THE IMPACT OF VOCABULARY BREADTH AND DEPTH ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF DIFFICULTY IN IELTS READING: A STUDY ON TEST ANXIETY AND COPING MECHANISMS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between vocabulary breadth and depth and students' perceived difficulty in the IELTS Reading Test, as well as how these perceptions relate to test anxiety and coping mechanisms. Vocabulary breadth refers to the number of words known, while depth reflects how well each word is understood, including its synonyms, collocations, and contextual meanings. Thirty EFL learners from an English learning community in Kediri, Indonesia, participated in this quantitative descriptive study. Data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire distributed via Google Form, which explored students' vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, anxiety levels, and perceptions of reading difficulty. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and interpretive analysis to capture both numerical trends and underlying perceptions. The results indicate that while most participants demonstrated adequate vocabulary breadth, many still struggled with vocabulary depth particularly in recognizing paraphrases, collocations, and polysemous words. These lexical gaps were strongly linked to their perceived difficulty with synonym and paraphrase-based questions in the IELTS Reading section. Additionally, the majority of students reported experiencing anxiety when encountering many unfamiliar words, often relying on coping strategies such as contextual guessing or skipping sentences to maintain reading flow. However, panic triggered by lexical unfamiliarity remained a significant barrier to comprehension. Overall, the findings highlight that vocabulary depth, rather than breadth alone, plays a more critical role in reading comprehension and perceived difficulty. The study suggests integrating explicit depth-oriented vocabulary instruction with anxiety-reduction strategies to enhance students' reading performance and test confidence.

Keywords: vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth, reading anxiety and coping strategies, IELTS reading, EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is an essential part of language proficiency and a strong predictor of students' reading comprehension (Atai & Nikuinezhad, 2012; Kiliç,

2019; .Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2014). In the area of high-stakes English language testing, vocabulary has an even greater significance, for example in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In fact, word knowledge itself that is, depth of knowledge has been reported to play a more important role than the number of known words that is vocabulary size or breadth in reading performance for such high-stakes tests as the IELTS Reading section (Chen, 2020; Taghizadeh & Khalili, 2019; Ehsanzadeh, 2012;.Qian, 2002; Read, 2004). Breadth refers to how many lexical items the learner knows and depth to how well each of the known lexical items is known, the latter involving a 'rich, nuanced understanding' of lexical items, encompassing knowledge of such things as collocations, polysemy and lexical relations (Westby, 2024; Firda & Azkiyah, 2021; Li & Kirby, 2015; Nation, 2013). This depth is essential in IELTS, where understanding is impeded by tight time constraints and tasks involving higher order skills, such as inferencing and recognition of paraphrase (Zhang, 2025; Schmitt, 2010).

Prior studies support that depth of knowledge has a stronger rater in processing complex reading task (Qian, 1999; Zhang & Lu, 2020; Rabadi, 2023) than general coverage in the vocabulary knowledge of coverage over both models. In the IELTS context, facing unfamiliar words frequently becomes an anxiety-provoking experience, which might cause test takers to use unhelpful coping mechanisms, like unnecessarily skipping questions in that section. On the other hand, learners who are high in metacognitive awareness and low in anxiety are more likely to engage in adaptive compensatory strategies, such as making contextual guesses to keep the flow of comprehension (Cécillon et al., 2024; Zeleke, 2017; Gu& Johnson, 1996). There have been increasing claims that depth of vocabulary knowledge is more predictive of L2 reading and listening performance (Chen & Zhang, 2023; Rabadi, 2023; Zhang & Lu, 2020). Nevertheless, the majority of the previous research concentrates on performance outcomes only and ignores how learners subjectively view and diagnose their problems (Wang et al., 2014), an especially important process in the psychological stress of test-taking.

Test anxiety, which is characterized as an affective and cognitive reaction to evaluative situations, always has an impact on this cognitive challenge (Chen, 2022; Dong, 2019; Zheng & Cheng, 2018; Horwitz et al., 1986; Zeidner, 1998). Because it reduces working memory and hinders strategic processing, high anxiety has a detrimental effect on reading (Huiyong & Xinping, 2025; Barnes et al., 2023; Chow et al., 2021; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Unfamiliar vocabulary frequently causes anxiety in the IELTS setting, which results in maladaptive coping mechanisms such as skipping sections. On the other hand, comprehension flow is maintained by effective adaptive coping such as contextual guessing (Hasanah et al., 2024; Wilawan, 2022; Gu & Johnson, 1996). For a thorough understanding of perceived reading difficulty, it is crucial to look at this interaction between cognitive factors breadth and depth and affective factors. Accordingly, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the gap between the participants' vocabulary breadth and depth affect how difficult they think IELTS Reading questions are, especially those that need them to understand synonyms or paraphrases?
2. How do participants' strategies for dealing with unknown words (guessing from context vs. skipping sentences) and their levels of anxiety (panic) relate to their perceptions of the main causes of errors (limitations of single vocabulary vs. understanding the overall context) in the IELTS Reading Test?
3. What factors do learners perceive as the main sources of difficulty in IELTS Reading?

This study intends to close a research gap by investigating the connection between students' perceptions of IELTS reading difficulty and vocabulary breadth and depth, as well as how these perceptions are impacted by test anxiety and coping mechanisms. The results are anticipated to offer theoretical understanding of the dual

construct of vocabulary knowledge as well as useful suggestions for creating depth-oriented instructional strategies and efficient anxiety-reduction techniques.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative, descriptive survey design. In the context of the IELTS Reading Test, this design was chosen because it sought to gather quantitative data from participants regarding their attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors regarding vocabulary mastery, reading strategies, and anxiety This design allows the researcher to describe overall patterns in the data without manipulating any variables. In order to show the distribution of participant responses, the results were examined and displayed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The study was carried out in an English learning community in Kediri, East Java, Indonesia, which is well known for its emphasis on IELTS preparation courses and English language instruction. To provide flexibility and accessibility for all participants, data was gathered online using a Google Form.

A total of thirty English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners took part in the study. All participants had either previously taken the IELTS Academic Reading Test or were preparing for it. Their English proficiency level was classified based on the institution's standardized placement test. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to deliberately select individuals who had completed intensive IELTS preparation courses or had firsthand experience with the IELTS test format. Recruitment was carried out through digital communication channel. Participation was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. Each participant received the online survey through Google Form. This method was chosen due to its effectiveness and accessibility in reaching respondents across different geographic locations.

The primary tool for gathering data was a questionnaire created by the researcher. Three main variables pertinent to the research questions were intended to be measured by the instrument that was first, assessing vocabulary mastery involves looking at both breadth (the quantity of words one knows) and depth (the understanding of synonyms, collocations, multiple meanings, and context). Secondly, Reading Strategies and Anxiety: analyzing how participants handle unfamiliar words (e.g., guessing from context versus skipping sentences) and how they react emotionally (calm or panic) in test scenarios. Third, finding out which question types participants believe to be the most difficult (such as paraphrase/synonym-based questions) and what they believe to be the main reasons for reading errors is known as perceived difficulty. A four-point Likert scale, from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, was used to rate each item. To guarantee the accuracy of data collection, the Google Form platform automatically recorded each response. For further coding and descriptive statistical analysis, the responses were exported and downloaded in spreadsheet format.

To determine the frequency and percentage distribution of each questionnaire item, all responses were coded and examined using Microsoft Excel. The findings were then displayed in tables and descriptive summaries to show patterns in reading strategies, test anxiety, perceived difficulty, and vocabulary depth and breadth. One of the fundamental statistical techniques employed in this study was descriptive analysis, which made it easier to interpret the categorical data gathered using the Likert-scale questionnaire (Ekiz, 2013). While percentage values make it simpler to understand the tendency and density of responses. The final questionnaire consisted of 22 items across four dimensions: vocabulary breadth (5 items), vocabulary depth (6 items), reading strategies and vocabulary question (6 items), and students' difficulties and perception of IELTS reading (5 items). All items used the same four-point Likert scale.

Content validity was established through expert judgment. The questionnaire was reviewed by an IELTS instructor, who evaluated each item for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the intended constructs. Reliability was examined through internal consistency analysis using data from the main sample. The resulting reliability

coefficients indicated acceptable internal consistency across all dimensions, demonstrating that the questionnaire consistently measured the intended constructs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1. The Relationship between Vocabulary Breadth–Depth Gaps and Perceived Reading Difficulty

1. Vocabulary Breadth

TABLE 1/ Students' Perceptions of Their Vocabulary Breadth in IELTS Reading

	Statement	Percentage			
		Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I know many English words commonly found in academic reading.	43,3% (13)	23,3% (7)	33,3% (10)	0% (0)
2.	I feel my vocabulary is sufficient to understand most IELTS texts.	50% (15)	10% (3)	36,7% (11)	3,3% (1)
3.	I often come across words in texts that I am completely unfamiliar with.	16,7% (3)	53,3% (16)	23,3% (7)	6,7% (2)
4.	I regularly add new word lists when studying (e.g. flashcards, word lists).	43,3% (13)	23,3% (7)	26,7% (8)	6.7% (2)
5.	I often feel that my vocabulary is not enough to understand long reading texts.	46,7% (14)	13,3% (4)	33,3% (10)	6,7% (2)

According to the data, participants reported a relatively high level of self-perceived vocabulary mastery. A total of 66.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they knew a large number of academic words, while 33.3% disagreed. This demonstrates that most students thought they had a good vocabulary that was appropriate for academic texts. The sizeable minority that disagreed, however, points to differences in participants' lexical exposure. Variations in reading preferences, educational backgrounds, or English language learning experiences could all have an impact on this. Although it varies, most students have a positive self-perception of their

academic vocabulary knowledge. This supports the assertions of Wu et al. (2021), Firda and Azkiyah (2021), and Nation (2013) that learners' input exposure and practice frequency have a significant impact on vocabulary breadth. These results show that most respondents have a broad enough vocabulary to comprehend academic texts. This supports Rabadi's (2023) assertion that the more words English language learners know, the more deeply they understand texts, and the more proficient they become readers. In a similar vein, Qian (2002) and Nation (2013) emphasized that breadth serves as the basis for deeper vocabulary knowledge, offering the lexical coverage required to comprehend the majority of academic materials. This is further reinforced by Li and Kirby (2015), who demonstrated that both breadth and depth jointly support reading comprehension, with breadth acting as the foundational predictor of initial text access.

In addition, half of the respondents believed they had sufficient vocabulary to comprehend most IELTS texts, while 16.7% disagreed. Similarly, 60% reported feeling confident in their vocabulary sufficiency, although 40% expressed doubt to varying degrees. These patterns indicate that, despite a generally positive perception, a substantial proportion of learners remains uncertain about their lexical readiness for IELTS reading. This supports Schmitt's (2010) assertion that even students with a large vocabulary frequently find it difficult to comprehend the material at the level needed for academic assessments. A tiny percentage of participants still believed that their vocabulary mastery was insufficient, despite the fact that over half of them felt very confident. This results in learners' perceptions of vocabulary adequacy differing. Additionally, Akbarian and Alavi (2022) found that vocabulary breadth contributes differently to test formats such as the TOEFL and IELTS, suggesting that lexical quantity alone cannot ensure uniform comprehension. This variation suggests different perceptions of lexical adequacy. Schmitt (2014) further emphasized that breadth ensures initial access to text meaning, but comprehension depth depends on nuanced lexical relationships. Atai and Nikuinezhad (2012) similarly reported that mismatches between breadth and depth predict varying comprehension outcomes, particularly in high-stakes academic reading.

On the other hand, the data also indicate that around 70% of participants reported frequently encountering unfamiliar words while reading, showing that many learners still faces notable lexical gaps. This implies that students frequently come across new words, indicating a discrepancy between their existing vocabulary and the lexical requirements of academic reading materials. This result emphasizes the ongoing necessity of vocabulary growth. Laufer (2016) asserts that in order to comfortably understand academic texts, even advanced learners usually require knowledge of at least 8,000–9,000 word families. Many students are still below that threshold, as indicated by the high rate of agreement in this case.. Thus, demonstrating that although breadth is crucial, deep vocabulary is also crucial for comprehending challenging texts like IELTS Reading. According to Nation (2001, 2013), learning vocabulary necessitates striking a balance between quantity and quality; extensive vocabulary coverage needs to be supported by depth (word families, collocations, and context-based meaning). This was recently supported by Chen et al. (2024), who demonstrated that while vocabulary breadth alone only predicts surface-level comprehension, combining inferential skills and depth knowledge improves text understanding. Zhang (2025) further found that lexical depth plays a decisive role in interpreting syntactically dense or paraphrased information skills frequently required in IELTS Reading.

Furthermore, the data show that about two-thirds of the participants (66.6%) reported actively learning new words during study activities, indicating that most learners engage in intentional vocabulary development. This suggests that the majority of participants use metacognitive techniques to improve their word knowledge and shows a generally positive attitude toward self-directed vocabulary learning. According to Oxford (1990) and Nation (2001), self-regulated vocabulary learning such as using flashcards or word lists contributes significantly to long-term lexical retention. The results show encouraging learner autonomy. This pattern is also

consistent with Tong (2022) and Ehsanzadeh (2012), who observed that intentional vocabulary enhancement, strengthens both breadth and depth and fosters more successful processing of paraphrases and inferential information.

A substantial proportion of learners expressed concerns about their lexical sufficiency for long texts. About 60% reported feeling that their vocabulary is often inadequate for understanding extended reading passages, while roughly one-third disagreed with this perception. This contrast highlights varying levels of lexical confidence among learners, suggesting that many still perceive long passages as lexically demanding despite having a generally positive view of their vocabulary knowledge. This indicates that students are realistically aware of their limitations when it comes to handling lengthy or complex texts, like those found in the IELTS reading section. This observation shows that even with a moderate vocabulary, many students still struggle to maintain understanding of longer, denser academic texts. The results are consistent with Read's (2000) distinction between vocabulary breadth (word quantity) and depth (quality of understanding), the latter of which appears to be deficient among participants. This supports the findings of Gu and Johnson (1996), who observed that students who use vocabulary management techniques (such as self-made lists or flashcards) perform better in reading and retain more information. Tong (2022) found that readers who used intentional vocabulary expansion strategies improved both breadth and depth, which in turn improved performance in paraphrase recognition tasks, a crucial skill for IELTS reading and this behavior is consistent with what was seen. Additionally, Taghizadeh and Khalili (2019) demonstrated that insufficient vocabulary depth significantly increases perceived text difficulty, especially in long expository passages similar to IELTS tasks.

The data in Table 1 indicate that most participants believe they possess a relatively large academic vocabulary, with more than 60% agreeing that they know many words found in academic texts. However, more than half also report frequently encountering unfamiliar words in IELTS passages. This contrast shows a clear breadth–demand mismatch, although students feel confident in general word knowledge, they still struggle when the lexical load becomes denser, as is typical in IELTS Reading. This gap is directly related to RQ1, because encountering unfamiliar words increases the perceived difficulty of items requiring synonym recognition and paraphrase tracking skills that depend not merely on breadth but also on depth. Nation (2001, 2013) and Qian (2002) similarly argue that breadth provides initial access to meaning, but depth determines how well learners understand textual reformulations. Recent work by Westby (2024) and Chen & Zhang (2023) also emphasizes that limitations in depth particularly in morphological awareness, collocation strength, and polysemy knowledge intensify perceived reading difficulty even among learners with adequate breadth.

2. Vocabulary Deepth

The participants' difficulties in the vocabulary depth dimension are highlighted by the data in Table 2.

TABLE 2/ Students' Perceptions of Their Vocabulary Deepth in IELTS Reading

Statement	Percentage			
	Agree	**Strongly Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
1. I easily recognize synonyms or paraphrases when reading English texts.	40% (12)	23,3% (7)	30% (9)	6.7% (2)
	36.7% (11)	20% (6)	30% (9)	13,3% (4)

2. I often have difficulty understanding the meaning of words that have multiple meanings.	56.7% (17)	6.7% (2)	33.3% (10)	3.3% (1)
3. I understand word relationships (collocations, idioms) which help reading comprehension.	50% (15)	23,3% (7)	23.3% (7)	3.3% (1)
4. I actively study collocations and the use of words in context, not just the meaning of words.	60% (18)	30% (9)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)
5. I can differentiate between similar words, such as big and huge.	53.3% (16)	10% (3)	20% (6)	16.7% (5)
6. I have difficulty recognizing the correct collocation in the text (e.g. “make a decision” vs. “do a decision”)				

2.1 Synonyms or paraphrases

A majority of students reported being able to identify synonyms or paraphrased expressions in reading passages, with over 60% expressing confidence in this skill. However, nearly one-third indicated difficulty in doing so, suggesting that lexical depth is not evenly developed across participants. This variation reflects differing levels of sensitivity to subtle semantic distinctions, an ability crucial for tackling paraphrase-based items in IELTS Reading. According to Qian (2002), inferential understanding is determined by vocabulary depth, particularly when it comes to identifying minute semantic differences between paraphrased sentences, whereas vocabulary breadth guarantees general comprehension. Read (2004) noted that depth permits precise meaning construction that goes beyond literal interpretation.

Then, successful reading comprehension requires the ability to identify synonyms and paraphrases, especially in academic contexts where authors commonly restate ideas using a variety of expressions. Read (2000) asserts that this ability reflects a higher degree of vocabulary knowledge since it entails comprehending not only the obvious meaning of words but also their subtleties and semantic relationships. When faced with unfamiliar vocabulary, learners who are able to recognize synonymous expressions are more likely to correctly infer meaning and retain comprehension. Furthermore, Nation (2013) highlights that reading fluency and inferential understandings are greatly enhanced by the recognition of lexical variation, which is an indication of growing vocabulary depth. Solati (2024) discovered that vocabulary depth enables accurate paraphrase detection. Findings by Atai & Nikuinezhad (2012)

show that depth consistently predicts reading performance more strongly than syntactic knowledge or vocabulary breadth. Similarly, Li & Kirby (2015) and Chen (2020) confirm that vocabulary depth is a powerful determinant of success in IELTS Academic Reading tasks. Wu et al. (2021) and Chen & Zhang (2023) also emphasize that deeper semantic knowledge is essential for interpreting paraphrased structures in L2 reading. All together, these studies support the idea that a major cause of difficulty in advanced reading assessments is a lack of lexical depth rather than breadth.

2.2 Collocations and Multiple Meanings

More than half of the participants reported difficulty in understanding words with multiple meanings, with over 56% indicating agreement. Meanwhile, about 43% expressed the opposite view. This pattern shows that polysemy remains a notable challenge for many learners, suggesting gaps in depth of vocabulary knowledge. Schmitt (2010) emphasizes that comprehending polysemous words necessitates both breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, which this finding supports. The challenges students encounter here suggest that they are still learning contextual meaning, which can have an impact on their ability to comprehend academic texts and accurately infer meaning. Zhang (2025) shows that lexical ambiguity resolution is strongly influenced by depth knowledge. Additionally, Huiyong & Xinping (2025) demonstrate that anxiety can hinder lexical-semantic processing which indicating that affective factors may interact with depth-related difficulties.

A clear majority of students indicated that they understood word relationships such as idioms and collocations, with over 63% expressing agreement. In contrast, roughly 36% reported the opposite. This suggests that while many learners possess adequate sensitivity to lexical relations, a considerable portion still struggles with recognizing structured multi-word expressions, an aspect strongly tied to vocabulary depth. This indicates that while a third of students continue to have difficulty with these elements, the majority of students acknowledge the significance of lexical relationships in comprehending contextual meaning. Knowledge of idioms and collocations indicates higher-order lexical competency. Understanding the relationships between words improves reading comprehension and fluency, as explained by Nation (2013). Nonetheless, the 33.3% who disagreed might not have had enough exposure to real-world English contexts where idioms and collocations are commonplace.

Subsequently, the majority of participants reported actively acquiring collocations and learning words in context, with over 70% showing agreement, while a smaller portion expressed disagreement. This suggests that most students use effective techniques to expand their vocabulary beyond simple memorization. The findings are consistent with Nation (2001) and Oxford (1990), highlighting the role that contextualized and active vocabulary learning plays in long-term memory and functional language use. Contextual study increases vocabulary depth, which is important for comprehending challenging academic texts like IELTS reading materials.

Then, most students demonstrated the ability to distinguish between similar words, with around 90% expressing agreement and only a small minority showing disagreement. As a sign of increasing vocabulary depth, this shows that the majority of participants have improved their sensitivity to minute lexical differences. Semantic precision is demonstrated by the ability to differentiate between near-synonyms. Read (2004) asserts that this skill shows that students are moving from simple word recognition to sophisticated comprehension, which improves comprehension and allows for more effective language use.

In the last question, over 60% of participants acknowledged frequently struggling to find the right collocations, while around one-third expressed disagreement.". This shows that even though students understand collocations, using them correctly are still difficult. Laufer and Waldman (2011) contend that one of the most challenging facets of vocabulary depth for EFL learners to master is collocation competence, which is supported by this finding. Due to a lack of exposure and

practice in real-world settings, many students still have difficulty choosing the right collocations despite general awareness.

All things considered, these results demonstrate enduring gaps in students' vocabulary depth, particularly with regard to their comprehension of paraphrases, collocations, and polysemous words. Knowing word meanings is only one aspect of depth knowledge; another knows how words interact and change depending on the situation. The findings of Schmitt (2010, 2014) and Bardakçı (2016), which discovered that knowledge of collocational and polysemous structures predicts reading proficiency more accurately than vocabulary breadth alone, are in line with this interpretation. Lexical sophistication is the foundation of accurate comprehension, as evidenced by Çak et al. (2016), who showed that learners with deeper lexical knowledge perform noticeably better in inferencing tasks. This conclusion is further supported by recent research. According to Pu, Yang, and Kim (2024), the best indicator of success in IELTS reading comprehension is vocabulary depth rather than breadth. Similarly, Solati (2024) found that depth is a critical component in paraphrase recognition, while West (2024) found that deeper semantic knowledge aids L2 learners in navigating lexical ambiguity in high-stakes reading tasks. When combined, these findings highlight that a lack of depth in semantic and collocational knowledge, rather than a lack of vocabulary size, is the primary obstacle to advanced reading proficiency.

Table 2 shows that although a portion of participants claim they can recognize synonyms or paraphrases, a sizeable minority continue to struggle, especially with words that have multiple meanings. More than half also report difficulty identifying correct collocations. These findings respond directly to RQ1, because synonym/paraphrase recognition is a major requirement in IELTS question types such as Matching Information, True–False–Not Given, and Sentence Completion. When learners cannot distinguish nuances in similar words or resolve polysemy, they misinterpret paraphrases, leading to incorrect answers. This aligns with Qian (2002) and Solati (2024), who show that depth not breadth is the strongest predictor of paraphrase-based reading items. In the present study, students' frequent encounters with unfamiliar words and limited depth explain why paraphrase-heavy questions are perceived as difficult.

Tables 1 and 2 indicate that participants' self-reported vocabulary breadth does not fully compensate for their limited vocabulary depth. This breadth–depth imbalance aligns with the challenges they report in interpreting synonyms, identifying collocations, and resolving polysemous words. Therefore, the perceived difficulty of the IELTS Reading test is not caused by lack of word quantity alone but by insufficient depth knowledge required for sophisticated textual reformulation.

RQ2. The Relationship Between Reading Strategies, Anxiety, and Perceived Sources of Errors

4. **Reading Strategy & Vocabulary (6 items)**

The second research question concerning tactics, anxiety (panic), and perceptions of the underlying causes of errors is addressed by this analysis:

TABLE 3/ Reading Strategy & Vocabulary question

Statement	Percentage			
	Agree	**Strongly Agree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
1. When I come across a word I don't know, I usually guess	43.3% (13)	46.7% (14)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)

	its meaning from context.	53.3% (11)	33.3% (10)	10% (3)	3,3% (1)
2.	If I don't understand a word, I often skip the sentence and look for information elsewhere in the text.	26.7% (8)	63.3% (19)	6.7% (2)	3.3% (1)
3.	I use a scanning strategy (looking for keywords) when working on reading questions	56.7% (17)	6.7% (2)	16.7% (5)	20% (6)
4.	I would rather spend time understanding difficult words than guessing the answer and moving.	33.3% (10)	53.3% (16)	13.3% (4)	0% (0)
5.	I used to mark words I didn't understand to study after reading.	36.7% (11)	3.3% (1)	30% (9)	30% (9)
6.	I quickly panic when I encounter a lot of new words in a text.				

3.1 Strategies for Dealing with Uncommon Words:

Instead of immediately consulting a dictionary, almost 90% of participants reported relying on contextual inference to understand unfamiliar words, with only a very small proportion expressing disagreement. This result demonstrates that, in spite of lexical constraints, the vast majority of students use contextual inference as a tactic to preserve reading fluency and comprehension. One of the best compensatory techniques for reading in a second language is contextual guessing. Nation (2001) asserts that students who are able to deduce meaning from contextual cues improve their vocabulary depth and reading efficiency. In a similar vein, Laufer (1997) and Fraser (1999) observe that contextual guessing encourages learners to actively engage with texts by utilizing discourse-level, syntactic, and semantic cues to construct meaning. But relying too much on context without checking it can cause misinterpretations, especially in academic texts with intricate structures (Chen, 2020; Harkio & Pietilä, 2016). To guarantee long-term lexical accuracy, contextual inference must be balanced with explicit vocabulary learning, even though it is a useful skill.

A large majority of participants over 80% reported that they often skip unfamiliar words and rely on clues from surrounding sentences to infer meaning, whereas only a

small minority expressed disagreement. This indicates that learners tend to prioritize maintaining reading flow rather than interrupting comprehension to decode every unknown item. This suggests that the majority of students use a selective attention strategy, concentrating on comprehension in general rather than becoming bogged down in challenging vocabulary. According to Grabe & Stoller (2011) and Carrell (1989), proficient readers place more importance on overall meaning and coherence than on word-by-word translation, a view supported by Wilawan (2022), whose inventory highlights skipping as a typical EFL strategic response. Avoiding frustration and preserving reading flow can be achieved by skipping unfamiliar vocabulary, especially on timed tests like the IELTS. Paribakht and Wesche (1999) and Taghizadeh and Khalili (2019), however, caution that persistently ignoring challenging words may impede vocabulary development and restrict lexical depth. Therefore, even though this technique improves comprehension in the short term, post-reading review should be used in addition to it to help reinforce unfamiliar words that were read.

According to the vast majority of participants, a total of 90% reported they employ scanning strategies to efficiently locate answers and key information. Only a very small proportion disagreed. This demonstrates that nearly all students understand and actively use scanning, a fundamental technique for academic reading assessments such as the IELTS. Finding specific information quickly without reading the entire text is made possible by scanning, which is essential for high-stakes reading tests. Scanning reflects test-wise behavior and strategic competence, as explained by Brown (2007) and Anderson (1991), enabling students to efficiently manage their time. It appears from the preponderance of agreement that scanning has become ingrained in the participants' reading repertoire. However, if students disregard overall comprehension, overuse of this technique could result in superficial understanding. Therefore, combining scanning with inferencing and skimming can result in a more effective and balanced reading strategy.

In the last question, The responses indicate that roughly two-thirds of the participants tend to mark challenging vocabulary for later review, reflecting a metacognitive effort to monitor and regulate their comprehension. Meanwhile, over one-third expressed the opposite preference, suggesting that a substantial portion of students prioritize maintaining reading flow rather than pausing to record difficult items. This suggests that a sizable fraction of students actively track their vocabulary gaps, exhibiting a type of metacognitive awareness related to language acquisition. Self-regulated learning behavior is demonstrated when new words are marked for post-reading study. These metacognitive techniques, according to Oxford (1990) and Zimmerman (2000), assist students in becoming more independent and purposeful in their vocabulary growth. By linking reading to vocabulary learning objectives, this technique promotes long-term retention. Westby (2024) emphasizes the importance of systematically assessing vocabulary breadth and depth to guide learning priorities, while research by Chen and Zhang (2023) demonstrates that deeper lexical knowledge directly supports comprehension in L2 Chinese reading highlighting the general importance of metacognitive vocabulary review across languages.

3.2. Panic Level

A large proportion of students reported experiencing anxiety when encountering many unfamiliar words, with almost 87% expressing agreement and only about 13% expressing disagreement. This overwhelmingly high rate of agreement shows that for many students, lexical unfamiliarity remains a significant cause of reading anxiety. These findings mirror recent evidence showing that vocabulary unfamiliarity strongly triggers L2 reading anxiety and disrupts working memory processing (Barnes et al., 2023; Cécillon et al., 2024; Chow et al., 2021). This is especially true in academic or test-oriented contexts like the IELTS. According to the data, new vocabulary not only poses a language barrier but also elicits an emotional reaction that may impair understanding and focus.

In second language (L2) research, reading anxiety triggered by unfamiliar vocabulary has been widely documented. Previous studies, such as Saito, Garza, and Horwitz (1999), have shown that encountering unknown words can lead to cognitive overload, reducing both motivation and comprehension accuracy. The findings of this study enrich the discussion by demonstrating that reading anxiety remains highly prominent in high-stakes contexts such as the IELTS Reading Test. In particular, participants reported increased anxiety when facing paraphrase-based items and dense academic vocabulary, indicating that anxiety is not merely caused by isolated unknown words but also by the cognitive demands of recognizing lexical variation. This suggests that vocabulary depth not only breadth plays a critical role in shaping anxiety levels during academic reading tasks

This panic illustrates the impact of Krashen's (1982) affective filter, which states that increased anxiety reduces cognitive processing efficiency, which in turn limits input absorption and comprehension. Vocabulary gaps serve as both cognitive and emotional obstacles to successful reading, as evidenced by the high percentage of students in this study reporting panic. If students with a relatively large vocabulary find lexical density overwhelming, they may become anxious. Students' emotional reactions to vocabulary difficulties frequently result from a lack of lexical depth rather than breadth; they may be able to recognize words on the surface but find it difficult to recall their complex meanings in context, which can cause anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. Anxiety not only impairs immediate comprehension but also discourages engagement with challenging texts, limiting long-term vocabulary growth (Westby, 2024; Nation, 2013).

Therefore, pedagogical interventions that balance the cognitive and affective aspects of learning are essential for addressing lexical anxiety. Fear of new words can be lessened with regular exposure to real reading materials, supervised vocabulary enrichment exercises, and practice with strategies like inferencing and selective attention. Regular participation in meaningful reading activities progressively increases lexical resilience and confidence, as suggested by Nation (2013) and Oxford (1990). This allows students to view new vocabulary as an opportunity for learning rather than a cause for fear. Overall, the results show that even though students use a variety of successful reading techniques, the emotional difficulty of new words continues to be a major barrier. Therefore, encouraging emotional control in addition to vocabulary growth may be a crucial first step in developing self-assured, independent readers who can handle lexical challenges in academic settings.

Table 3 shows that a large majority of participants rely on contextual guessing, while a similar proportion often skip sentences containing unfamiliar words. These two strategies appear contradictory but actually reflect a flexible, albeit inconsistent, approach to comprehension management. This relates to RQ2, because strategy choices influence whether learners attribute errors to single-word limitations or global comprehension issues. Students who rely on skipping may lose cohesion and miss key paraphrased information, resulting in errors unrelated to individual vocabulary items but to disrupt global understanding. This aligns with Carrell (1989) and Grabe & Stoller (2011), who argue that skipping can preserve fluency but at the cost of coherence, especially in dense texts like IELTS.

RQ3. What factors do learners perceive as the main sources of difficulty in IELTS Reading?

4. Difficulties & Perceptions about IELTS Reading

TABLE 4/ Difficulties & Perceptions about IELTS Reading

	Statement	Percentage		
		Agree	**Strongly Agree**	**Disagree**
1.	Questions in the form of paraphrases/synonyms (e.g. True/False/Not Given) give me the most difficulty.	46.7% (14)	13.3% (4)	33.3% (10)
2.	I feel that limited vocabulary (breadth) is the main reason I answered the questions incorrectly.	40% (12)	20% (6)	40% (3)
3.	In my opinion, expanding vocabulary is more important than practicing reading strategies.	36.7% (11)	16.7% (5)	40% (12)
4.	I make mistakes more often because I don't understand the overall context of the text than because I don't know the meaning of a single word.	30% (9)	40% (12)	26.7% (8)
5.	Practicing increasing the number of words (wordlists) has been quite helpful in my preparation for IELTS.	33.3% (10)	13.3% (4)	40% (12)

4.1. Perceived Causes of Errors and Level of Difficulty

A clear majority around 60% of respondents identified paraphrased or synonymous question types as the most challenging, while about 40% did not share this view. This pattern suggests that while many students are able to identify synonyms at the lexical level, it is still challenging to apply this ability to comprehension questions that rephrase information in novel ways. IELTS reading sections, which require the ability to interpret paraphrased ideas rather than literal repetitions, are frequently where this kind of difficulty occurs. Finding semantic equivalency between various lexical forms remains a persistent challenge for many EFL learners, as evidenced by the comparatively high percentage of agreement. Read (2004) and Buck (2001) claim that difficulties recognizing paraphrases are a reflection of both limited inferencing abilities and a shallow vocabulary. Studies on vocabulary dimensions, such as Atai & Nikuinezhad (2012), Li & Kirby (2015), Chen & Zhang (2023), and Westby (2024) who reinforce that both breadth and depth, along with syntactic knowledge, significantly predict reading performance. Learners lacking depth knowledge struggle to map semantic relationships between paraphrased expressions. Students may misunderstand important concepts and provide inaccurate

answers on comprehension tests when they are unable to connect synonymous expressions. Understanding paraphrased questions requires vocabulary depth, or the capacity to discern nuanced semantic relationships Qian (2002). This ability differentiates between deep semantic processing and surface-level recognition in high-stakes exams like the IELTS. Therefore, even though they have a sufficient vocabulary breadth, students who lack this ability frequently have lower comprehension accuracy.

A substantial proportion, 60% of the participants acknowledged that many of their incorrect answers resulted from limited vocabulary breadth, while the remaining 40% did not share this view. This balanced split suggests that although vocabulary size is a major contributing factor for most learners, others attribute their errors to different issues such as time pressure or ineffective reading strategies. Nevertheless, the majority agreement reinforces the idea that insufficient lexical knowledge continues to hinder reading comprehension, particularly in tests like IELTS that feature both high-frequency and low-frequency vocabulary items. According to Nation (2001, 2013), reading fluency and global comprehension are directly impacted by vocabulary breadth. Academic texts are difficult for readers who know fewer than 8,000–9,000 word families to understand (Laufer, 2016). As a result, the answers suggest that a large number of participants might still be below this lexical threshold. Schmitt (2014) contends that learners are forced to rely largely on context-based guessing because a narrow vocabulary breadth limits access to meaning at the discourse level. These results demonstrate that in order to decrease comprehension errors caused by lexical gaps, reading-strategy instruction must be combined with systematic vocabulary expansion.

Nearly half of the respondents 70% in total indicated that their reading errors were more often caused by misunderstanding the overall context rather than by misinterpreting individual word meanings. Meanwhile, about 30% disagreed with this view. This implies that a large number of students understand that poor discourse-level processing, not just a lack of vocabulary, is the cause of their comprehension problems. It draws attention to the difficulty of combining meanings at the sentence and paragraph levels to create a cohesive overall interpretation of the text, which is a crucial IELTS reading skill. Grabe and Stoller (2011) stress that creating a mental image of the text's overall meaning is just as important to reading comprehension as lexical access. Excessive attention to individual words can cause learners to lose sight of contextual coherence. Koda (2005) asserts that proficient readers anticipate logical flow and make connections between ideas using top-down strategies, filling in lexical gaps as needed. Thus, the high level of agreement in this item indicates that students are becoming more conscious of the fact that deep comprehension necessitates the integration of linguistic, inferential, and schematic knowledge. Therefore, rather than focusing on word-by-word decoding, instructional strategies should promote contextual reading, discourse mapping, and inferencing practice.

In addition, over half of the respondents, 53.4% overall felt that increasing their vocabulary was more beneficial than practicing reading strategies, while the remaining 46.7% disagreed. This evenly distributed sample shows that although many students see vocabulary development as the cornerstone of comprehension, others think strategy training is just as important. Given that both are essential for proficient reading performance, the results point to a persistent conflict between EFL learners' linguistic and strategic competence. Anderson (1991) and Grabe (2009) contend that the interplay of linguistic knowledge and cognitive strategy use leads to reading success. Merely concentrating on vocabulary without developing a strategy could result in only partial comprehension. On the other hand, strategies are not able to completely make up for a lack of vocabulary. The students' preference for vocabulary expansion reflects awareness of lexical limitations but perhaps underestimates the metacognitive benefits of strategic reading (Oxford, 1990). Pedagogically, balanced instruction that integrates vocabulary enrichment with explicit strategy training such as prediction, inferencing, and summarizing would better prepare learners for complex reading tasks like IELTS. Dong (2019) and Chen (2022) highlight that

anxiety and test pressure can reduce strategy use, leading learners to rely more on vocabulary knowledge, mirroring student perceptions in this survey.

For IELTS preparation, nearly half of the participants (46.6% in total) perceived wordlist use as helpful, while 53.3% did not share this view. This conflicting reaction suggests that although a large number of students view vocabulary lists as helpful resources for increasing their word knowledge, others might view them as inadequate in the absence of contextualized practice. Among students preparing for academic reading tests, rote memorization is still common but not always successful, according to the findings, which also reflect a variety of learning preferences. According to Nation (2001), wordlists can help expand one's vocabulary, especially when it comes to academic terms that are used frequently. However, such memorization frequently falls short of fostering long-term retention or a depth of understanding in the absence of contextual engagement (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Learners develop greater lexical competence when they combine wordlists with real-world reading exercises and collocational awareness (Webb, 2008). Therefore, the conflicting views in this item emphasize how crucial it is for teachers to combine meaning-focused reading with explicit vocabulary study in order to foster both the recognition and effective application of new words.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at how students' perceived difficulty on the IELTS Reading Test related to the breadth and depth of their vocabulary, as well as the impact of test anxiety and coping mechanisms. The results indicate that although the majority of participants had a fairly broad vocabulary, there were still notable gaps in vocabulary depth, especially when it came to identifying paraphrases, collocations, and polysemous words. It was shown that these flaws increased the perception of reading task complexity and contributed to comprehension issues.

Test anxiety also turned out to be a major affective barrier. Many students said they experienced panic when they came across new words, which frequently resulted in maladaptive coping mechanisms like skipping sentences or relying too much on scanning. The degree of lexical depth and emotional control of the students determined how effective contextual guessing and scanning were, despite the fact that they were popular strategies. The results thus confirm that a balanced approach combining cognitive (lexical knowledge and strategy use) and affective (anxiety management) factors is necessary for successful reading comprehension on high-stakes tests such as the IELTS.

In terms of pedagogy, these findings highlight the need to teach vocabulary beyond mere word quantity by fostering deeper lexical comprehension, including collocations, synonym recognition, and contextual meaning inference. Additionally, IELTS preparation programs should integrate metacognitive strategy instruction and anxiety-reduction techniques to strengthen learners' confidence and reading performance.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single learning community, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance the applicability of the results. Moreover, to better understand the causal relationships between vocabulary knowledge, affective factors, and reading outcomes, subsequent studies may employ experimental interventions or inferential statistical approaches.

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