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Reading English Novels as Gateway for Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Novels serve as an accessible and enjoyable medium to enhance linguistic skills, including vocabulary expansion, comprehension, and an understanding of different linguistic expressions. The immersive nature of storytelling captivates readers, allowing them to connect with characters and narratives on an emotional level, which encourages sustained interest in the activity. This paper explores the application of reading English novels as a form of incidental learning. College students ($n = 18$) were purposively sampled through online preliminary screening. The selected participants were interviewed individually about their experiences as English novel readers and how this facilitated vocabulary learning. The findings indicated that reading English novels facilitated incidental vocabulary acquisition among students by exposing them to diverse and contextually rich English language applications. Novels introduced students to a wide range of vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions, descriptive terms, and advanced words often absent from traditional textbooks, enhancing their speaking and writing skills. The contextual richness of narratives allowed students to infer meanings, retain vocabulary longer, and understand words in practical usage. Guessing meanings from context was a prevalent strategy, enabling students to intuitively learn unfamiliar words and reinforce understanding through occasional reference checks. Furthermore, the types of vocabulary acquired included vivid and expressive adjectives, low-frequency conversational terms, and content-specific or academic vocabulary, all of which enriched students' language proficiency, creativity, and academic writing. Future research could examine how different reading methods and task-based activities, such as using digital platforms, online tools and reflective exercises, influence vocabulary retention and application, offering insights into

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optimizing reading strategies for language proficiency development.

Keywords: Creativity; Extensive reading; Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition; Language Proficiency; Vocabulary Learning

1. Introduction

Novels, as a medium for learning, offer numerous benefits, particularly in the context of English language learning. Their rich narratives, unpredictable plots, character development, and unique linguistic features engage learners and sustain their interest in reading until the story concludes. Through novels, students can experience the emotions conveyed by characters, which enhances their overall engagement.

Novels significantly contribute to language skill development. As writing models, they demonstrate proper sentence construction and grammatical structure, while careful reading of novels aids in understanding plotlines, context, character roles, and historical or cultural backgrounds^[1-3]. Reading novels has also been shown to improve vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and familiarity with linguistic forms, enhancing students' ability to explore different communication styles. Reading aloud from novels further refines pronunciation and listening skills, as learners practice unfamiliar phrases^[2].

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing emphasis on research related to second language vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is widely regarded as the essential element in learning a second language, serving as the starting point for learners to build proficiency^[4, 5]. Consequently, its significance is closely associated with the initial stages of language acquisition. Researchers have extensively debated effective strategies for vocabulary learning, primarily focusing on two approaches: incidental learning and intentional learning^[6, 7].

A central debate in second language vocabulary acquisition concerns the effectiveness of intentional versus incidental learning approaches^[7]. Intentional learning involves structured, planned activities aimed at memorizing vocabulary, such as word substitution, quizzes, and puzzles, which often prioritize memorization over cognitive engagement^[8, 9]. While this method can result in faster vocabulary acquisition and retention^[10], its effectiveness is limited if learners fail to associate words with broader linguistic contexts or forms^[8]. In contrast, incidental vocabulary learning

occurs as a byproduct of other activities, such as reading or supplementary exercises^[9]. This approach enables learners to acquire new words subconsciously, focusing on the overall meaning of the text rather than isolated vocabulary^[7]. Repeated exposure to words within meaningful contexts enhances long-term retention and cognitive processing, promoting deeper engagement and recall^[11].

However, explicitly teaching all vocabulary items in an educational setting may be a challenging and labor-intensive task^[12]. Hence, this paper focused on the idea of incidental vocabulary learning when college students read English novels during their leisure time. Incidental vocabulary learning is a process by which learners infer the meaning of unfamiliar words through contextual clues^[6]. This approach involves acquiring knowledge unintentionally while engaging in another primary task. According to Richards and Schmidt^[13], this occurs when learners are exposed to input-rich environments over extended periods, leading to extensive and more frequent vocabulary acquisition. Studies have highlighted that encountering new words within meaningful contexts significantly enhances learners' vocabulary knowledge^[14].

Engaging in extensive reading allows learners to encounter new words in different contexts, reinforcing comprehension and retention through repeated exposure and contextual inference. In addition, novels present language structures, idiomatic expressions, and genre-specific terminology that enhance both receptive and productive language skills. The quality of reading also promotes deeper cognitive engagement, developing an intuitive understanding of word meanings and usage. Lastly, incidental learning through novels may contribute to improved fluency, as exposure to varied linguistic patterns strengthens both written and spoken communication.

2. Literature Review

Incidental vocabulary acquisition serves as an alternative to the more widely recognized method of intentional vocabulary learning, which necessitates deliberate effort and focused attention on the task at hand^[15]. According to Al-

dukhayel^[16], incidental vocabulary acquisition is characterized by the learning of vocabulary through engaging with meaningful content, such as reading or listening, without consciously focusing on specific vocabulary items. In this context, incidental learning refers to the process of acquiring new words unintentionally, often as a byproduct of routine activities such as reading, engaging in conversations, watching media, or listening to music. Studies have highlighted that incidental learning significantly contributes to the vocabulary development of second language learners^[16]. Consequently, it is imperative for educators to integrate strategies that promote incidental vocabulary acquisition within classroom practices to enhance language learning outcomes^[17, 18].

Yamashita^[19] believed in the role of sufficient linguistic input in second language learning, arguing that extensive reading provides a rich and pedagogically beneficial learning environment. Learners engaging in extensive reading can experience significant advancements in different aspects of language competence. Extensive reading can influence vocabulary development and learners' attitudes toward reading^[20]. Vocabulary breadth is a key determinant of proficiency in several language skills, while encouraging a positive attitude toward reading motivates learners to pursue autonomous, informal extensive reading beyond the classroom setting^[21].

Schmidt^[22] emphasizes the necessity of attention to input for explicit learning and posits that it may also suffice for implicit learning. Ellis^[23] highlights unresolved questions in implicit and explicit learning, including which grammar and vocabulary aspects can be acquired implicitly, the modularity of implicit learning, the mechanisms of explicit learning, sensitive periods for implicit acquisition, and their neural underpinnings. Ellis^[24] asserts that the perceptual and motor features of vocabulary—such as phonetic, phonological, and articulation aspects—are acquired implicitly through frequent exposure and practice. Conversely, learning word meanings requires explicit, conscious processing at semantic and conceptual levels, focusing on form-meaning associations^[23, 24]. Proficient learners employ advanced metacognitive strategies, including contextual inference and semantic or imagery-based mediation, to facilitate vocabulary acquisition^[25–27].

It is widely acknowledged that native speakers acquire a significant portion of their vocabulary through contextual exposure. In the early stages, children learning their first language predominantly gain vocabulary through verbal in-

teractions^[28]. Theoretical studies have demonstrated notable vocabulary gains resulting from reading activities^[29, 30]. This evidence led Nation and Meara^[31] to conclude that “learning incidentally through listening and reading accounts for most first language vocabulary learning.”

In second language learning, several studies highlight that incidental vocabulary learning promotes deeper cognitive processing and enhances long-term retention^[8, 32, 33]. According to Hulstijn and Laufer^[32], the vocabulary encountered during incidental learning is more likely to be stored in long-term memory, enabling learners to confidently use these words in various contexts. Furthermore, Ponniah^[11] observed that first-year undergraduate students who engaged in incidental vocabulary acquisition outperformed their peers who learned vocabulary through intentional methods. Ponniah^[11] elaborates that each time learners encounter an unfamiliar word, they acquire at least a partial understanding of its meaning^[7]. With repeated exposure, this process can lead to substantial vocabulary growth^[34].

Interestingly, second language learners tend to assimilate new vocabulary when they concentrate on the overall meaning of the text, rather than focusing explicitly on unfamiliar words. Since this process occurs subconsciously, learners often remain unaware of their vocabulary acquisition during reading^[7]. Hence, this paper examined how incidental learning in English novels can serve as an effective mechanism for vocabulary acquisition and overall language development. The study investigated the extent to which repeated exposure to vocabulary in authentic literary contexts facilitates deeper cognitive engagement and long-term retention. It also explored how the immersive experience of reading novels, which often involves rich and varied linguistic input^[35], supports not only vocabulary growth but also comprehension and critical thinking skills.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study explored the experiences of college students who read English novels and how this became the gateway for incidental vocabulary acquisition. Exploratory research, frequently employed to examine phenomena characterized by limited empirical understanding, is an effective design for preliminary concepts^[36, 37]. This research paradigm helps

address emerging or underexplored topics, leveraging adaptable, non-restrictive methods that ensure an impartial and comprehensive investigation of narratives^[38]. Exploratory inquiries in social sciences systematically delineate underlying patterns and salient elements that elucidate sociocultural and psychological phenomena^[39]. A distinct attribute of this approach lies in its inherent flexibility, which accommodates the development of adaptive methods in response to dynamic and evolving datasets—a quality necessary for investigating concepts that have received minimal prior academic attention^[40]. Despite critiques regarding potential constraints in methodological rigor, the contributions of exploratory studies to the advancement of conceptual frameworks and hypothesis generation remain substantial^[41]. These investigations not only serve as precursors to more systematic empirical studies but also provide a scaffolding for future research trajectories, which then enrich the academic discourse and shape subsequent inquiry^[42, 43]. This paper answered one essential question in language learning: how reading English novels during leisure time becomes an opportunity for incidental vocabulary acquisition. Conceptually, engaging in activities like reading novels, learners encounter vocabulary in real-life contexts, facilitating comprehension and retention through repeated exposure and contextual inference.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

Participant selection in exploratory research is a crucial step aimed at obtaining qualitative data that redefine

broad concepts into specific, actionable themes^[40]. Unlike large-scale studies aimed at statistical generalization, exploratory research often prioritizes depth of understanding by employing small, intentionally screened samples^[44, 45]. In qualitative paradigms such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry, sample sizes typically range from one to 20 participants, reflecting the focus on capturing detailed, context-specific insights rather than generating population-wide conclusions^[46]. Purposive sampling, a predominant approach in qualitative inquiry, is particularly well-suited for exploratory research due to its deliberate and adaptable nature^[47]. This non-probability sampling technique enables researchers to select participants based on predefined criteria that align with the objectives, ensuring the relevance and richness of the collected data^[45].

College students reading English novels were selected through online purposive sampling^[48] to gather preliminary data about their demographics and experiences. Open-ended questions were administered through Google Forms to collect detailed information from the participants. There were three major sampling characteristics used: (1) currently enrolled in Academic Year 2024—2025, (2) read English novels as leisure (>3 hours per week), (3) write English essays, stories, or journals, (4) demonstrate consistent academic engagement in language-related subjects, and (5) have prior experience with reflective or analytical reading practices. Out of 178 college students who responded to the sampling, only 18 were selected to be interviewed. **Table 1** presents the summary of information collected from the participants.

Table 1. Information from sampled participants.

| Name | Sex | Age | Preferred Novel Genre | Weekly Hours Spent Reading | Experience in Writing English Essays/Stories/Journals |
|--------|--------|-----|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alex | Male | 20 | Fantasy | 5 | Regularly writes essays for class and personal journals |
| Beth | Female | 22 | Romance | 7 | Writes short stories and personal reflections |
| Carl | Male | 21 | Thriller | 4 | Writes essays and journals for academic purposes |
| Diana | Female | 23 | Historical Fiction | 6 | Frequently writes stories for creative writing class |
| Eric | Male | 19 | Science Fiction | 8 | Writes academic essays and stories |
| Fiona | Female | 20 | Mystery | 5 | Writes personal journals and essays for class |
| Greg | Male | 22 | Fantasy | 9 | Writes essays and short stories |
| Hannah | Female | 21 | Romance | 6 | Writes essays and occasionally journals |
| Ian | Male | 23 | Adventure | 4 | Regularly writes personal stories and essays |
| Jenny | Female | 20 | Mystery | 7 | Writes essays for class and short stories |
| Kevin | Male | 22 | Historical Fiction | 6 | Writes journals and academic essays |
| Laura | Female | 19 | Thriller | 5 | Writes short stories and reflective essays |
| Mark | Male | 21 | Fantasy | 8 | Writes stories and academic essays |
| Nancy | Female | 20 | Romance | 6 | Writes essays and personal journals |
| Oliver | Male | 23 | Science Fiction | 5 | Writes academic essays and creative stories |
| Paula | Female | 21 | Adventure | 4 | Writes essays and personal stories |
| Quinn | Male | 22 | Thriller | 6 | Writes stories and essays for both academic and personal use |
| Rose | Female | 19 | Mystery | 7 | Regularly writes essays and personal journals |

3.3. Instrumentation

This study meticulously developed an interview guide intended to elicit comprehensive responses from the participants. The process of designing a semi-structured interview guide began with a thorough understanding of the research objectives and contextual knowledge, which served as the foundation for formulating the initial questions^[49, 50]. Semi-structured questions were designed to encourage participants to share narratives that reflected their personal experiences and perspectives. This design facilitated the acquisition of rich, detailed responses, reflecting the thematic goals of the study^[51]. The semi-structured questions provided structure and flexibility in the inquiry, ensuring that essential topics were addressed while also allowing the interviewer to adapt

to the flow of conversation. This approach enabled the probing of emergent themes and the clarification of ambiguous responses^[52]. This flexibility proved essential in capturing in-depth insights that may have otherwise remained unexplored in more rigid interview formats. A pilot phase was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness of the questions in eliciting unbiased and meaningful responses^[53]. Furthermore, expert validation was sought to enhance the guide’s coherence, ensuring its alignment with both theoretical frameworks and methodological standards, which strengthened its rigor and applicability^[49]. After examination and validation, final guide questions (**Table 2**) were developed to elicit the interview responses from participants.

Table 2. Information from sampled participants.

| Objectives | Interview Questions |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To investigate how reading English novels facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition among learners. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe your experience with reading English novels? How do you think this has helped you learn new vocabulary without actively studying it? 2. When reading English novels, do you often encounter unfamiliar words? How do you typically figure out their meanings, and do you think this helps with your vocabulary acquisition? 3. In your opinion, how does reading novels in English compare to other methods (like studying word lists) in helping you acquire new vocabulary? |
| To analyze the types of vocabulary commonly acquired through reading English novels and their relevance to learners’ language proficiency. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What types of words do you find yourself learning most often when reading English novels? Are they mostly common words, academic terms, or more specialized vocabulary? 2. Do you notice any patterns in the types of vocabulary that appear in the novels you read? For example, do certain genres introduce specific types of vocabulary more frequently? 3. How do the new words you acquire from reading novels contribute to your overall language proficiency, especially in terms of speaking, writing, or understanding academic content? |

3.4. Data Collection

In interviews, the primary goal was to create an environment that encouraged open dialogue, where participants felt encouraged to share their personal experiences and perspectives openly^[54, 55]. This was achieved through one-on-one interviews, which developed a conversational tone that promoted natural expression, alleviating the constraints of formal communication^[56]. The interview guide typically contained thematic questions addressing the core areas of inquiry while also leaving room for follow-up questions to explore participants’ responses^[57]. This structure enabled the interviewer to maintain focus on key topics while adapting to changes in the conversation, ensuring that critical insights were not overlooked^[58]. During the interview, participants

were fully informed about the study’s purpose, ethical considerations, confidentiality measures, and the intended use of their data^[54, 59]. To preserve the integrity of the data, three key principles were adhered to: maintaining the natural flow of participants’ narratives without unnecessary interruptions, establishing positive interaction to encourage a comfortable and trusting environment, and minimizing interviewer bias to ensure the authenticity of responses^[60]. With this approach, researchers highlighted the value of participants’ experiences, which in turn encouraged comprehensive and reflective responses. Probing and reflective questioning techniques were employed to enrich the narrative data, prompting participants to explore ideas, articulate implicit meanings, and reflect on their experiences^[61, 62]. With the consent of participants, the

interviewer recorded notes, codes, and preliminary themes in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, while also capturing the entire conversation using a phone recorder.

3.5. Data Analysis

Narratives from one-on-one interviews were the primary data in this study. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the narratives, contextualize the codes, and develop themes. Reflexive thematic analysis is a rigorous and sophisticated qualitative method employed to interpret patterns of meaning within narrative data, particularly within the context of exploring lived experiences^[63]. This method extends beyond mere superficial categorization, as it aims to illuminate shared meanings and provide deeper, more conceptual insights^[64]. The inherent dynamic and flexible nature of the approach facilitated the progressive evolution of codes as the researcher attained an increasingly profound understanding of the data^[65]. Reflexivity, a fundamental tenet of this method, encouraged researchers to critically examine how their own values, personal experiences, and underlying assumptions influenced the analytic process^[66]. This recognition of subjectivity, when actively and reflexively managed, was not regarded as a limitation but rather as a valuable resource that contributed to fortifying the analytic process^[64, 67]. Consequently, the study adopted an inductive, data-driven approach, wherein themes and codes emerged organically from the data, rather than being preconceived or imposed based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Such an approach proved particularly appropriate for exploratory research, wherein the intent was to generate reflective and context-sensitive insights into the perspectives of the participants^[68]. To preserve the integrity of the method, the analysis adhered to the six-phase framework of reflexive thematic analysis (**Figure 1**), as described by Braun and Clarke^[69]. These phases encompassed: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of themes, (4) refinement and review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) the production of the final report. The inductive nature of this approach ensured that the analysis remained firmly grounded in the data itself, allowing themes and patterns to emerge naturally without the imposition of preconceived notions or external influences.

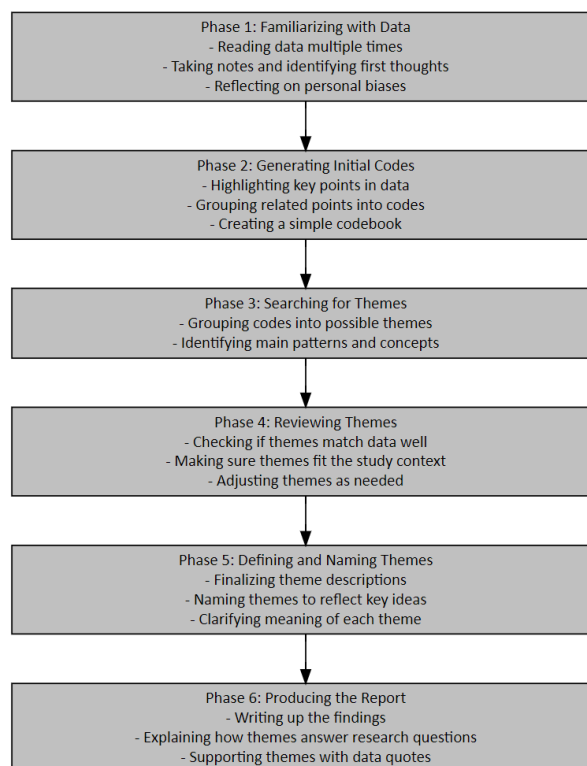


Figure 1. Workflow of reflexive thematic analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Objective 1

Objective 1: To investigate how reading English novels facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition among students.

The findings identified the role of reading English novels in facilitating incidental vocabulary acquisition among students. The analysis revealed three major narrative themes—source, context, and guessing—that illustrated how this approach contributed to vocabulary development. Source emphasized that novels exposed students to a broader range of words, including idioms, expressions, and descriptive terms, often absent in traditional textbooks. This exposure not only enhanced their vocabulary but also improved their speaking and writing skills, enabling more accurate and confident expression. In Context, participants noted that novels provided natural and immersive contexts for learning, where words were associated with emotions, actions, and dialogue. This contextual richness allowed them to infer meanings more effectively and retain vocabulary for longer periods. Lastly, Guessing was a strategy of deriving meanings from contextual clues within the narrative. They noted

that authors often embedded subtle hints in the storyline, enabling them to infer meanings without disrupting the reading flow. This strategy was particularly beneficial for understanding words critical to the comprehension of the text.

(1) Theme 1: Source

For college students, English novels served as a primary source for incidental vocabulary acquisition. Participants emphasized that engaging with novels exposed them to an array of vocabulary that extended beyond the scope of traditional textbooks. For instance, they frequently encountered descriptive terms and words such as ‘serene’ or ‘timid’, which enhanced their linguistic repertoire without appearing excessively formal.

“Reading novels exposes me to a wide range of vocabulary that I wouldn’t encounter in textbooks.”

“I’ve been reading English novels since high school, and it’s been one of the best ways for me to pick up new words.”

“Novels help me discover words that are just a little outside of what I normally use, like ‘serene’ or ‘timid’. They’re not super rare, but they make my language feel richer and more expressive without sounding formal.”

In addition, novels provided opportunities to become more familiar with idiomatic expressions, colloquial phrases, and slang, enriching their understanding of language in authentic contexts. Participants also noted that older novels introduced them to unfamiliar and advanced vocabulary, further contributing to their language development.

“Reading novels has made me more familiar with idioms, expressions, and even slang.”

“I often come across unfamiliar words, especially in older or more complex novels.”

Although novels were not perceived as focused tools for achieving specific vocabulary goals, they were described as highly effective for natural and contextualized learning. This immersive exposure was particularly valuable for improving participants’ speaking and writing skills, enabling them to articulate thoughts with greater precision and confidence. Generally, the use of novels as a learning medium significantly contributed to their linguistic growth, offering

both breadth and depth in vocabulary acquisition.

“Since I enjoy reading fantasy and adventure novels, I’ve picked up so much descriptive vocabulary.”

“Novels are great for learning how words are used in real life, but they’re not as focused as word lists when it comes to specific goals.”

“Learning new words from novels has improved my speaking skills. I can express myself more precisely and confidently in writing because I have a broader vocabulary to draw from.”

(2) Theme 2: Context

College students believed that encountering words in context significantly facilitated participants’ understanding of their meanings and real-life applications. Participants highlighted that contextual exposure to vocabulary in novels allowed for a natural and passive learning process, wherein learning often occurred subconsciously.

“When you see words in context, it’s easier to guess their meanings and understand how they’re used in real-life situations. I don’t even realize I’m learning—it just happens naturally.”

“I noticed how people talk differently in different situations, like formal versus casual. It’s like a passive way of learning, but it sticks with me longer because it’s interesting.”

It was observed that novels provided diverse linguistic contexts, enabling participants to discern differences between formal and casual expressions. For example, conversational elements in novels exposed them to phrases such as “hit the nail on the head” for informal scenarios and “in light of recent events” for formal situations. This dialogue-rich environment enhanced their ability to understand context-specific language use.

“Novels often include conversations between characters, which is a great way to see how people use language differently in various contexts. For instance, I’ve learned casual phrases like ‘hit the nail on the head’ and more for-

mal expressions like ‘in light of recent events’ through dialogue.”

Furthermore, participants described novels as dynamic and engaging learning tools, where vocabulary was embedded within emotions, actions, and narratives. This immersive experience created a mental visualization like a “movie”, which solidified their understanding of words. In contrast, word lists, while useful for memorization, were perceived as limited in demonstrating how words functioned across varied contexts.

“Reading novels feels much more natural and engaging than studying word lists. In a novel, words come alive because they’re used in context, surrounded by emotions, actions, and dialogue.”

“When I read novels, I can picture the scenes and characters, which helps me understand how words fit into different contexts. It’s like creating a mental movie, and the vocabulary becomes part of that world. Word lists don’t give me that visual connection.”

“Word lists are great for quick memorization, but they often fail to show how words behave in different contexts. In novels, you see how a word can change its meaning slightly based on tone, setting, or the characters’ intentions. That versatility is something you can’t get from a list.”

Notably, the participants valued the versatility of vocabulary presented in novels, as the meaning of words often shifted subtly depending on tone, setting, or intent. This richness in context provided a depth of learning that surpassed traditional memorization techniques, encouraging a comprehensive understanding of language use.

(3) Theme 3: Guessing

Narratives indicated that guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context was a prevalent strategy among participants. This approach was deemed effective because authors frequently incorporated subtle contextual clues through elements such as characters’ actions, settings, and tone. These contextual hints facilitated an intuitive understanding of new vocabulary.

“My go-to method is to guess the meaning from the context.”

“Guessing the meaning from context is my main strategy too. I think it works well because authors often provide subtle clues through the characters’ actions, the setting, or the tone.”

Participants expressed that their primary method of learning unfamiliar words involved making educated guesses based on the surrounding context. In instances where a word appeared essential to comprehending the narrative, they opted to consult external resources to confirm its meaning. This combination of contextual deduction and targeted reference reinforced vocabulary acquisition.

“If the word seems crucial to understanding the story, I’ll look it up. This method helps me learn new vocabulary naturally, as I tend to remember words better when I see how they’re used in a sentence.”

Words encountered and interpreted within sentences were more likely to be retained, as the process of guessing and verifying meanings enhanced both memory retention and comprehension of the word’s practical application.

4.2. Objective 2

Objective 2: To analyze the types of vocabulary commonly acquired through reading English novels and their relevance to students’ language proficiency.

The analysis demonstrated that the types of vocabulary acquired through reading English novels involved a broad range of expressive, low-frequency, and content-specific terms, each contributing uniquely to the development of students’ *language proficiency*. College students reported acquiring vivid and precise adjectives through novels. These terms were often associated with *descriptive* and *sensory experiences* within the narrative, enhancing their retention. It was observed that exposure to *emotive* and *visually evocative language* significantly enriched participants’ ability to write more expressively in creative and academic contexts. The *low-frequency vocabulary* highlighted participants’ tendency to acquire uncommon but conversational terms. While not academic or technical, these words were considered valuable for *enhancing everyday communication* and adding speci-

ficity to language use. The *content/academic vocabulary* emphasized the influence of specific genres, particularly science fiction and classics, in introducing technical and formal terms. Participants noted that science fiction exposed them to *specialized and futuristic terminology*, which encouraged an interest in scientific and technological concepts. Similarly, classic literature and formal-toned novels introduced *academic-sounding vocabulary*, which was deemed instrumental in improving participants' *academic writing* and comprehension of scholarly texts.

(1) Theme 1: Expressive

College students reported that they had acquired *vivid* and *precise adjectives* through reading stories rather than dictionaries. They expressed how this experience had enhanced their *ability to write more expressively*. For instance, they had learned words from classic literature, where the *context of the narrative* made the vocabulary easier to recall.

“Words like ‘ominous’, ‘ethereal’, and ‘resilient’ came to me through stories rather than a dictionary. It’s amazing how this also makes my own writing more expressive.”

“For example, I learned words like ‘melancholy’ and ‘quaint’ while reading classics like *Pride and Prejudice*. The context of the story makes it easier to remember the words later.”

They emphasized that novels, rich in *descriptive language and emotional depth*, made the vocabulary more memorable. Words tied to *vivid scenes or characters* were particularly impactful compared to those encountered in textbook lists. College students noted that descriptive and sensory words had significantly improved their creative writing, allowing them to *express ideas more vividly*.

“Novels are filled with descriptive language and emotional depth, which makes the vocabulary stick in my mind. Words like ‘serene’ or ‘tumultuous’ are much more memorable when they’re tied to vivid scenes or characters, compared to seeing them in a textbook list.”

“I often learn descriptive and sensory words like ‘ethereal’, ‘clamorous’, or ‘opalescent’. These words are great for creative writing and help me express myself more vividly.”

Furthermore, they shared how exposure to *evocative and imaginative language* in novels enabled them to create *vivid mental imagery*, particularly in crafting short stories or poetry. They believed that novels had contributed to their ability to use *engaging and dynamic vocabulary* in essays and creative outputs.

“I love picking up words like ‘luminous’, ‘torrid’, or ‘verdant’. These words help me paint vivid mental pictures, especially when I’m writing short stories or poetry.”

“Novels have taught me vivid and precise adjectives like ‘serene’, ‘chaotic’, or ‘ominous’. Using these in my essays and creative writing makes my descriptions more engaging.”

(2) Theme 2: Content/Academic

College students indicated that science fiction novels had introduced them to *technical and futuristic terms*, which were often related to technology and science. They noted that such vocabulary made the *futuristic worlds* in these novels *feel plausible and scientifically grounded*. This genre had not only sparked their interest in scientific concepts but also expanded their understanding of specialized terminology.

“Science fiction introduces me to technical and futuristic terms, like ‘terraforming’, ‘cyborg’, or ‘quantum’. These words often relate to technology and science, which is one of the reasons I love the genre.”

“Science fiction often uses terms like ‘nanotechnology’, ‘hyperdrive’, or ‘cryogenics’. These words make the futuristic worlds feel plausible and grounded in science.”

“Some of the advanced or formal vocabulary I pick up from novels often shows up in academic readings or lectures.”

In addition, college students shared that *advanced and formal vocabulary* acquired from novels frequently appeared in academic readings or lectures. Classic literature and novels with a *formal tone* were highlighted as significant sources of *academic-sounding words*. Encountering such vocabulary in *context* helped participants grasp their appropriate usage, enhancing their academic writing skills.

“When I read classic novels or books with a formal tone, I often encounter academic-sounding words, like ‘perfunctory’ or ‘ubiquitous’. These words help me in essays and academic writing, so I try to remember them.”

“Novels help me see how academic-sounding words are used in context. For example, I learned how to use ‘ephemeral’ and ‘insipid’ appropriately by reading them in classic literature.”

(3) Theme 3: Low-frequency

Participants reported that they *mostly acquired slightly uncommon* but still *conversational words* they had not previously noticed, such as “wistful” or “quaint”. These words were not considered *academic or technical terms*, but they were seen as valuable for adding *depth to writing* and *communication*.

“I mostly pick up slightly uncommon but still conversational words that I hadn’t noticed before, like ‘wistful’ or ‘quaint’. These aren’t academic or technical terms, but they add a lot of depth to my vocabulary for everyday use.”

“Through novels, I often learned words that were uncommon in daily speech, but which were still valuable for enhancing my communication.”

Some of the *less frequent words* they encountered were subtle yet contributed a certain *richness to their vocabulary*. While these words were not technical in nature, they allowed participants to make their language *more descriptive* and *refined* in casual conversations. Despite not being commonly used, these *low-frequency words* were recognized for *enriching the ability* to express ideas more *creatively* and *vividly* in informal contexts, making conversations more *engaging*.

“Some of the less frequent words I encountered in novels were subtle but added a certain richness to my vocabulary. Even though they weren’t technical terms, they made my language sound more descriptive and refined in casual conversation.”

“These low-frequency words, though not commonly used, enriched my ability to express

myself more creatively and vividly in informal contexts, making my conversations more engaging.”

5. Discussion

Incidental vocabulary acquisition has been a key focus in second language vocabulary research^[70–72]. Defining incidental learning is challenging, with two primary interpretations: (a) a methodological perspective where vocabulary is acquired without explicit awareness of a test, and (b) a pedagogical perspective where it occurs as a by-product of meaning-focused activities^[73]. This paper describes incidental vocabulary learning as a process in which individuals acquire new words unintentionally through exposure to language in context (like reading novels), rather than through direct instruction.

Since about two-thirds of intentionally learned vocabulary is prone to forgetting^[73], relying solely on deliberate learning methods (e.g., flashcards) is insufficient^[74]. Just as much of first language vocabulary is acquired incidentally, second language vocabulary can be expanded through exposure to meaningful input^[75]. By reading, listening to, or viewing substantial second language content, learners encounter unfamiliar words and gradually build word knowledge, including form–meaning associations and collocations^[76].

This paper observes that incidental vocabulary learning occurs during the reading of English novels when students encounter new words, interpret context-specific vocabulary, and engage in guessing the meanings of unfamiliar terms. Research has demonstrated that both first language and second-language learners can acquire vocabulary incidentally through reading^[9, 77–79]. However, its role in second language learning is debated, with some arguing that explicit learning plays a greater role^[80]. Despite this, scholars agree on the importance of encouraging incidental learning in second language contexts^[80]. This paper asserts that for incidental vocabulary learning to be effective, there must be extensive interaction between the reading materials, the cognitive processes of the learner, and reflective thinking. When learners engage deeply with the text, they not only encounter new words but also activate cognitive strategies such as inference, prediction, and contextual analysis.

Early studies have focused on incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading, recognizing its critical role in language learning^[81, 82]. Theoretically, Krashen^[83] argues that a significant portion of vocabulary is acquired through extensive reading, with learners naturally absorbing the necessary vocabulary as they engage in intensive reading activities. Among the readers of English novels, this paper observed that learning vocabulary in novels exposes them to words that are often more descriptive, idiomatic, and colloquial, extending beyond the more formal and limited vocabulary found in textbooks. In addition, it has been established that reading benefits more than just the association of word structure and meaning as it also facilitates the development of multiple aspects of word knowledge^[87]. Encountering words in sentences, where they are surrounded by clues about their meaning—such as actions, emotions, or tone—allows learners to deduce their definitions intuitively. This process, often passive and subconscious, helps learners to retain words more effectively as they are linked to meaningful experiences within the narrative. This supports why exposure to new words through reading can enhance learners' understanding of vocabulary across various contexts and forms^[85–87].

Further, the cognitive processes associated with reading text, involving activities such as decoding, comprehension, and inference-making, have been a prominent focus within the field of cognitive psychology^[85]. Process-dominant models of reading comprehension focus on the cognitive processes and mental representations involved in extracting meaning from text^[86]. College students reported that the immersive context provided by novels helps them make inferences about word meanings and enhances retention, demonstrating the critical role of context in comprehension. Similarly, the guessing strategy, which involves deriving the meaning of unfamiliar words from contextual clues within the narrative, aligns with cognitive models that emphasize active engagement in the learning process. Recent studies also supported this explaining that reading comprehension entails two interconnected skills: the ability to decode symbols by recognizing words in the text and the capacity to comprehend the language by interpreting the meaning of individual words and sentences^[88, 89]. For instance, terms such as 'ominous', 'ethereal', and 'resilient' were frequently cited by students as words they learned from novels, with the narrative context making the words easier to remember

and apply in their own writing. Students identified how exposure to descriptive and sensory language within novels improved their creative writing skills. They emphasized that novels, filled with evocative language and emotional depth, made vocabulary acquisition more engaging and memorable compared to conventional word lists.

Scholars conducted a literature review addressing the concerns, advancements, and potential future directions of incidental second language vocabulary acquisition through reading^[90]. There were several key factors that influence the extent of vocabulary acquired incidentally during reading. These factors include the quality and quantity of processing, the mode of input, the richness of context, lexical coverage, reading proficiency, text comprehension, input enhancement, and the type of task learners are required to perform—whether it involves reading alone or reading followed by the completion of a subsequent task^[91–93]. The exposure to context-rich narratives aligns with the notion that vocabulary acquisition is enhanced when students process text both deeply and repeatedly. The acquisition of vivid, low-frequency, and content-specific terms through novel reading is influenced by key factors such as reading proficiency, lexical coverage, and text comprehension. These factors are essential in shaping the degree to which students can retain and use new vocabulary in various contexts. Reading proficiency determines how effectively students decode and process new words, while lexical coverage—the proportion of known words in a text—affects their ability to infer meanings from context.

Nevertheless, future studies could further explore the extent to which students' competence in English vocabulary is influenced by their exposure to English novels, particularly in both traditional and technology-based reading settings. While this study highlighted the benefits of reading novels in more formal classroom contexts, the increasing prevalence of digital and technology-based reading platforms presents an opportunity to investigate whether the modality of reading (e.g., e-books, audiobooks, or online articles) has any significant impact on vocabulary acquisition. In addition, considering the influence of students' reading proficiency and the type of task involved, future studies could investigate whether specific tasks—such as task-based reading activities or reflective writing exercises—enhance vocabulary retention and application. For instance, students who engage in

reading followed by summarizing or discussing the content may show greater vocabulary acquisition due to the additional cognitive engagement required during post-reading tasks.

6. Conclusion

The study explored how reading English novels contributed to incidental vocabulary acquisition and its relevance to students' language proficiency. English novels could help in expanding students' vocabulary through exposure to different words, including expressive, low-frequency, and content-specific terms. Students reported acquiring vivid adjectives, colloquial expressions, and technical vocabulary, particularly from genres such as science fiction and classic literature. The study identified three key themes: Source, where novels introduced a wider range of vocabulary compared to textbooks, enhancing speaking and writing skills; Context, where words were learned in immersive, natural settings that allowed students to understand their meanings subconsciously; and Guessing, where students inferred meanings from contextual clues, reinforcing long-term retention. Novels also facilitated students' ability to understand the practical application of vocabulary, with descriptive language enriching creative writing and formal vocabulary improving academic writing. Generally, the findings suggested that reading novels contributes significantly to both expressive and academic language development in students.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size may limit the statistical power and the generalizability of the findings to a broader population; thus, future studies should include more diverse participants from various educational backgrounds and proficiency levels. In addition, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias or personal interpretation, highlighting the need for objective assessments such as vocabulary tests or writing samples to more accurately measure vocabulary acquisition. The qualitative nature of the study, while valuable in exploring students' experiences, may also restrict generalizability, suggesting that a mixed-methods approach integrating both qualitative and quantitative data would strengthen validity.

Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on English novels and did not account for the potential impact of other

reading materials, such as academic texts, newspapers, or online content, which may also contribute to incidental vocabulary acquisition. Future research should explore the comparative effectiveness of different text types, examine external factors such as prior English exposure, reading habits, and motivation, and investigate the role of guided reading approaches or classroom interventions. Adopting experimental or longitudinal designs would provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of novel reading on vocabulary growth. Lastly, other linguistic factors, including grammar acquisition and pragmatic competence, should be considered to develop a more comprehensive understanding of language development through novel reading.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality concerns for the participants. However, anonymized data are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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