

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION IN VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH SHORT STORIES: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN AN INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition is a major challenge in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but research exploring students' perceptions of vocabulary learning through collaborative discussion is still limited. This study explores the perceptions of students at SMP Harapan Cibitung regarding vocabulary learning through short stories using a collaborative discussion approach. Using a descriptive qualitative method, three participants from grade IX (high, medium, and low levels) were interviewed and observed. The results of the study show four main findings: 1) Students applied gradual scaffolding at three levels of ZPD (individual-peer-teacher); 2) Collaborative discussion resulted in psychological transformations including cognitive changes (from not understanding to understanding), affective changes (from doubt to confidence), and social changes (from individual to group); 3) Functional vocabulary was used to understand the story content and communicate; 4) Learning took place through the construction of shared knowledge, which included horizontal scaffolding, dialogic learning, and affective solidarity. These findings indicate that vocabulary learning through short stories with collaborative discussion is a comprehensive process involving gradual stages, social cooperation, and the use of functional vocabulary. This study provides practical implications for teachers in applying a gradual scaffolding model and creating a learning environment that supports students' psychological transformation.

Keywords: Collaborative Discussion, Student Perception, Short Stories

INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is essential because a well-developed vocabulary underpins effective communication and reflects overall proficiency in a second language (Wei & Hu, 2025). Vocabulary is fundamental to developing the four core language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Beyond facilitating successful communication (Kusumawati & Arifin, 2024) a strong vocabulary foundation is critical for academic achievement, as students with limited vocabulary may struggle to make meaningful progress in their studies (Zeng et al., 2025).

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves more than simply memorizing a large number of words. Students must also be able to use vocabulary efficiently and

appropriately across reading, writing, and speaking tasks (Al-othman, 2025; Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023). Both the frequency of exposure to new words and the attention given to them play a critical role in acquiring new vocabulary. Accordingly, engaging in careful reading, analyzing context, and exploring word meanings can enhance learners' understanding and retention of familiar vocabulary (Nation, 2015).

Vocabulary development can be effectively enhanced through the use of structured vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Approaches such as contextual inference, keyword techniques, and concept mapping have been demonstrated to support students in retaining and revisiting vocabulary (Ayana et al., 2024). The choice of strategy is influenced by educational level, with graduate students tending to employ metacognitive approaches, while undergraduates more often rely on persistence and memorization strategies (Ghalebi et al., 2020). Furthermore, mastery of vocabulary promotes lexical awareness, encompassing curiosity, engagement, and a positive attitude toward newly acquired concepts (Simonnet et al., 2024). Both teachers and EFL learners recognize that a broad vocabulary is as fundamental as proficiency in speaking, writing, and comprehending a second language (Alshumrani, 2024).

Instructional approaches play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition. Collaborative learning (CL) has been shown to be particularly effective, as it engages students in working together to study content and achieve shared learning objectives (Li, 2025). Grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, this approach underscores the significance of social interaction in both language and cognitive development. Through collaborative learning, students can access peer guidance while actively participating in the construction of knowledge.

Research has shown that collaborative learning can improve academic achievement more effectively than individual study (Dinh, 2025). Students tend to feel more confident and engage more actively in group discussions, which also supports the development of critical thinking skills (Garces et al., 2024; Tsai, 2025). Instruction that incorporates scaffolding and self-assessment can further enhance motivation and reduce learning-related anxiety (Abdel et al., 2023). Within collaborative groups, students have the opportunity to master content more effectively, strengthen their cognitive abilities, and cultivate greater independence as learners (Wijaya et al., 2021). Collaborative learning in the digital era is increasingly enriched by the integration of technology. Mobile-Assisted Collaborative Learning (MACL) utilizes digital tools to enhance students' digital literacy while fostering greater independence in learning (Yuan et al., 2025). Evidence indicates that technology-supported vocabulary learning significantly improves students' engagement, retention, and capacity for autonomous learning (Simonnet et al., 2024). Beyond vocabulary development, collaborative learning in contemporary contexts nurtures essential twenty-first-century skills, including effective communication, teamwork, and critical thinking, preparing students to participate actively and thoughtfully in a connected world.

Short stories offer an engaging and effective way to learn new vocabulary by providing authentic contexts that make word usage meaningful. Through narrative texts, students can naturally understand the meaning and application of vocabulary within relevant and realistic situations (Benabbes & AbdulHaleem Abu Taleb, 2024). Unlike isolated vocabulary drills, short stories immerse learners in rich contexts, enabling them to comprehend and use words in practical, real-life scenarios.

Research indicates that short stories serve as an effective medium for vocabulary instruction. Integrating short stories into learning activities can enhance students' motivation, engagement, and overall language comprehension (Bhatti et al., 2022). Story based learning has been shown to improve vocabulary retention by up to eighty percent, largely due to increased attention and emotional investment in the material (Ali Mansoor et al., 2023). Moreover, short stories contribute to students' cultural understanding and overall reading proficiency (Rosales, 2025). Thus, short stories function not merely as reading material but as a powerful tool for developing language fluency, cultural awareness, and social interaction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

While many studies have explored vocabulary teaching techniques, the majority have concentrated on the teacher's role or on quantitative outcomes, often overlooking students' perspectives and lived experiences (Khoirunnisa et al., 2025; Rosales, 2025). To gain a fuller understanding of how students engage with the learning process and the factors that shape their motivation and success, it is vital to explore their viewpoints (Alshumrani, 2024). Adopting a student-centered approach allows researchers to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of learners throughout the vocabulary acquisition process.

Digital literacy is also becoming increasingly vital within contemporary language learning. It plays an important role in strengthening learners' language competence (Bacalja et al., 2022). Other studies similarly assert that digital approaches can enrich students' educational experiences (Zakir et al., 2025). Digital literacy is positively linked to student motivation and academic achievement (Li, 2025). Nevertheless, the integration of digital literacy in language learning in Indonesia still encounters various challenges. The most pressing concern involves the effective implementation of collaborative strategies.

Therefore, this study was conducted at SMP Harapan Cibitung with the primary objective of examining students' perceptions and experiences of vocabulary acquisition through collaborative discussions centered on short stories. To achieve this aim, the study focuses on three key research questions. The first explores how students perceive the role of collaborative discussion in supporting vocabulary learning through short stories. The second investigates the types of learning processes students undergo when participating in discussion-based short story reading activities. The third examines the psychological and social transformations that may occur as students engage in collaborative vocabulary learning.

This study is distinctive in its qualitative, student-centered orientation, emphasizing learners' subjective experiences rather than solely relying on teacher observations or

quantitative measures. By foregrounding students' voices, the research seeks to generate deeper insights into how collaborative discussion can shape vocabulary development. More broadly, the findings aim to provide educators with practical perspectives for designing language instruction that is more contextual, responsive to learners' needs, and aligned with the demands of the digital era.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate students' perceptions and experiences of vocabulary learning through collaborative discussions using short stories. This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture participants' experiences in their natural context and to present their perspectives clearly and accurately. The aim of this research was not to test hypotheses or quantify variables, but to understand how students interpret and engage with vocabulary-learning processes in the classroom. A qualitative descriptive approach also enabled the researcher to represent the views of students with varying English proficiency levels while maintaining the authenticity of their responses.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were ninth-grade students at SMP Harapan Cibitung, consisting of 26 learners aged 14–15. Purposive sampling was used to select a class that had previously participated in vocabulary learning through short stories and collaborative discussions. From this class, three students representing low, intermediate, and high proficiency levels were selected as the focal participants. This sampling strategy aligns with qualitative research principles, which prioritize depth over breadth and seek information-rich cases that can provide detailed insights. The selected students were considered capable of articulating their learning experiences clearly and contributed diverse perspectives based on their skill levels.

Rationale for Participant Selection

The decision to focus on three participants was grounded in the qualitative research principle that emphasizes depth of understanding rather than generalizability. Sample size in qualitative studies is determined by information richness, and in this case, the participants were deliberately chosen to reflect different proficiency levels relevant to the research context. The inclusion of low-, intermediate-, and high-proficiency students provided a range of perspectives and enabled the researcher to identify both similarities and differences in vocabulary-learning experiences. This maximum variation sampling allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon without the need for a large number of participants.

Research Location and Duration

The study was conducted at SMP Harapan Cibitung, West Bandung, during the even semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Data collection took place over two months, from August to September 2025. This timeframe allowed students to engage in short story–based vocabulary instruction before being asked to share their perceptions.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately ten minutes were conducted individually with each participant in Indonesian to ensure clarity and comfort. Classroom observations were carried out on four separate occasions to examine student participation, interaction patterns, and the overall learning environment during discussion-based activities. In addition to interviews and observations, documentation such as visual records and field notes was collected to support and verify the primary data.

Research Procedures

The research began with coordination between the researcher, the school, and the English teachers to explain the study's purpose and schedule. Interview guides and observation sheets were prepared prior to data collection. Classroom observations were conducted first, followed by individual interviews with the three selected students. Each interview was conducted separately to allow participants to express their thoughts freely. Throughout the data collection period, the researcher also documented relevant classroom activities to supplement observational findings.

Data Sources

Primary data consisted of students' verbal responses during interviews and their observable behaviors during classroom discussions. Secondary data included documentation of learning activities and researcher field notes, which helped contextualize and corroborate the primary data. These combined sources provided a comprehensive depiction of students' experiences.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The researcher first read the interview transcripts and observation notes multiple times to develop a holistic understanding of the dataset. Relevant segments were coded according to the research questions, and these codes were then grouped into categories and themes while preserving the participants' original expressions whenever possible. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentation enhanced the credibility and authenticity of the findings. All analyses were conducted manually.

Research Ethics Considerations

Approval for the study was obtained from SMP Harapan Cibitung prior to data collection. Written consent was secured from parents or guardians, and students were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, including their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting data, and no personal identifiers were disclosed. All data, including observation notes and interview recordings, were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. Data collection activities were conducted without disrupting regular classroom instruction, and participation was voluntary and uncompensated. All procedures adhered to established ethical standards for educational research involving human participants.

RESULTS

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews and observations as the primary methods of data collection, followed by a thematic analysis to interpret the findings. A detailed coding process was also carried out to distill participants' perceptions with greater clarity and nuance. This approach aimed to ensure the authenticity and coherence of each element within the instrument's theoretical framework. All participant responses were systematically coded and organized into thematic categories that best reflected their perspectives.

This study uses a qualitative method in which data collection is analyzed using Creswell's theory (2012). The steps taken were as follows: first, preparing and organizing the data; second, reading all of the data to obtain general information; third, grouping the data into several categories; fourth, finding patterns and themes; fifth, presenting and reporting the findings; sixth, describing and discussing the meaning of the findings. The final stage of qualitative data analysis was analyzing and responding to the results.

Based on this, the researcher used a non-probability sampling technique, namely purposive sampling, in which the researcher deliberately selected subjects deemed relevant for the study (Subhaktiyasa, 2024). The subjects were categorized into three levels, namely higher level, medium level, and lower level. The processes involved led the researcher to identify four main points based on the problems that arose.

Gradual Scaffolding in the Learning Process (Self, Peer, Teacher)

Based on the results of the interviews and observations, the three students representing high, moderate, and low proficiency levels showed a consistent pattern in dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary in the short story. They began by attempting to interpret the meaning independently, then sought support from peers who had already understood the term when difficulties persisted, and finally turned to the teacher when the meaning remained unclear. The observations also revealed that the students displayed genuine initiative, particularly when they asked for further clarification on explanations they felt they had not yet fully understood.

Independent Learning Through Context-Based Guessing

Student 1 reported a preference for first noting unfamiliar vocabulary and then attempting to infer its meaning, stating: *“When I encounter a new word, I immediately write it down and sometimes look up its meaning. Occasionally, I try to guess it.”* Student 2 described a similar strategy, explaining: *“I usually try to guess the meaning on my own.”*

These observations suggest that students actively engage with the text, striving to construct meaning from contextual cues and demonstrating an initiative to understand new vocabulary independently.

Collaborative Discussion with Peers

When students were unable to determine the meaning independently, they engaged in discussions with their peers. Student 3 explained: *“I will discuss it with a friend,”* while Student 1 similarly noted: *“I immediately ask a friend.”*

These findings suggest that peers function as a secondary source of scaffolding, providing support through the exchange of knowledge and collaborative efforts to enhance comprehension.

Consultation with the Teacher

All three students demonstrated a consistent pattern in which, when peer discussions failed to provide a clear or accurate understanding, they sought guidance from the teacher. Student 1 explained: *“When I encounter difficulties, I will ask the teacher.”* Student 2 stated: *“If I am mistaken or still do not understand, I ultimately consult the teacher.”* Student 3 added: *“When I do not understand, I ask the teacher directly.”*

These findings underscore the teacher’s role as the ultimate source of scaffolding, providing expert support that enables students to achieve precise and meaningful comprehension.

These findings can be understood through the lens of gradual scaffolding, consistent with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, which emphasizes that learning emerges through guidance and support from more knowledgeable others. In this study, students progressed through three levels of ZPD: (1) the Individual ZPD, exemplified by students’ attempts to infer meaning independently; (2) the Peer ZPD, reflected in their collaborative discussions with classmates; and (3) the Teacher ZPD, demonstrated when they sought clarification from the teacher. This process illustrates that students were not passive recipients of knowledge, but rather active participants who engaged in a deliberate, stepwise approach to problem-solving and meaning-making.

The Impact of Collaborative Discussion on Students' Confidence and Motivation

The findings from interviews and observations revealed that all three students experienced notable growth in both confidence and comprehension of the short story through collaborative discussions. While some students initially displayed hesitation, their self-assurance increased after receiving supportive encouragement from the teacher. Furthermore, the students consistently demonstrated mutual respect, as reflected in their careful listening and thoughtful consideration of each other's viewpoints, highlighting a positive and inclusive learning environment.

Cognitive Transformation: From Not Understanding to Understanding

Student 2 reflected: *"After the discussion, I felt that I understood much better; for instance, before the discussion, I did not know, but afterward, I was able to grasp even the finer details."* This illustrates that collaborative discussions can meaningfully support students facing difficulties in vocabulary comprehension, fostering not only basic understanding but also a deeper, more nuanced grasp of the material.

Affective Transformation: From Hesitation to Confidence

Student 1 expressed: *"I became more confident because I felt more certain about the short story."* In a similar vein, Student 3 reflected: *"I gained significant confidence; my understanding improved, and the discussion helped clarify the concepts and information I was reading."* These findings suggest that collaborative discussions contributed not only to the enhancement of students' cognitive comprehension but also to the development of their self-confidence, highlighting an important affective transformation alongside their intellectual growth.

Social Transformation: From Individual to Group Learning

The observations indicated that students who initially approached learning individually gradually transitioned to collaborative group learning. This shift was reflected in their mutual support and cooperative interactions, as they worked together to achieve shared understanding. The classroom atmosphere became more vibrant and participatory, with students actively exchanging knowledge and engaging in meaningful dialogue, thereby fostering a sense of community and collective responsibility in the learning process.

These findings can be understood through Lave and Wenger's concept of *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students actively engage within a *Community of Practice*. Collaborative discussions fostered a supportive and encouraging classroom environment, allowing students to express their ideas, share perspectives, and seek assistance with increased confidence (Ariffin, 2021; Lin, 2019). Within this framework, the teacher serves as a facilitator who provides motivation, while students' self-assurance develops through interactive engagement and the mutual support offered by their peers.

Vocabulary as a Strategy for Comprehending Meaning

The interview findings revealed that students used vocabulary not only as a means of communication but also as a strategic tool to deepen their understanding of the short story, indicating that vocabulary learning went beyond simple memorization. Observations further showed that students were able to explain the meaning of words to support their comprehension of the text. In addition, students actively applied new vocabulary in sentences they created and incorporated it into their daily conversations, demonstrating a meaningful and practical engagement with language.

Expanding Vocabulary and Knowledge Through Reading Short Stories

Student 1 reflected: “After reading the short story, I was able to learn new vocabulary that I had not known before, and it also broadened my knowledge.” Student 2 shared a similar experience, noting: “Reading short stories in class was very enjoyable and helped me develop a deeper understanding of the material.”

These reflections indicate that engaging with short stories not only supports vocabulary acquisition but also enriches students’ knowledge, allowing them to explore and understand the diverse themes embedded within the texts.

Applying Functional Vocabulary in Context

Observations revealed that students interpreted vocabulary meaningfully within the context of the story, rather than relying solely on literal definitions. For instance, when encountering the word “believed,” students understood its significance within the narrative, beyond simply translating it as “percaya.” This demonstrates that students actively engaged with the language, applying new vocabulary in their own sentences and incorporating it into daily conversations, reflecting a practical and purposeful use of language in meaningful contexts.

These findings can be understood through Lewis’s (1993) Lexical Approach and the theory of Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition, which highlight that students naturally expand their vocabulary through meaningful reading activities. Interacting with short stories offers students the opportunity to encounter and comprehend words within their authentic contexts. This perspective is consistent with research demonstrating that effective vocabulary mastery allows students to acquire new words both explicitly and implicitly (Silfani, 2023).

Social Dynamics in the Construction of Shared Knowledge

The interview findings indicated that all three participants acknowledged the important roles played by both the teacher and their peers during discussions. The teacher, however, was perceived as particularly supportive due to the depth, accuracy, and clarity of the explanations provided, which facilitated students’ understanding. Observations further confirmed that students engaged in meaningful interaction and collaboration throughout the

learning process. They distributed group tasks equitably, assisted peers in comprehending new vocabulary, and consistently demonstrated respect by listening to and thoughtfully responding to one another's contributions.

Horizontal Scaffolding (Peer-to-Peer)

Student 1 shared: *"In my experience, discussions with my peers are the most helpful, but when they are also unsure, I turn to the teacher for guidance."* This pattern highlights how students who have a solid grasp of certain terms can assist their peers in understanding concepts they are less familiar with. Through this process, students actively engage in the collaborative exchange of knowledge, supporting each other's learning and fostering a shared understanding (Chairinkam, 2021)

Dialogic Learning

Student 2 reflected: *"Both my peers and the teacher play important roles. I do not feel hesitant to ask my friends repeatedly, even though their answers are not always accurate. When I consult the teacher, however, the explanations are consistently precise."*

Engaging in discussions with peers allows students to collaborate meaningfully and develop a collective understanding. This dialogic learning unfolds in two complementary ways: through the teacher's guidance and through interactive exchanges among students, highlighting the value of both expert input and peer collaboration in the learning process (Chairinkam, 2021).

Affective Solidarity

Student 3 shared: *"Offer sincere praise to those participating in discussions so they feel more motivated."* This form of emotional support reflects students' willingness to assist one another and to respect each other's perspectives. Such interactions contribute to a more enjoyable and comfortable learning experience, fostering a classroom environment that is inclusive and welcoming for all participants engaged in meaningful dialogue (García-carrión et al., 2020).

These findings suggest that the classroom is not merely a space for individual competition, but rather a collaborative environment for knowledge construction, where social interactions enhance collective understanding. Three primary patterns emerged from the study: (1) horizontal scaffolding, in which students actively support each other; (2) dialogic learning, characterized by the reciprocal exchange of knowledge among peers; and (3) affective solidarity, which nurtures a positive, supportive, and engaging learning atmosphere.

Learning new vocabulary through short stories unfolds gradually and is facilitated by the support of others. The scaffolding process begins with students attempting to infer the meaning of words independently, followed by collaborative discussions with peers, and

ultimately seeking clarification from the teacher when needed. Engaging in this collaborative process not only motivates students but also enhances their confidence in using the language. Rather than simply memorizing vocabulary, students actively apply new words to deepen their understanding of the text. The mutual support and encouragement among students cultivate a cooperative learning environment, rendering the learning experience both meaningful and engaging.

DISCUSSION

This study identified four key insights into students' perceptions of vocabulary development through short stories. The following section will examine these findings in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and situate them within the context of existing research.

Gradual Scaffolding in the Learning Process (Self-Peer-Teacher)

The findings of this study reveal that students acquire vocabulary in a progressive manner across varying proficiency levels, beginning with independent attempts to infer meaning, followed by collaborative discussions with peers, and ultimately seeking guidance from the teacher. This process is consistent with Vygotsky's concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). Three distinct levels of ZPD were identified in this study: the Individual ZPD, in which students generate their own interpretations or hypotheses; the Peer ZPD, where students engage in collaborative interaction with classmates; and the Teacher ZPD, in which students consult the teacher for clarification and deeper understanding.

These findings align with previous research indicating that Thai EFL students employed scaffolding in a progressive manner, with beginner learners relying on procedural support and intermediate learners more actively engaging in knowledge sharing and questioning (Yawiloeng, 2021). This study further highlights a systematic, three-tiered scaffolding pattern initiated by the students themselves rather than directed by the teacher, offering a novel insight into student-driven learning processes.

Moreover, individuals who depend on specific domains are not significantly affected by particular forms of collaborative tasks. Conversely, domain-dependent learners tend to achieve higher-quality outcomes in collaborative writing activities (Wang, 2020). The present study illustrates that a consistent, gradual scaffolding strategy can be successfully implemented across students of all levels, irrespective of their cognitive styles, supporting both independent and collaborative learning.

Previous studies have identified six types of effective scaffolding in reading instruction: modeling, bridging, contextualizing, schema building, text re-presenting, and metacognition (Suryani et al., 2023). This study builds on these findings by showing that scaffolding occurs not only vertically, from teacher to student, but also horizontally, among peers, with students intentionally selecting the level of support based on their own self assessment.

The student-initiated gradual scaffolding approach contrasts with conventional top-down models. By taking an active role in guiding the scaffolding process, students are able to engage more independently, fostering a sense of autonomy and personal responsibility in their learning journey.

Educators can structure learning activities around a three-stage framework: Stage 1 (Independent Exploration, 5–8 minutes): During this stage, students actively engage in understanding new vocabulary on their own, drawing on contextual clues or consulting a dictionary as needed. This approach encourages autonomy and fosters students' capacity to make meaning independently. Stage 2 (Peer Discussion, 10 minutes): Students participate in small-group discussions, collaboratively exchanging ideas and deepening their understanding of the vocabulary. Stage 3 (Teacher Explanation, 5–8 minutes): The teacher offers clarification and targeted guidance for any vocabulary that students have not yet fully grasped.

This structured framework supports a gradual transfer of learning responsibility from teacher to student, fostering learner autonomy while maintaining a supportive environment where guidance is readily accessible.

The Impact of Collaborative Discussion on Students' Psychological Transformation

The findings of this study reveal changes across three interconnected dimensions. Cognitively, students progressed from a state of uncertainty to a deeper understanding of the material. Emotionally, they experienced a shift from doubt to greater self-confidence. Socially, students moved from solitary learning toward active, collaborative engagement. These outcomes align with Lave and Wenger's theory of *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, which emphasizes that meaningful learning is most effectively achieved through active participation within a community of practice.

Collaborative writing has been found to support the development of productive vocabulary, with 63% of students indicating a preference for written formats, as these provide time to thoughtfully organize and articulate their ideas (Wang, 2020). This study offers an expanded perspective, revealing that collaborative interactions not only enhance cognitive outcomes but also contribute to meaningful emotional and social growth.

Earlier research highlighted that 87.5% of students perceived scaffolding as a factor that increased their motivation (Suryani et al., 2023). Building on this, the present study suggests that the boost in motivation emerges not simply from general encouragement, but through the simultaneous transformation of cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, creating a more holistic learning experience.

The simultaneous transformation across cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in collaborative vocabulary learning represents a novel insight, as such a comprehensive model has not been clearly documented in prior EFL research.

To promote effective peer scaffolding, educators are encouraged to form heterogeneous groups that include students with different proficiency levels, allowing them

to support one another and exchange knowledge meaningfully. Group diversity enables stronger students to assist peers who need additional guidance, while lower-proficiency students contribute their own perspectives and benefit from collaborative learning.

In addition to thoughtful grouping, teachers should implement structured discussion protocols to guide student interaction. Activities such as think-pair-share and the use of sentence stems can help students articulate ideas more effectively and ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to participate. These structured approaches provide a clear framework for discussion, reducing confusion and increasing the quality of student engagement.

Creating a supportive learning atmosphere is also essential. Teachers can cultivate psychological safety by establishing principles such as “Every opinion is valued,” which encourages students to express their thoughts without fear of judgment. When learners feel respected and secure, they are more likely to take academic risks, share ideas, and collaborate constructively with peers.

Finally, the use of metacognitive prompts can further enhance students’ learning experiences. By asking reflective questions such as, “What strategies are you using to understand this short story?” teachers help students become more aware of their thinking processes and the techniques they use during reading and discussion. This reflective practice fosters greater autonomy and strengthens students’ overall metacognitive awareness.

Functional Use of Vocabulary

Students develop vocabulary not simply by memorizing words, but by actively using them to understand texts and engage in everyday communication. This process aligns with the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993) and the concept of Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition, both of which highlight that meaningful interaction with language in context fosters deeper comprehension and more sustainable learning.

The systematic patterns of word forms and the richness of contextual cues can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, particularly in the learning of nouns (Zou & Yan, 2019). The findings of this study indicate that students do more than understand individual word meanings; they also develop a functional vocabulary repertoire that allows them to anticipate the progression of a story and communicate meaningfully in everyday situations.

Peer scaffolding has been found to enhance students’ reading comprehension (Yawiloeng, 2021). The present study extends this understanding by showing that students also develop a deeper grasp of causal relationships within texts as they acquire relevant vocabulary knowledge.

The use of functional vocabulary can be understood through two dimensions: the textual function, which involves interpreting the structure and elements of the narrative, and the communicative function, which encompasses applying vocabulary meaningfully in everyday communication.

This study highlight several instructional practices that can effectively enhance vocabulary learning through short stories. First, teachers can incorporate textual activities that require students to create story maps identifying key vocabulary, plot elements, and character traits. Engaging in these tasks encourages students to analyze characters using descriptive adjectives and action verbs, thereby deepening their interaction with the text and reinforcing vocabulary in context.

In addition to textual engagement, communicative activities such as role-playing can provide meaningful opportunities for students to apply newly acquired vocabulary. By assuming the roles of characters and reenacting scenes from the story, students practice narrative language in authentic communicative situations. This approach not only enhances vocabulary retention but also strengthens speaking fluency and comprehension.

A spiral curriculum can further support vocabulary development by reintroducing key terms across different lessons and contexts throughout the semester. Revisiting vocabulary in a structured and cumulative manner helps reinforce long-term retention and fosters students' ability to use words flexibly across various communicative situations.

Finally, performance-based assessments such as story retelling and role-playing can be used to evaluate students' comprehension and practical language use. These assessment methods move beyond traditional multiple-choice testing by allowing students to demonstrate their understanding through authentic, communicative performance. This approach provides a more accurate picture of students' vocabulary mastery and encourages deeper, more meaningful learning.

Social Dynamics in the Construction of Shared Knowledge

Three approaches support collaborative vocabulary learning: horizontal scaffolding among peers, dialogic learning, and affective solidarity.

Previous research has identified ten common forms of peer scaffolding, including procedural support, information sharing, and confirmation (Yawiloeng, 2021). Building on this, the present study explores three key mechanisms of peer scaffolding: horizontal scaffolding without hierarchical structures, dialogic learning that encourages collaborative elaboration, and affective solidarity, which provides emotional support and fosters a supportive learning environment.

Peer scaffolding has been shown to significantly improve vocabulary acquisition compared to teacher-led scaffolding ($p < 0.05$) (Munir, 2023). This study elucidates the underlying principles of its effectiveness by highlighting three patterns of social dynamics that occur simultaneously.

This paradigm highlights three interconnected patterns of social interaction: egalitarian horizontal scaffolding, collaborative dialogue centered on co-constructing meaning, and affective solidarity that nurtures a supportive learning community. It underscores that acquiring vocabulary is inherently a social process, shaped through shared experiences and mutual engagement.

This study emphasize the importance of fostering collaborative learning environments that support vocabulary development. Horizontal scaffolding can be strengthened by implementing reciprocal teaching strategies in which students take turns assuming the role of “teacher.” This approach, combined with a well-structured peer mentorship system that outlines clear expectations, enables learners to support one another and promotes shared academic growth.

Dialogue-based learning also plays a critical role in enhancing students’ vocabulary acquisition. Teachers can guide students to engage in responsible dialogue by using language that encourages elaboration, critical reflection, and constructive exchange of ideas. Such dialogic interaction allows students to articulate their understanding more clearly while learning to evaluate and build upon the contributions of their peers.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic benefits, affective solidarity can significantly enhance the collaborative learning experience. Student groups can establish shared principles—such as “We support each other in achieving success”—to promote a sense of collective responsibility. Reflective strategies, such as discussing questions like “How have your peers contributed to your learning journey?” help students recognize mutual support and develop a stronger sense of community within the classroom.

The teacher’s role as a facilitator is also essential. During group activities, the teacher should move between groups, pose strategic questions, and validate students’ explanations to reinforce understanding. This supportive presence ensures that discussions remain focused and productive while empowering students to take ownership of their learning.

Structured collaborative activities further support vocabulary development. Techniques such as Vocabulary Jigsaw, where groups analyze different parts of a story and teach vocabulary to others, promote interdependence and deeper engagement with the text. Vocabulary Hot Seat allows students to guess target vocabulary with help from classmates, encouraging quick recall and collaborative problem-solving. Story Sequencing activities, in which students arrange narrative components while identifying key linguistic markers, help learners connect vocabulary to plot structure and contextual cues. Collectively, these activities provide diverse, interactive opportunities for students to apply and internalize new vocabulary meaningfully.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

This study offers several contributions to learning theory. First, it introduces a three-level model of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), in which students move from individual effort to peer support and finally to teacher guidance. This model expands Vygotsky’s original concept by showing how scaffolding can begin with the learner and gradually build toward more expert assistance, encouraging autonomy and self-directed learning. Second, the study highlights a three-dimensional transformation experienced by students—emotional, cognitive, and social—which provides deeper insight into how

collaborative learning shapes both understanding and classroom engagement. Third, the findings support a functional view of vocabulary knowledge, emphasizing that vocabulary learning involves not only knowing word forms but also using words meaningfully in communication and textual interpretation. Finally, the study identifies interrelated patterns of social dynamics—horizontal scaffolding, dialogic interaction, and affective support—that together demonstrate the central role of social relationships in fostering language development.

Practical Contributions

Several practical implications emerge for classroom practice. The study provides educators with a structured framework for designing vocabulary activities that promote purposeful peer interaction and collaborative learning. It also supports a gradual release approach, beginning with students' independent exploration, followed by peer discussion, and concluding with teacher clarification. Assessment practices may be broadened to include not only language proficiency but also collaboration skills, metacognitive awareness, and students' ability to use vocabulary in authentic contexts. In addition, the study offers guidance for teacher professional development, emphasizing facilitation skills and the creation of safe, supportive learning environments where students feel comfortable participating and taking risks.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The small sample size, three students from one school, limits the generalizability of the findings, indicating the need for wider participant representation. The research also lacked longitudinal data, preventing observation of changes in students' learning over time. In addition, the absence of quantitative vocabulary measurements makes it difficult to evaluate learning gains with precision. The study also did not consider how differences in text genre or complexity might influence vocabulary learning. Group dynamics were not examined in detail, even though individual differences and group composition can affect collaboration. Finally, only students' perspectives were explored, without incorporating teachers' viewpoints, which could provide additional insight.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should consider using mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative vocabulary assessments to strengthen the validity of the findings. Longitudinal research covering a full semester or academic year would provide a clearer picture of learning progression and retention. Further investigation into the features of short stories, such as complexity, genre, and cultural relevance, is recommended to better understand their impact on learning outcomes. Research on group dynamics—particularly how different group compositions affect cooperation—would also be valuable. Finally, including teachers' reflections and classroom observations could enrich the understanding of how collaborative vocabulary learning unfolds in practice.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of vocabulary acquisition through short stories using a collaborative discussion approach at SMP Harapan Cibitung. The findings address the three research questions and illustrate how collaborative learning contributes to students' linguistic, cognitive, and social development.

With regard to the first research question, students viewed collaborative discussion as a process of co-constructing knowledge supported by three social dynamics: horizontal scaffolding, dialogic interaction, and affective solidarity. They recognized the complementary roles of teachers and peers, noting that while peers provide accessible support, teachers offer more precise and comprehensive clarification. Overall, students perceived collaborative discussion as a safe and supportive environment that enables them to exchange ideas freely without hierarchical barriers.

In responding to the second research question, the study revealed that students progress through a three-stage learning process involving independent exploration, peer collaboration, and teacher consultation. This trajectory aligns with the three levels of the Zone of Proximal Development—Individual ZPD, Peer ZPD, and Teacher ZPD. Students also demonstrated an understanding of vocabulary as a functional tool used to interpret narrative texts and to communicate meaningfully in everyday contexts, rather than as isolated items to be memorized. Their learning experiences were characterized by reciprocal interactions that fostered sustained engagement and deeper comprehension.

The findings related to the third research question show that collaborative discussion promotes three interrelated forms of transformation: cognitive, affective, and social. Students experienced cognitive growth as they moved from initial confusion to clearer understanding; affective development as their confidence increased; and social transformation as they shifted from working individually to engaging more actively with peers. These transformations occurred simultaneously and reinforced one another, contributing to a more integrated and meaningful learning experience.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that collaborative discussion not only enhances vocabulary learning through short stories but also supports broader developmental outcomes that are essential for effective language acquisition.

ntexts that extend beyond its original linguistic focus.

Implications

Implications for Teachers

The findings suggest that teachers can apply the three-stage scaffolding model—*independent work, peer discussion, and teacher clarification*—to gradually build students' responsibility for learning. Creating a psychologically safe classroom with norms such as "All contributions are valued" helps students participate confidently. Heterogeneous grouping should be used to strengthen peer support, and teachers are encouraged to act as facilitators by posing guiding questions and validating peer explanations. Assessment should also measure collaboration, metacognitive awareness, and students' ability to use vocabulary in real contexts, not only their cognitive achievement.

Implications for Curriculum Designers

Vocabulary instruction through short stories should be treated as a central component of the curriculum. A spiral approach, in which key vocabulary is revisited across different units, can support long-term retention. Collaborative learning strategies—such as think–pair–share, peer teaching, and vocabulary jigsaw—should be embedded into instructional design. Short story selection must consider students’ proficiency, interests, and textual complexity. Performance-based assessments, including story retelling and role-playing, are recommended to capture cognitive, affective, and social learning outcomes more accurately.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should use mixed methods with larger samples and longer timeframes to strengthen evidence for the scaffolding and transformation frameworks. Research on genre, text complexity, and cultural context would clarify how different narrative features influence vocabulary learning. Studies on group dynamics—including group composition, size, and learner traits—would deepen understanding of collaborative processes. Incorporating teachers’ perspectives would also enrich interpretations of classroom practices and implementation challenges.

This study reinforces that vocabulary learning through short stories and collaborative discussion is a multifaceted process shaped by cognitive, emotional, and social interaction. The theoretical models developed—the three-level ZPD model, the social dynamics patterns, and the transformation framework—offer useful foundations for designing more effective and engaging language-learning experiences.

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