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Enhancing Students' Reading Comprehension of Descriptive Texts through Realia-Based Activities in a Low-Tech EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension remains one of the most challenging aspects of English language learning for EFL learners, particularly when dealing with descriptive texts that require strong vocabulary knowledge and visualization ability. This study investigated how realia-based activities improved this skill among eighth-grade students at MTs Ma'arif Roudlotut Tholibin, a boarding school in Metro, Lampung, where access to technology was limited. A total of 18 students from Class VIIIA participated in this research during the academic year 2025/2026. The study employed a Classroom Action Research design following the Kurt Lewin model, which was conducted in two cycles with three stages in each cycle: Planning, Action, and Observation and Reflection. Reading comprehension tests and observation sheets were used to collect the data, and the findings were verified through methodological triangulation. The results showed a significant improvement across both cycles. The class mean score increased from 62.56 in the pre-test to 70.22 after Cycle 1, and further improved to 76.33 after Cycle 2, exceeding the passing standard of 74. The percentage of students who achieved the passing score increased from 22.2 percent to 77.8 percent. In addition, student participation improved from 70 percent to 90 percent between cycles. These findings indicated that the use of real objects in the classroom, particularly through an object-first instructional sequence where students observe and interact with realia before reading, was an effective and practical approach to improve students' reading comprehension, particularly in educational settings with limited access to digital resources.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a crucial skill in English language learning, particularly in EFL settings where students have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Without strong reading ability, students often struggle to access new knowledge, develop vocabulary, and engage effectively in academic activities. In such contexts, reading comprehension requires learners to actively construct meaning by connecting textual information with their prior knowledge, which becomes more complex when processed in a foreign language environment (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Snow (2002) further defines reading comprehension as the process of simultaneously extracting and

constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language, emphasizing that it is not a passive but an active cognitive process.

Several theoretical frameworks explain how reading comprehension works. According to Burns, Roe, and Ross (1996), reading comprehension operates at three levels: literal comprehension, which involves identifying information explicitly stated in the text; inferential comprehension, which requires readers to read between the lines and draw conclusions; and critical comprehension, which involves evaluating and analyzing the text. At the junior high school level, literal comprehension and vocabulary knowledge serve as the foundational skills, as students must first be able to identify explicit information before developing higher-order comprehension abilities (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Furthermore, Schema Theory proposed by Grabe and Stoller (2019) emphasizes that comprehension is heavily influenced by prior knowledge, readers who possess relevant background knowledge are better equipped to construct meaning from text.

Among the text types taught in Indonesian junior high schools, descriptive text presents particular challenges for students. This type of text requires learners to form clear mental images of objects, people, or places based on written descriptions. Such a process depends heavily on vocabulary mastery, especially descriptive adjectives, as well as the ability to visualize abstract information (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). When students lack sufficient vocabulary and visualization skills, they often fail to construct meaning effectively. These challenges become more significant in boarding school contexts, where access to digital learning resources such as mobile phones and the internet is limited (Harmer, 2015).

Descriptive text is defined by Anderson and Anderson (1997) as a text that describes a particular person, place, or thing with the purpose of giving readers a clear picture so they can visualize what is being described. It consists of two main structural components: identification, which introduces the subject, and description, which provides detailed physical characteristics (Knapp & Watkins, 2005). The language features of this text type include the use of simple present tense, adjectives and compound adjectives, linking verbs, and attributive processes (Gerot & Wignell, 1994). Students' difficulties with descriptive texts stem from several interconnected challenges: limited adjective vocabulary, inability to visualize objects, difficulty identifying important information, and low motivation during reading activities. Research confirms that vocabulary proficiency serves as a reliable predictor of students' reading performance (Brown, 2004). Without understanding key descriptive vocabulary, students cannot comprehend what objects look like or distinguish between similar items based on written descriptions.

These problems were identified during the researcher's Field Experience Program (PPL) at MTs Ma'arif Roudlotut Tholibin in the academic year 2025/2026. Approximately 65 percent of students in Class VIIIA scored below the minimum achievement criterion of 74 in reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Classroom observation and discussion with the English teacher revealed that students experienced difficulties in identifying explicit information and understanding descriptive vocabulary, which are fundamental components of reading comprehension (Brown, 2004). In addition, students showed low participation and limited engagement during classroom activities. Considering the school context, a boarding school where students are not permitted to bring mobile devices and projectors are rarely available, there is a clear need for an instructional approach that is engaging, practical, and does not rely on technological support (Gebhard, 2006).

Instructional media play a crucial role in facilitating effective learning by helping students understand abstract concepts more easily. According to Smaldino, Lowther, and Russell (2014), instructional media include all tools and resources used to deliver

information and support the learning process. Similarly, Gerlach and Ely (1980) define media as any person, material, or event that establishes conditions enabling learners to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In language learning, the use of appropriate media is essential to enhance students' engagement and comprehension, particularly when learners face difficulties in processing abstract information (Harmer, 2015). Therefore, selecting suitable instructional media becomes an important consideration in designing effective classroom instruction.

One form of instructional media that can effectively support language learning is realia. Realia refers to real and tangible objects used in classroom instruction to facilitate teaching and learning (Gebhard, 2006). Harmer (2015) explains that realia provides direct sensory experience, allowing students to see, touch, and interact with objects, which makes learning more meaningful and memorable. The use of realia is particularly beneficial in teaching descriptive texts, as it helps students visualize the objects being described and understand vocabulary more easily. According to Nation and Newton (2009), realia enhances vocabulary acquisition by connecting words with real-world referents. In addition, realia supports experiential learning, where students learn through direct interaction with their environment (Kolb, 1984). Therefore, realia-based activities offer a practical and effective instructional approach, especially in classrooms with limited access to technology.

Realia, defined as real and tangible objects used in classroom instruction, offers a potential solution to these challenges. The use of real objects helps transform abstract language into concrete experiences, making it easier for students to understand and remember new vocabulary (Gebhard, 2006; Harmer, 2015). This approach is supported by Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986), which suggests that learning becomes more effective when information is processed through both verbal and visual channels simultaneously. When students interact directly with real objects while reading descriptive texts, they can better connect written information with real-world representations, reducing cognitive load and supporting meaning construction (Paivio, 1986).

Among the various types of realia, authentic objects are the most appropriate for instructional use in this study's context. Unlike pictures or symbolic representations, authentic objects allow students to touch, examine, and verify physical attributes described in texts (Harmer, 2015). When students read words such as "smooth," "heavy," or "shiny," they can confirm these attributes directly on the object, reinforcing both vocabulary acquisition and literal comprehension. This direct sensory experience reduces cognitive load during text processing and makes learning more meaningful (Gebhard, 2006). Moreover, authentic objects are practical, low-cost, and require no technological infrastructure, making them ideally suited for boarding school environments where access to digital devices is restricted (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of realia in language learning. Research has shown that realia can improve vocabulary mastery and enhance students' ability to produce descriptive language (Annisa et al., 2022; Celik Korkmaz & Karatepe, 2018; Fahri, 2024; Gobert, 2018; Mungkur, 2023). Studies using visual and concrete media have also demonstrated significant improvement in students' reading comprehension scores compared to conventional instruction (Asrul et al., 2020). However, these studies focused primarily on productive skills such as vocabulary acquisition and writing, leaving a notable gap in research on realia-based instruction specifically targeting reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Moreover, most existing realia studies were conducted in technology-enabled classroom settings, whereas the present study is situated in a low-resource boarding

school where access to digital devices is strictly restricted. This contextual gap underscores the need for a study that examines how realia-based activities can improve reading comprehension in such constrained educational environments.

The novelty of this study lies in three aspects. First, unlike previous studies that used realia primarily for vocabulary mastery and writing skills, this study applies realia-based activities specifically to improve reading comprehension of descriptive texts. Second, this study introduces an object-first instructional sequence, where students observe and interact with real objects before reading the text, as a deliberate modification to activate prior knowledge and reduce cognitive load during text processing. Third, this study is conducted in a boarding school setting with limited access to digital resources, a context that has been largely underrepresented in existing realia-based research. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of realia-based activities in improving students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts among eighth-grade students at MTs Ma'arif Roudlotut Tholibin in the academic year 2025/2026.

This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the use of realia in improving reading comprehension within a low-resource educational setting. It also offers practical implications for English teachers by presenting an innovative, low-cost, and technology-independent instructional strategy that can enhance students' engagement and comprehension in reading activities (Burns, 2010).

II. METHODS

This study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach based on the Kurt Lewin model. CAR was chosen because the goal was not only to measure whether a strategy worked, but also to improve teaching practice in a real classroom through a systematic and reflective process (Burns, 2010). The Kurt Lewin model organizes each cycle into three stages: Planning, Action, and Observation and Reflection. If improvement is insufficient after one cycle, the researcher reflects on what needs to be improved and makes adjustments in the next cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The research took place at MTs Ma'arif Roudlotut Tholibin in North Metro, Lampung, during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were 18 students of Class VIIIA, selected based on preliminary observation which showed that they had low scores in reading comprehension and were identified by the English teacher as the class most in need of intervention. This selection is consistent with the nature of CAR, which focuses on improving learning outcomes in a specific classroom context (Burns, 2010).

The study was conducted in two cycles, each consisting of two meetings. In Cycle 1, the researcher used a backpack as the main realia object and also used objects available in the classroom such as desks, chairs, and students' pencil cases. The texts used described a school bag and a classroom, which matched the objects used. In the first meeting, students took a pre-test consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions and were introduced to realia-based activities, where they read descriptive texts while observing real objects and connecting the description with what they could see. In the second meeting, students worked in groups using different classroom objects and completed comprehension tasks before taking Post-Test 1.

After reflecting on Cycle 1 together with the English teacher, two improvements were made in Cycle 2. First, the activity sequence was changed so that students observed the object before reading the text in order to activate their prior knowledge and vocabulary

(Harmer, 2015). Second, the vocabulary focus was simplified to make it more accessible for students with lower proficiency levels. A pink tumbler was used as the realia in Cycle 2, and the texts described a person. At the end of Cycle 2, students took Post-Test 2.

Two instruments were used for data collection. The first was a reading comprehension test consisting of 20 multiple-choice items, administered as a pre-test, Post-Test 1, and Post-Test 2. The tests were designed to measure students' ability in identifying explicit information and understanding vocabulary in descriptive texts. The second instrument was an observation sheet containing indicators of student engagement and participation during the learning process.

The reading comprehension test specifically measured two micro skills: literal comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, with 12 items assessing literal comprehension and 8 items assessing vocabulary knowledge. Literal comprehension questions required students to identify explicit details directly stated in the texts, such as the color, size, shape, or location of described objects. For example, one sample item read: "Based on the text, what color is the school bag?" with four answer choices. Vocabulary knowledge questions assessed students' understanding of descriptive adjectives and concrete nouns used in the texts, such as identifying the meaning of the word "sturdy" as used in context. Both test sets were validated by the English teacher and the research supervisor prior to administration to ensure alignment with the eighth-grade curriculum and appropriate difficulty levelThe observation sheet contained ten indicators of student activities, including paying attention to the explanation, responding to teacher questions, reading the descriptive text, observing the realia objects, participating in activities, asking and answering questions, working actively, showing interest in learning, and completing the task. Each indicator was assessed using a Yes/No checklist by the English teacher during every meeting in every cycle to document behavioral changes across the intervention period. The observation indicators are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classroom Observation Sheet Indicators

No	Students activities
1.	Students pay attention to the explanation
2.	Students respond to teacher questions
3.	Students read the descriptive text
4.	Students observe the realia objects
5.	Students participate in activities
6.	Students ask questions
7.	Students answer questions
8.	Students work actively
9.	Students show interest in learning
10	Students complete the task

Note: Each indicator was assessed using Yes/No checklist by the English teacher during every meeting.

The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating the mean scores of students' test results and comparing the improvement from pre-test to post-tests. In addition, the number of students who achieved the minimum mastery criterion of 74 was calculated and converted into percentages. Qualitative data obtained from observation sheets and field notes were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns of students' participation and engagement during the implementation of realia-based activities. To ensure the validity of the data, methodological triangulation was applied by cross-checking the results from tests and observation data (Burns, 2010).

The research was considered successful if the class mean score reached or exceeded the minimum mastery criterion of 74 and at least 75% of students achieved this threshold. This criterion was established in coordination with the English teacher based on the school's academic standards. Additionally, positive changes in student engagement and participation, as documented through observation sheets, served as qualitative indicators of successful implementation. The CAR methodology was chosen because it allows the researcher to simultaneously implement instruction and study its effects, making adjustments across cycles based on evidence gathered from each phase (Burns, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This cyclical and reflective design is particularly suited to classroom-based problems where context-specific adaptation is essential for achieving meaningful and measurable improvement.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study showed clear and consistent improvement in students' reading comprehension across both cycles of the intervention. The data from the tests and observation sheets are summarized in Table 2.

In this study, the Minimum Mastery Criterion is referred to as KKTP (Kriteria Ketercapaian Tujuan Pembelajaran), which represents the minimum score that students must achieve to be considered successful in meeting the learning objectives. KKTP is determined based on the school's academic standards and is aligned with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum implemented in Indonesian schools. In this research, the KKTP was set at 74, meaning that students who obtained a score of 74 or higher were categorized as having achieved mastery in reading comprehension.

Table 2. Summary of Test Scores and Observation Results

Assessment	Mean Score	Students Achieving KKTP (>=74)	Obs. Score
Pre-Test	62.56	4 students (22.2%)	-
Post-Test Cycle 1	70.22	6 students (33.3%)	70% (Good)
Post-Test Cycle 2	76.33	14 students (77.8%)	90% (Very Good)
Total Improvement	**13.77**	**10 students (55.6%)**	**20%**

Before the intervention, the class had a mean score of 62.56, and only 4 students (22.2%) reached the minimum mastery criterion of 74. This finding confirmed the initial observation that most students had difficulty identifying specific information and understanding descriptive vocabulary. This condition is consistent with Ramadhianti and

Somba (2023), who reported that Indonesian EFL students often struggle with descriptive vocabulary and literal comprehension when texts are presented without concrete support.

After Cycle 1, the mean score increased to 70.22, with 6 students (33.3%) achieving the passing criterion. The observation score also improved, with an average of 70% (Good). Students began to show greater engagement, particularly when interacting with the real object. Several students attempted to touch and examine the object to verify details mentioned in the text, which supports Harmer's (2015) view that realia promotes meaningful interaction with language. However, some students still showed hesitation in responding and faced difficulties with certain vocabulary items.

Based on the reflection of Cycle 1, two modifications were implemented in Cycle 2. First, the activity sequence was adjusted so that students observed the object before reading the text to activate prior knowledge. Second, the vocabulary load was simplified. These changes led to significant improvement. After Cycle 2, the mean score increased to 76.33, exceeding the minimum criterion, and 14 students (77.8%) achieved the passing score. The observation score also improved to 90% (Very Good), indicating higher participation and engagement. Students became more confident, and classroom interaction increased noticeably.

Despite the overall improvement, four students did not reach the minimum mastery criterion of 74 by the end of Cycle 2. Observation notes indicated that these students demonstrated lower engagement during group activities and appeared hesitant to interact with the realia objects compared to their peers. Field notes also recorded that they frequently left vocabulary items unanswered in the comprehension tasks, suggesting persistent difficulty with descriptive adjectives even after the simplified vocabulary focus implemented in Cycle 2. These students may benefit from additional individualized support, a longer intervention period, or supplementary vocabulary pre-teaching prior to realia-based reading tasks in future cycles.

Discussion

The improvement in students' reading comprehension can be explained through relevant learning theories. The significant increase in students' mean scores indicates that realia-based activities effectively supported students in understanding descriptive texts. This finding aligns with Dual Coding Theory proposed by Paivio (1986), which suggests that learning becomes more effective when verbal and visual information are processed simultaneously. In this study, students were not only reading the text but also directly interacting with real objects, allowing them to connect written descriptions with concrete representations, thereby reducing cognitive load and facilitating comprehension.

Furthermore, the object-first instructional sequence implemented in Cycle 2 played a crucial role in enhancing students' performance. By observing the object before reading the text, students were able to activate their prior knowledge and relevant vocabulary. This supports Schema Theory (Grabe & Stoller, 2019), which emphasizes that comprehension is strongly influenced by background knowledge. When students had prior exposure to the object, they could process the text more efficiently and accurately.

In addition, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research. Asrul et al. (2020) found that the use of visual media significantly improved students' reading comprehension. Similarly, Annisa et al. (2022), Celik Korkmaz and Karatepe (2018), and Mungkur et al. (2023) reported that realia effectively enhanced students' vocabulary mastery, a finding further supported by Gobert (2018). This study extends those findings by

demonstrating that realia-based activities are also effective in improving reading comprehension, particularly in descriptive texts and in low-resource learning environments.

The improvement in student participation documented through observation sheets further supports this explanation. When students could physically interact with realia objects, verify written descriptions against tangible referents, and discuss attributes with peers, they transitioned from passive to active learners. This shift aligns with constructivist learning principles, which posit that knowledge is constructed through active engagement rather than passive reception. The boarding school context of this study, which restricted digital device use, paradoxically supported deeper engagement with realia because students were fully present in the physical learning experience without technological distractions.

In addition, the change in activity sequence played an important role. In Cycle 1, the text-first approach did not sufficiently activate students' prior knowledge. In Cycle 2, observing the object before reading helped students access relevant vocabulary and background knowledge. This finding is in line with schema theory, which emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge in reading comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). The improvement in observation scores further indicates that this strategy enhanced not only comprehension but also student engagement.

The object-first sequence adopted in Cycle 2 has direct practical implications for realia-based reading instruction. When students observe and interact with an object before reading, they build a concrete mental framework that reduces cognitive load during text processing. Key vocabulary becomes anchored to real physical referents, making it more accessible and memorable. This finding suggests that teachers implementing realia in reading instruction should prioritize an object-first approach as a default sequence, particularly for students with limited vocabulary and low prior knowledge of the subjects being described.

These findings are also supported by previous studies. Asrul et al. (2020) found that concrete visual media significantly improved reading comprehension among junior high school students. Similarly, Mungkur et al. (2023) and Annisa et al. (2022) reported that realia effectively improved vocabulary mastery. The effectiveness of realia in improving writing skills on descriptive texts has also been confirmed in several studies in Indonesian EFL contexts. Lamusu (2022) demonstrated through Classroom Action Research that realia media significantly enhanced students' competence in writing descriptive texts, while Sunengko and Afifi (2021) found that eighth-grade students' descriptive writing proficiency improved significantly after realia-based instruction. Sumarsih (2019) further reported that students' mean scores improved from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 and that most students responded positively to realia as a learning medium for descriptive tasks. Additionally, Gultom (2022) demonstrated through Classroom Action Research that reading comprehension of descriptive texts can be significantly improved through systematic instructional intervention across cycles, further validating the CAR methodology applied in this study. In addition, Ilhami et al. (2022) emphasized that effective classroom management and appropriate instructional strategies contribute significantly to students' learning outcomes, which further supports the effectiveness of realia-based activities implemented in this study. This study extends those findings by showing that realia-based activities also improve reading comprehension, particularly in descriptive texts and in low-resource learning environments. This study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of English language teaching. Theoretically, it provides empirical support for Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) and Schema Theory in the context of EFL reading comprehension, demonstrating that combining verbal input with real-world visual experiences enhances students' ability to construct meaning from texts. Practically, this study offers English teachers an effective,

low-cost, and technology-independent instructional strategy through the use of realia-based activities. This approach is particularly beneficial for classrooms with limited access to digital resources, as it promotes active learning, improves student engagement, and enhances reading comprehension without requiring technological support.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrated that realia-based activities significantly improved students' reading comprehension of descriptive texts in Class VIIIA at MTs Ma'arif Roudlotut Tholibin across two cycles of Classroom Action Research. The class mean score surpassed the minimum mastery criterion of 74, and the proportion of students achieving mastery exceeded the 75% success threshold. These outcomes confirm that realia-based instruction, particularly the object-first sequence introduced in Cycle 2, is an effective, low-cost, and technology-independent strategy for EFL reading classrooms, especially in boarding school settings where access to digital resources is restricted. The improvement in student engagement further supports the view that physical interaction with real objects promotes active learning and enhances meaning construction during reading activities.

However, this study has several limitations. The research involved only 18 students in a single class over approximately three weeks, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, four students did not reach the minimum mastery criterion by the end of Cycle 2, suggesting that some learners may require additional individualized support or a longer intervention period.

Based on these findings, three specific recommendations are offered. First, for English teachers, particularly those in low-resource schools, it is recommended to implement an object-first realia sequence as a default approach in reading lessons on descriptive texts, selecting authentic everyday objects that match the text content, and guiding students to observe and describe the object orally before reading. Second, for school administrators, it is recommended to allocate a small budget for a shared set of realia objects for English instruction at the junior high school level, as this represents a low-cost investment with measurable impact on student outcomes. Third, for future researchers, it is recommended to replicate this study with larger and more diverse samples across different text types and grade levels, and to examine the long-term retention of reading comprehension skills developed through realia-based instruction

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