document review by a formal institutional ethics committee or the exact written consent procedures used for students and parents; formal ethical approval therefore cannot be claimed. Nevertheless, the study was conducted as a classroom-improvement activity, participation in reporting was treated confidentially, student names were not included in the dataset or manuscript, and results were reported in aggregate. Classroom photographs were used only as supporting documentation and

should not be published or shared unless appropriate school and parental permission for minors has been confirmed. Students' participation in routine learning activities did not affect their right to fair instruction or confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Baseline Findings

Before the action cycles, the classroom baseline was documented qualitatively rather than through a separately reported numerical pre-test. The preliminary observation indicated that students frequently had difficulty identifying word meanings, recalling previously taught vocabulary, and using target words during classroom activities. Instruction was predominantly teacher centered, and relatively few students volunteered responses. Because individual baseline test scores were not preserved in the available dataset, no numerical baseline mean or mastery percentage is reported.

Cycle I

Cycle I introduced vocabulary through authentic objects and guided identification activities. Although students were exposed to concrete referents, observation notes indicated that many still relied heavily on teacher prompts and had difficulty retrieving and using the target words independently. The end-of-cycle assessment therefore served as the first quantitative checkpoint in the action research process.

At the end of Cycle I, the class mean was 43.5. The highest score was 75 and the lowest was 25. Of the 20 students, one student achieved the MMC of 75, producing a mastery percentage of 5%; the other 19 students (95%) remained below the criterion.

The Cycle I results were below the predetermined success indicator of 75% class mastery. The distribution suggested that the initial implementation did not yet provide enough supported practice for most students to connect the objects with accurate word retrieval and use. The reflection phase therefore focused on strengthening modeling, repetition, object-word matching, student handling of the realia, opportunities to produce the target words, and immediate feedback.

Because only 5% of students reached the MMC, the study proceeded to Cycle II with revised instructional procedures. The changes were intended to make student practice more systematic and to reduce dependence on teacher explanation.

Table 1. Students' Vocabulary Achievement in Cycle I

Aspect	Score
Number of Students	20
Mean Score	43.5
Highest Score	75
Lowest Score	25
Students Achieving MMC	1
Students Not Achieving MMC	19

Table 1 shows that Cycle I performance remained substantially below the target. These scores are interpreted as the outcome of the first action cycle, not as a separate pre-test.

Cycle II

Cycle II implemented the revised procedures identified during reflection. Students received clearer demonstrations, more guided repetition, additional opportunities to match and manipulate

objects, more frequent prompts to name and describe the realia, and more immediate corrective feedback. Observation records noted that more students attempted responses and participated in object-based tasks than in the first cycle; however, these behavioral observations were not quantified with a validated scale.

At the end of Cycle II, the class mean was 77.5, the highest score was 95, and the lowest score was 70. Sixteen of the 20 students achieved the MMC, corresponding to 80% mastery, while four students (20%) remained below the criterion.

The Cycle II results met the predetermined success indicator. Relative to Cycle I, the mean increased by 34.0 points and the mastery percentage increased by 75 percentage points, from 5% to 80%. The lowest score also increased from 25 to 70, indicating that improvement was not confined to the highest-performing students.

Table 2. Students' Vocabulary Achievement in Cycle II

Aspect	Score
Number of Students	20
Mean Score	77.5
Highest Score	95
Lowest Score	70
Students Achieving MMC	16
Students Not Achieving MMC	4

Across the two cycles, the available quantitative evidence shows a clear progression in classroom achievement: the mean rose from 43.5 to 77.5, and the number of students meeting the MMC rose from 1 to 16. Because no numerical baseline assessment was available, the defensible comparison is between Cycle I and Cycle II. The second cycle met the classroom action criterion, and no additional cycle was conducted.

DISCUSSION

The results show substantial classroom improvement between the first and second action cycles. The class mean increased from 43.5 to 77.5, while mastery rose from 5% to 80%. Within the logic of CAR, this pattern indicates that the revised Cycle II procedures were more successful in helping this class meet the school criterion. The findings should not, however, be interpreted as proof that realia alone caused the improvement, because the study did not include a control group, random assignment, or a stable numerical baseline.

A plausible pedagogical explanation is that realia reduced the abstraction of vocabulary learning. When students could see and handle an object while hearing, naming, classifying, or describing it, the spoken or written form of a word was linked to a concrete referent. This link may support semantic elaboration and retrieval by providing visual, tactile, and contextual cues. The repeated movement from recognition to production in Cycle II also increased opportunities for active processing rather than passive exposure.

The difference between the cycles is especially important. Cycle I involved the initial use of realia, but reflection indicated that presentation of objects was not sufficient by itself. Cycle II added clearer modeling, guided repetition, direct object-word matching, more student manipulation and description of the objects, and immediate feedback. Therefore, the improvement is more accurately attributed to the combination of realia and a more structured instructional sequence than to the mere presence of authentic objects.

This interpretation is consistent with previous empirical work. Bhatti et al. (2021) reported that realia-mediated instruction supported vocabulary learning by connecting words with concrete experiences, and Rahmayani (2022) similarly found benefits in a young-learner context. Muliyah et al. (2023) emphasized that realia becomes more productive when embedded in organized learning activities. The present study extends these observations to one eighth-grade classroom, but direct comparison is limited because prior studies differed in participants, duration, assessment instruments, and research design.

The observation records suggested more visible participation in Cycle II, including more attempts to answer, identify objects, and use target words. These observations are pedagogically relevant because they indicate that the revised lessons may have created more opportunities to respond. Nevertheless, the study did not administer validated measures of motivation, confidence, engagement, enthusiasm, or long-term retention. Claims about these constructs must therefore remain descriptive and should not be treated as independently verified outcomes.

Alternative explanations must also be considered. Students completed repeated classroom assessments and may have become more familiar with the task format. Practice effects, increased teacher attention, greater familiarity with classroom routines, and adaptation to the observer may have contributed to the higher Cycle II scores. In addition, the two cycle tests were teacher developed and were not formally equated; differences in item difficulty cannot be ruled out. These factors prevent a strong causal conclusion.

The practical implication is that familiar, low-cost objects can be incorporated into vocabulary lessons when teachers use them as part of a structured sequence of noticing, identification, guided practice, production, and feedback. The findings demonstrate meaningful improvement in this classroom and support continued reflective use of realia. They do not establish that the same gains will occur in other schools, age groups, vocabulary domains, or instructional conditions.

Study Limitations

The study was limited to one intact class of 20 students in a single school, used no control group, and covered a short intervention period. Exact dates, lesson duration, number of meetings, vocabulary-topic sequence, and the full inventory of realia were not retained in the source documentation. The teacher-developed achievement tests lacked documented item-level blueprints, formal content-validation records, reliability coefficients, and equating evidence. A numerical pre-intervention baseline was also unavailable. Observer and teacher expectancy, testing effects, and increased familiarity with the procedures may have influenced the results. These limitations restrict reproducibility, causal inference, and generalizability. Future research should use a clearly documented intervention protocol, validated parallel vocabulary tests, inter-rater procedures for observation, delayed retention measures, larger multi-class samples, and a comparison group where feasible.

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research documented meaningful improvement in the vocabulary achievement of 20 eighth-grade students after realia-mediated instruction was revised across two cycles. The class mean increased from 43.5 in Cycle I to 77.5 in Cycle II, and mastery increased from 5% to 80%, thereby meeting the study's predetermined classroom success criterion.

The improvement was observed after Cycle II incorporated more systematic modeling, repetition, object-word matching, student manipulation and description of objects, and immediate feedback. Classroom records also suggested more visible participation during the revised lessons,

although motivation, confidence, engagement, and retention were not measured with validated instruments.

The findings support the practical use of familiar authentic objects as one component of structured vocabulary instruction in this specific classroom. They should not be interpreted as definitive evidence of general or causal effectiveness because the study involved one class, no comparison group, a short intervention, and teacher-developed assessments with limited documented psychometric evidence.

Teachers may consider integrating realia into a sequence of contextualized vocabulary activities while monitoring student performance and adapting instruction through reflection. Future studies should document the intervention in greater detail, employ validated and comparable assessments, include delayed retention measures, and test the approach with larger samples and comparison groups across different educational contexts.

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