

Lexical Competence and Reading Engagement in Crisis: Teachers' Experiences of Vocabulary-Related Challenges in Reading Comprehension in Lesotho Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Reading comprehension is a key part of English language learning and academic success, chiefly in contexts where English is used as a second language and as a medium of instruction. Crucial to this process is vocabulary knowledge, which allows learners to access and interpret textual meaning. Yet, tenacious challenges in learners' performance in vocabulary-related comprehension tasks continue to increase worries in Lesotho secondary schools. This study explored the challenges teachers meet in teaching vocabulary-related questions in reading comprehension among Grade 11 learners. Directed by the Lexico-Cognitive Reading Empowerment Model (LCREM), the study conceptualises comprehension as the interface between lexical skill, cognitive dispensation, instructional mediation, sociocultural setting, and reader engagement. A qualitative research design, underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, was employed. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected English teachers and analysed thematically. The findings disclose that teachers face challenges like learners' inadequate vocabulary knowledge, difficulties with higher-order comprehension tasks, weak reading engagement, and contextual and instructional limitations. These factors together limit learners' capacity to interpret texts, respond correctly, and exhibit linguistic flexibility. The study concludes that vocabulary should be chief to reading comprehension teaching and that operative teaching needs integrated methods that concurrently advance lexical skill and endorse reading engagement. It underwrites and foregrounds that teachers' perspectives and offerings must be contextually grounded in understanding of vocabulary-related challenges in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: Vocabulary Teaching; Reading Comprehension; Lexical Ability; Teacher Challenges; Reading Engagement; Lesotho Secondary Schools.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension (RC) is commonly documented as a principal factor of language learning and academic success, mainly in ESL settings. It embroils more than the skill to interpret written symbols; instead, it requires learners to vigorously conceptualise meaning, interpret ideas, and engross critically with texts (Alkhudiry, 2018; Oguntade, 2021). Within this process, vocabulary knowledge (VK) is fundamental, since it affords the linguistic groundwork through which meaning is retrieved and exchanged (Babayigit

& Trenkic, 2026; Zeng et al., 2025). Deprived of sufficient VK, learners are incapable to wholly comprehend texts, irrespective of their skill to decrypt or recognise words (Smith et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2025). Given its supremacy, persevering difficulties in RC have extensive implications for learners' academic lines.

In examination-driven situations, where assessment banks greatly on reading-based tasks, such repercussions become even more distinct, as learners are mandated to exhibit not only understanding but also the aptitude to interpret,

analyse, and respond accurately under time constraints (Fischer et al., 2024). It is within this wide-ranging understanding of reading comprehension, as both a cognitive process and an academic need, that its importance in second language education (SLE) must be treasured. Any restrictions in learners' capability to comprehend texts cannot be viewed in seclusion but must be understood as chunk of a broader set of linguistic and educational challenges that impress on general learning results.

Documented literature in second language acquisition (SLA) has steadily proven a robust and mutual relationship between VK and RC. The former enables learners to understand texts, while the latter, in turn, serves as a key mechanism for vocabulary development (Biseko, 2025; McKeown, 2019). This bidirectional relationship submits that vocabulary and reading are not autonomous skills, but rather conjointly underpinning processes that develop concomitantly over time (Corpuz et al., 2024). Likewise, VK itself is multi-dimensional, incorporating both the breadth of vocabulary; the amount of words known, and the depth of vocabulary- the value of understanding of those words, including their meanings, forms, and uses (Magyar et al., 2025). Both dimensions are indispensable for effective comprehension, as learners must not only identify words but also infer their meanings within specific situations.

With regard to the significance of VK as a main constituent of RC, research has historically concentrated more on vocabulary range (breadth) than on VK depth. Vocabulary size has been extensively allied with learners' ability to access and process textual meaning (Oikawa et al., 2026). Conversely, an emergent body of scholarship has defied this emphasis, disputing that VK depth plays an equally, if not more, substantial role in comprehension (Alshafi, 2023; Tong et al., 2023; Nation, 2020). Other scholars contend that profounder lexical awareness enables learners to construe nuanced meanings, engage with figurative language, and apply vocabulary docilely across milieus, thereby facilitating higher-order comprehension processes (Heidari & Aliyar, 2025; Hu et al., 2022). Contrariwise, other scholars uphold that a satisfactorily huge vocabulary base is a necessity for comprehension, as it permits learners to identify a larger amount of words in a text, tumbling processing struggle (Bergström et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2025). The relative contributions of vocabulary size and depth to reading comprehension, still, remain inconclusive. This dearth of clarity is partway attributable to the ways in which these concepts have been conceptualised and measured, and the propensity to examine them in sequestration rather than as interconnected dimensions of vocabulary competence (Quines, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for more integrative approaches that reflect how both vocabulary size and depth interact to influence RC.

In SL contexts, the development of VK is principally fashioned by the quality and extent of learners' experience to the target language. Vocabulary acquisition (VA) ensues through many conduits, including explicit teaching, incidental learning, and the usage of autonomous learning approaches, with reading vastly recognised as a predominantly dominant source of vocabulary development (van den Broek et al., 2022). Through continued engagement with texts, learners meet lexical items in assorted and meaningful contexts, which facilitates not only recognition but also profounder semantic understanding and retention (Wu et al., 2026; Yuile et al., 2026). Such contextualised experience lets learners develop a more nuanced and supple command of vocabulary, empowering them to deduce meaning more successfully while reading. Nevertheless, the efficiency of reading as a machine for vocabulary development is contingent upon numerous critical aspects. Principal among these is the level of learners' engagement with texts, as vigorous and continual interaction with reading materials augments opportunities for VA (Alfaleh et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2025). As well, the disposal of suitable, level-specific reading resources and the incidence of effective teaching support play a momentous role in mediating this process (Ndijuye et al., 2025). Without these conditions, learners' experience to language remains inadequate, thus limiting vocabulary development and, by extension, their aptitude to comprehend texts efficiently. Notwithstanding the documented importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension, many learners in ESL settings continue to experience insistent problems in understanding texts. These hitches are habitually ascribed to limited vocabulary knowledge, which restricts learners' ability to access meaning, interpret complex ideas, and respond efficiently to comprehension tasks (Liswaniso & Pretorius, 2025; Molwantoa et al., 2025). Specifically, learners struggle with tasks that entail higher-order thinking, like inference, paraphrasing, and interpretation of the writer's use of language, all of which mandate a high level of lexical skill (Jaramillo et al., 2025).

Within the Lesotho context, English occupies a central and influential role as both a subject and the primary medium of instruction (MoI) in secondary education. This twofold function places English not only as a subject to be learned but also as the linguistic truck through which knowledge in other subjects is retrieved and assessed (Moea & Mokhets'engoane, 2024). The LGCSE English Language syllabus echoes this importance by accentuating the expansion of communicative competence, with particular emphasis on learners' ability to engage eloquently with written texts (Moea, 2025a; Moea, 2023; National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC] & Examinations Council of Lesotho [ECOL], 2019). Reading comprehension, as a main section of assessment, needs learners to show a range of skills, comprising understanding unambiguous information, interpreting implied meanings, and responding fittingly to diverse question types that test both literal and inferential comprehension (NCDC & ECOL, 2019).

Nevertheless, the efficacious achievement of these outcomes is profoundly dependent upon learners' level of VK. RC tasks integrally depend on learners' aptitude to access and employ language, as meaning is created through the interpretation of lexical items within context (Moea & Lekhetho, 2025a). A limited vocabulary gamut limits learners' capacity to understand texts, identify key ideas, and engage with higher-order questions that necessitate inference, evaluation, and paraphrasing (Nation, 2020). As a result, VK arises not as an outlying skill, but as a central element of learners' performance in reading comprehension, determining their ability to meet the linguistic and cognitive demands of the LGCSE examination.

While the relationship between VK and RC has been extensively explored in global research, there remains a need for context-specific research that examines how vocabulary-related challenges manifest within specific educational backgrounds. In the case of Lesotho, inadequate attention has been granted to the pedagogical facet of this issue, predominantly in relation to the challenges teachers meet in teaching vocabulary within reading comprehension. Teachers are key in mediating learners' interaction with texts, yet their experiences and perceptions are often undersold in research. In contradiction of this backdrop, the present study pursues to reconnoitre the challenges teachers come across in teaching vocabulary-related questions in reading comprehension among Grade 11 learners in Lesotho secondary schools. By concentrating on teachers' perceptions, the study targets to provide a subterranean understanding of the intricacies involved in vocabulary teaching and to contribute to exertions aimed at refining reading comprehension performance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Lexico-Cognitive Reading Empowerment Model (LCREM)*

The Lexico-Cognitive Reading Empowerment Model (LCREM), a model developed by Moea (2025c), offers a rounded and integrative framework for understanding reading comprehension as a dynamic and contextually umpired process. Unlike outmoded models that segregate linguistic or cognitive components, LCREM conceptualises reading comprehension performance (RCP) as an embryonic outcome of interacting variables, expressed functionally as: $RCP = f(LF \times CM) + (IM + SCC + RE)$ (Moea & Lekhetho, 2025b). At its centre lies the multiplicative interface between Lexical Foundations (LF) and Cognitive Mediation (CM), which together institute the primary engine of comprehension. Lexical Foundations (LF) comprise both the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, which offer the semantic and structural resources necessary for meaning-making (Tran et al, 2020; Zeng et al., 2025). Cognitive Mediation, on the other hand, epitomises the reader's ability to stimulate, integrate, and manipulate these vocabulary resources through processes like inferring, working memory coordination, and metacognitive monitoring (Mohd et al., 2025). The

multiplicative relationship between LF and CM connotes that comprehension is not attained through the presence of one constituent alone; rather, it hinges on their mutual reinforcement, where a deficit in either dimension proportionately constrains RCP.

Beyond this central interaction, LCREM includes three critical regulating variables, being: Instructional Mediation (IM), Sociocultural Context (SCC), and Reader Engagement (RE), which jointly shape and strengthen the efficacy of the lexical-cognitive relationship. Instructional Mediation foregrounds the role of the teacher as an expediter of meaning, underscoring the significance of scaffolded vocabulary teaching and strategic reading practices (Chauke & Tabane, 2021). Sociocultural Context locates reading within the wider linguistic and cultural environment, recognising that comprehension is influenced by learners' background knowledge, language exposure, and alignment between home and school discourses (Sinclair, 2025; Sulis, 2025). Reader Engagement, meanwhile, hosts the affective and motivational facet, underlining that continued attention, interest, and determination are necessary for deep processing and effective comprehension (Lyu & Hu, 2025; Malakul & Songmuang, 2026). Collectively, these elements position RC not as a static ability but as an authorised and adaptable construct, moulded by the interplay of linguistic properties, cognitive processes, instructional practices, and contextual actualities. In this sense, LCREM provides a powerful lens for examining reading challenges in polyglot milieus like Lesotho, where interferences in any of these components can ominously impact learners' comprehension results.

Within the input hypothesis framework, the view of comprehensible input becomes mostly important, exclusively in SL contexts. For reading comprehension to happen successfully, the linguistic input must be available to the learner at a level that consents for meaningful interpretation (Aqdas, 2025; Carter et al., 2024; Dixon & Oakhill, 2024; Duke et al, 2021). This denotes that learners should be open to language that marginally extends past their current level of proficiency but remains understandable through context, prior knowledge, and cognitive processing. When input is intelligible, learners are able to focus on meaning rather than form, easing the internalisation of linguistic constructions and the growth of general language aptitude (Babayigit & Trenkic, 2026; Zhang et al., 2025). Contrariwise, when texts are linguistically unreachable, comprehension is mired, and opportunities for language expansion are considerably reduced.

➤ *Reading Comprehension and the 21st Century*

RC in the 21st century has advanced yonder the old-style belief of decoding and understanding printed texts. It now covers a wider set of cognitive, linguistic, and digital literacy skills. In modern educational environments, learners are obliged not only to extract meaning from written materials but

also to critically scrutinise, evaluate, and synthesise information crosswise multiple sources and formats (Aqdas, 2025; Le et al., 2024; Olifant, 2024). The propagation of digital technologies has altered reading into a multimodal action, where texts are regularly presented in amalgamation with images, hyperlinks, audio, and collaborative elements (Shi, 2025). As a result, effective RC now comprises navigating multifaceted information environments, discerning trustworthiness, and incorporating diverse forms of content to create meaning.

In addition, 21st-century reading places grander importance on higher-order thinking skills, like critical reasoning, inferencing, and reflective judgment. Learners are projected to engross enthusiastically with texts, question assumptions, and construe meaning within far-reaching social, cultural, and global circumstances (Le et al., 2024; Moea, 2023; Moea & Mokhets’engoane, 2024). This move needs not only sturdy foundational skills, including vocabulary knowledge and linguistic competence, but also the skill to apply metacognitive strategies to observe understanding and adjust reading processes (Khellab et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022; Tibken et al., 2024). In polyglot settings, these demands are further strengthened, as learners must concurrently negotiate language proficiency and comprehension (Mufori et al., 2025; Qian et al., 2026). Therefore, RC in the 21st century is best understood as a vigorous and unified process that conglomerates conventional literacy skills with critical, digital, and cognitive competencies obligatory for meaningful partaking in an increasingly intricate and information-rich world.

III. LGCSE READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS CATEGORIES

➤ *Textually Explicit Questions*

Textually explicit questions (TEQs) constitute a category that has their answers openly stated in the passage and can be traced without the need for interpretation or inference. TEQs mainly assess learners’ knack to identify, retrieve, and copy information that is plainly presented in the text (Dugasa et al., 2022; Oguntade, 2021). In the LGCSE reading comprehension setting, one-word or consecutive-word questions and some meaning in context questions fall within this set, as they necessitate learners to find specific details, definitions, or directly stated meanings (Oguntade, 2021; van den Broek et al., 2022). These questions bank profoundly on learners’ lexical recognition and surface-level comprehension skills (Alkhudiry, 2018; Liswaniso & Pretorius, 2025; van den Broek et al., 2022). Nonetheless, even at this level, VK remains essential, as learners must comprehend both the question and the related portion of the text to extract correct responses. Thus, while TEQs are regarded less cognitively arduous, they still mirror foundational comprehension skills and linguistic know-how.

➤ *Textually Implicit Questions*

Textually implicit questions (TIQs) oblige learners to develop meaning by integrating information from different parts of the text. Unlike TEQs, TIQs’ answers are not openly stated but must be deduced through links between sentences or ideas obtainable within the passage (Hung et al., 2025). In the LGCSE, summary questions, own-words (opinion-based) questions, some writer’s craft questions, and some meaning in context questions fall under this set. These tasks mandate for higher-order cognitive processes, comprising analysis, synthesis, and paraphrasing for learners must restructure and reinterpret textual information (Snow, 2020). Vocabulary proficiency plays a pivotal role here, as learners need adequate lexical means to comprehend connections between ideas and prompt them in their own words (Moea, 2025a). TIQs therefore link literal comprehension and subterranean interpretation, making them more cognitively challenging than TEQs.

➤ *Scriptally Implicit Questions*

Scriptally implicit questions (SIQs) embody the uppermost level of comprehension, demanding learners to conglomerate textual information with their prior knowledge, experiences, or broader world understanding. SIQs go yonder the text, demanding construal, assessment, and thinking that are not entirely confined within the passage itself (Wang, 2006). In the LGCSE reading comprehension, inferential questions and some writer’s craft questions fall into this type, as they need learners to construe implied meanings, assess authorial intent, and create logical conclusions. Fruitfully answering SIQs rests on both cognitive and linguistic proficiency, chiefly vocabulary depth, which assists learners to infer nuanced language and make evocative connections (Tran et al., 2020). These questions are cognitively multifarious and serve as stout gauges of higher-order thinking skills since they measure learners’ skill to extend comprehension beyond the text and engage critically with its meaning. Below is the concise classification summary of these categories.

Table 1: Concise Classification Overview

Question Type	Category
One-word / Consecutive-word	Textually Explicit (TE)
Vocabulary (contextual meaning)	Textually Explicit (TE)
Summary	Textually Implicit (TI)
Own-words (opinion-based)	Textually Implicit (TI)
Writer’s Craft	Textually Implicit (TI) / Scriptally Implicit (SI)
Inference	Scriptally Implicit (SI)

➤ *‘Explain Fully’ Questions*

In RC, the instruction “explain fully” needs learners to provide a whole, detailed, and well-built response that transcends beyond a brief or half-done answer. It signals that a simple statement or identification is unsatisfactory; rather, the learner must elucidate, expand, and validate their answer using strong reasoning and, where necessary, proof from the text (ECOL, 2023). Scholastically, “explain fully” comprises three key components. First, the learner must find the correct idea or answer based on the text (Shilo, 2015). Second, they must elaborate on that idea, showing how or why it is applicable by unloading its meaning. Third, they are anticipated to support their explanation, either by referring to the text; directly or indirectly, or by soundly connecting ideas (Shilo, 2015). This often needs paraphrasing rather than copying, signifying both comprehension and language control (ECOL, 2023). Here, the learner not only recognises the reason but also elucidates the underlying effect and meaning. Notably, “explain fully” questions often measure deeper comprehension skills, including inference, interpretation, and the skill to express ideas unmistakably in one’s own words (Alfiana et al., 2025).

The instruction “explain fully” is not knotted to a solo category; its grouping hinges on the nature of the question and the level of processing required. Nevertheless, in most RC contexts, it falls under TIQs and, in some cases, SIQs. In most cases, “explain fully” belongs to the TIQs category because it necessitates learners to go beyond directly stated information and elaborate on ideas using evidence from the text (Alfiana et al., 2025). The answer is typically grounded in the passage, but it is not overtly stated in a whole form. Learners must then combine information, explain meaning, and expand on it in their own words (ECOL, 2023). For example, when a question asks learners to “explain fully why something happened,” they are expected to infer and link ideas within the text rather than merely locate a single sentence. This makes the task cognitively more challenging than TEQs. In more advanced cases, “explain fully” can fall under SIQs, mainly when learners are mandated to extend their elucidation beyond the text by integrating prior knowledge, personal understanding, or wider reasoning. This is popular in questions that include interpretation of themes, assessment of actions, or justification of opinions. Learners must not only rely on textual evidence but also incorporate their own knowledge and reasoning, making the task even more composite.

➤ *Vocabulary Knowledge as a Foundation for Reading Comprehension*

Documented scholarship has constantly identified VK as a chief basis of RC in both L1 and L2 contexts. It works as the key medium through which meaning is retrieved, created, and construed during reading (Alkhudiry, 2018). Scholars contend that comprehension is essentially hindered when learners lack adequate lexical familiarity because they are inept to decrypt, infer, or assimilate textual information effectually (Farukh & Vulchanova, 2025; Liswaniso & Pretorius, 2025). In this

regard, vocabulary is not simply a backup component of reading but a foundational part upon which comprehension is constructed. Research conceptualises VK as multi-dimensional, classically differentiating between breadth and depth (Luo et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020). While vocabulary breadth permits primary access to meaning (Dagnaw, 2023; Westby, 2024), VK depth permits learners to deduce nuances, comprehend figurative language, and engage with context-specific meanings (Lavigne et al., 2022; Moea, 2025c). Conversely, studies have shown that many SL learners own narrow vocabulary breadth and even more limited depth (Biseko, 2025; Heidari, 2024; Sun et al., 2023), occasioning in disjointed comprehension and over-reliance on shallow processing strategies.

Notwithstanding the solid theoretic unanimity on the position of vocabulary, a critical restraint in the literature is the propensity to treat VK as an inert concept, regularly measured through secluded tests of word knowledge. Such methods miscarry to capture how vocabulary is essentially used in self-motivated reading contexts, mainly in examination locations where learners are obligated to understand meaning, paraphrase, and assess language. This gap underwrites the need for research that studies vocabulary not only as knowledge but as a practical resource in comprehension tasks.

➤ *Vocabulary Demands of Reading Comprehension Questions*

RC questions, chiefly in formal assessment situations, place weighty demands on learners’ VK. These tasks frequently outspread beyond factual understanding to embrace higher-order cognitive processes like inference, paraphrasing, and assessment of language use (Smith et al., 2021). Such demands need learners to retain not only an extensive range of vocabulary but also the skill to handle and apply lexical knowledge amenably (Kraal et al., 2018). Literature shows that learners recurrently struggle with comprehension questions that oblige them to interpret hidden meaning, provide responses in their own words, or analyse the effect of diction (Aqdas, 2025; Golke, 2022; Moea, 2025c). These questions need a level of lexical cleverness that many L2 learners have not developed. Consequently, learners are inclined to bank on strategies like copying directly from the text or giving dictionary-like definitions that flop to cover contextual meaning (Zeng et al., 2025). A critical matter within the literature is that while the vocabulary demands of comprehension tasks are well recognised, there is inadequate exploration of how these demands line up with actual classroom teaching. In many cases, vocabulary teaching remains fixated on disconnected word meanings rather than on increasing the contextual and productive skills required for comprehension questions. This misalignment proposes a detach between what is taught and what is evaluated, thus contributing to learners’ problems in RC.

➤ *Vocabulary Attainment and the Role of Reading Engagement*

The relationship between vocabulary attainment and reading engagement has been broadly explored, with reading identified as one of the most operational means of developing VK. Through acquaintance to texts, learners come across words in mottled settings, which eases profounder understanding and retention (Chandy et al., 2024; Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021; Zeng et al., 2025). Incidental vocabulary learning through reading is mainly significant, as it permits learners to gain language naturally and recurrently over time (van den Broek, 2022). Nonetheless, the efficiency of reading as a tool for vocabulary growth is reliant upon learners' level of engagement with texts (Diem & Ramadhia, 2025). Scholarship has revealed that learners who engross in wide and intentional reading tend to grow solidier VK and enhanced comprehension abilities compared to those who read only within designed classroom environments (Tsang & Fung, 2024; Zeng et al., 2025). Contrariwise, restricted reading engagement kerbs exposure to language, occasioning in sluggish vocabulary growth and weaker comprehension (Liswaniso, & Pretorius, 2025; Mutema & Pretorius, 2024). In spite of this, a critical gap in the literature lies in the assumption that entree to reading materials mechanically converts into reading engagement. In many L2 contexts, learners establish low motivation to read, often due to linguistic problems, lack of interest, or restricted access to appropriate texts (Misbah et al., 2017; Noori et al., 2025). This proposes that reading engagement is not just a matter of obtainability but also of learner attitudes, motivation, and instructional support. Therefore, vocabulary acquisition cannot be wholly understood without bearing in mind the socio-cultural and affective aspects that influence reading behaviour.

➤ *Problems in Teaching Vocabulary in L2 Settings*

Teaching vocabulary in ESL settings presents a range of instructional problems, principally in settings where learners have inadequate experience to the target language outside the classroom. Instructors are often obliged to address major gaps in learners' VK while concurrently covering curriculum content and preparing learners for examinations (Merga et al., 2020). This builds a tension between teaching for comprehension and teaching for examination performance. Research highlights that vocabulary teaching in various classrooms remains generally overt and decontextualised, centring on definitions, word lists, and memorisation (Green & Coxhead, 2026; McKeown, 2019). While such methods may underwrite vocabulary breadth, they do little to advance depth of understanding or the knack to use vocabulary in context. Consequently, learners may know words but flop to apply them well in comprehension tasks. Likewise, teachers often face challenges linked to learner diversity, as students within the same classroom may have hugely different levels of VK (Coyle et al., 2023; Yotta, 2023). This makes it problematic to implement identical pedagogic approaches and needs teachers to acclimatise their methodologies to meet

diverse learner needs. Yet, the literature offers partial perception into how teachers traverse these challenges in practice, predominantly in relation to vocabulary teaching within RC.

➤ *Teacher Perceptions and the Instructional Gap*

While a considerable body of research has studied the rapport between VK and RC, there is somewhat bantam effort on teachers' experiences and perspectives. Teachers are principal to the instructional process, yet their voices are frequently undersold in research, mainly in research that pursues to comprehend classroom-level challenges. Existing literature submit that teachers know the importance of vocabulary in RC but often lack ample support, resources, or training to address vocabulary-related challenges efficiently (Dixon & Oakhill, 2024; McKeown, 2019; Zeng et al., 2025). Moreover, there is evidence of a gap between theoretical data and classroom practice, with teachers struggling to convert research-based policies into practical pedagogic approaches (Chi, 2021; Ramsaroop et al., 2024). Critically, the lack of teacher-centred research limits the understanding of how vocabulary challenges manifest in actual classroom environments, exclusively in relation to assessment-driven teaching. Without this viewpoint, labours to improve vocabulary teaching risk being detached from the actualities of classroom practice.

➤ *Synthesis and Research Gap*

The reviewed scholarship underlines the dominant role of VK in RC and accentuates the multifarious interchange between lexical knowledge, reading engagement, and instructional practices. Conversely, some critical gaps surface. First, much of the research centres on learners' VK in isolation, with restricted attention to how vocabulary is pragmatic in comprehension tasks. Second, there is a dearth of alignment between the vocabulary demands of assessment and the nature of vocabulary teaching in classrooms. Third, the role of reading engagement is repeatedly acknowledged but inadequately examined in relation to vocabulary growth in specific contexts. Lastly, and most outstandingly, there is a remarkable lack of research that centres teachers' perceptions on vocabulary-related challenges in RC. This study addresses these gaps by reconnoitring the challenges teachers meet in teaching vocabulary-related questions in reading comprehension within the Lesotho secondary schools milieu.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative case study research design to examine the challenges teachers bump into in teaching vocabulary-related questions in RC in Lesotho secondary schools. The qualitative approach was believed fitting because it allows for an exhaustive examination of participants' understandings, perceptions, and analyses within their natural educational contexts (Lim, 2025). The study was underpropped by an interpretivist paradigm, which pursues to

comprehend phenomena from the perspectives of those directly involved (Burns et al., 2022), in this case, English language teachers answerable for preparing learners for reading comprehension tasks. Participants were purposively selected due to their experience in teaching Grade 11 English and their participation in preparing learners for the LGCSE English Language examination. Data was produced through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences (Lim, 2025) while ensuring that key issues related to vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension were addressed.

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, following a methodical process of coding, categorisation, and theme development. This involved acquaintance with the data, identification of repetitive patterns, and the construction of themes that echo the main challenges recounted by participants. To improve the trustworthiness of the study, strategies like protracted engagement with the data, cautious transcription, and constant coding processes were engaged. Ethical considerations were firmly observed, comprising informed consent, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms (e.g., T1, T2) to guarantee participants' privacy and anonymity. Through this methodological approach, the study offers a rich, contextually grounded appreciation of the instructional challenges associated with teaching vocabulary within reading comprehension in Lesotho secondary schools.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

➤ *Scarce Vocabulary Breadth and Its Bearing on Comprehension*

The findings disclose that insufficient vocabulary breadth creates a foundational blockade to RC, indorsing the central suggestion of the Lexico-Cognitive Reading Empowerment Model (LCREM) that lexical competence fortifies all comprehension processes. Teachers constantly reported that learners own a severely narrow lexical gamut, which limits their skill to access even superficial meaning in texts. As T1 explained, learners experience *“the absence or lack of reading ethos – learners lack a wide range of vocabulary because they do not read broadly or extensively,”* while T9 likewise noted that *“learners are not extensive readers so it's very challenging to support them improve their vocabulary.”* These extracts illuminate a cyclical shortfall in which inadequate reading exposure limits vocabulary growth, which in turn further diminishes learners' capacity and motivation to engage with texts.

From an LCREM perspective, this mirrors a breakdown in Lexical Foundations (LF), which are vital for allowing Cognitive Mediation (CM). Deprived of adequate vocabulary breadth, learners are inept to decipher meaning, recognise key ideas, or engage in even rudimentary comprehension processes. This lines up with standing literature which positions vocabulary breadth as a requirement for retrieving

textual meaning and reducing processing effort (Nation, 2020; Dagnaw, 2023). Nonetheless, the current findings outspread this understanding by displaying that vocabulary precincts are not just individual scarcities but are fashioned by bigger circumstantial issues, including weak reading culture and an irregular learner preparedness. T8's observation that *“only a few manage... whereas majority struggle due to poor background”* highlights how differences in preceding lexical experience craft stratified comprehension results within the same classroom. Therefore, scarce vocabulary breadth surfaces not only as a linguistic concern but as a systemic restraint rooted within the sociocultural and educational context, reinforcing LCREM's emphasis on the interaction between LF and Sociocultural Context (SCC).

➤ *Low VK and Dearth of Depth of Understanding*

Further than restrictions in vocabulary breadth, the findings show that learners display low and decontextualised lexical awareness, which destabilises their ability to infer meaning in context. Teacher 1 remarked, *“Majority are familiar with certain words but only know them on surface level and are not familiar with their roots or derivatives....”* Similarly, Teacher 8 added, *“learners can't comprehend between simple and complex vocabulary”* while Teacher 9 stated, *“a small percentage understands that words have literal and figurative meanings....”* These manifest that the learners' VK is shallow and disjointed, displaying a deficiency of semantic depth (polysemy, morphology, figurative meaning). Within LCREM, vocabulary depth is a critical measurement of lexical proficiency, as it allows learners to comprehend semantic nuances, figurative meanings, and contextual variations. Yet, teachers' accounts submit that learners' knowledge of words is generally shallow, kerbing their aptitude to engage expressively with texts. This finding is consistent with literature that extricates between vocabulary breadth and depth, at variance that deeper vocabulary knowledge is vital for higher-order comprehension processes like inference and interpretation (Lavigne et al., 2022; Nation, 2020). Conversely, this study advances this discussion by proving that learners' shallow VK openly upsets the LF × CM interaction crucial to LCREM. Even when learners identify words, they are inept to stimulate or operate them cognitively, ensuing in split comprehension. This proposes that VK in this context is not functionally included into learners' cognitive processing systems. Notably, this deficit mirrors an instructional gap acknowledged in the literature, where vocabulary teaching often accentuates memorisation rather than contextual and productive use (McKeown, 2019). The findings thus back the dispute that vocabulary should be taught as a dynamic and functional resource rather than a fixed body of knowledge. Within LCREM, this implies that solidification LF entails not only growing vocabulary size but also extending learners' semantic and background understanding to facilitate operative cognitive mediation.

➤ *Insistent Problems with Higher-Order Vocabulary Questions*

A critical area where vocabulary deficits became most evident was in learners' performance on higher-order comprehension questions. Teachers continually reported that learners struggle with inferential, own-words, writer's craft, and "explain fully" questions, all of which need radical lexical and cognitive engagement. T1 noted hitches with "*questions requiring extensive vocabulary, use of own words... inference... and writer's craft,*" while T9 underlined challenges across "*implicit questions... explain-fully... effects-of-words... evidence questions.*" Equally, T6 observed that learners "*miscarry drearily to infer the text... they have to draw conclusions by themselves.*" These findings intensely align with the classification of comprehension questions into textually implicit (TI) and Scriptally implicit (SI) classes, which need learners to go yonder literal understanding and engage in subterranean interpretation (Wang, 2006). Within LCREM, such tasks demand a vigorous interaction between LF and CM. Nevertheless, the findings specify that learners lack both the lexical means and the cognitive approaches required to meet these demands. This buttresses literature portentous that higher-order comprehension is reliant on both vocabulary depth and cognitive processing abilities (Snow, 2002; Hung et al., 2025). Still, the study underwrites a critical insight: learners' failure in these questions is not purely down to cognitive strain but to the failure to mobilise vocabulary within cognitive processes. Therefore, the challenge lies not only in understanding words but in exhausting them to think, infer, and interpret. This accentuates the multiplicative nature of LCREM, where weakness in either LF or CM ominously constrains comprehension performance.

➤ *Absence of Reading Engagement and Weak Reading Culture*

The lack of a sturdy reading culture appeared as a ubiquitous challenge, openly impacting both vocabulary development and comprehension. Teachers recurrently stressed that learners engage triflingly with texts, with T5 remarking that learners "*read only when they are enforced to,*" and T9 specifying that learners "*cannot volunteer to read other novels.*" T3 and T7 further highlighted motivational scarcities, labelling learners as deficient of interest and being "*indolent to read... indolent to think.*" Within LCREM, this reflects a critical flaw in Reader Engagement (RE), which functions as a reagent for both lexical growth and cognitive processing. The findings upkeep literature that classifies reading as a prime source of vocabulary attainment and underlines the role of engagement in smoothing language learning (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021; van den Broek et al., 2022). Conversely, the study expands this understanding by indicating that dearth of engagement not only limits vocabulary advance but also impedes the growth of cognitive abilities required for comprehension. The link between vocabulary and engagement is thus shared and underpinning: restricted vocabulary lessens learners' aptitude to engage with

texts, while little engagement curbs opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. This cyclical interface aligns sturdily with LCREM, emphasising the need for instructional methodologies that concurrently stimulate reading engagement and lexical development.

➤ *Learners' Inadequate Expressive Ability and Challenges in Paraphrasing*

Teachers also reported that learners struggle significantly with conveying ideas in their own words, mostly in tasks needful of paraphrasing and explanation. T5 noted that learners "*do not even succeed to identify the answer... let alone putting it in their own words,*" while T6 attributed failure in own-words questions to "*lack of expression.*" T8 further stressed learners' incapacity to create synonyms, even when they know key words. This finding exposes a critical gap in productive vocabulary knowledge, which is habitually ignored in deliberations of reading comprehension. While much research centres on receptive vocabulary, this study validates that productive lexical skill is indispensable for effective performance in comprehension tasks. Within LCREM, this suggests that LF must comprise not only recognition of words but also the aptitude to use them flexibly and fittingly in fashioning meaning. The findings line up with literature underscoring the importance of using vocabulary vigorously rather than unreceptively (Lavigne et al., 2022). This study further extends this argument by displaying that learners' failure to express meaning confines their capacity to establish comprehension, even when fractional understanding exists. Therefore, vocabulary teaching must travel beyond recognition to comprise transformation, paraphrasing, and contextual application.

➤ *Negative Learner Attitudes and Affective Barricades*

Affective issues appeared as additional weighty constraint, with teachers reporting negative learner attitudes towards English and reading. T6 noted that learners often claim that "*English is not our native language,*" while also emphasising issues of "laziness" and disengagement. T7 correspondingly pointed to learners' disinclination to engage in critical thinking. Within LCREM, these findings mirror the influence of sentimental dimensions within Reader Engagement (RE). Negative attitudes diminish inspiration to engage with texts, thus off-putting both vocabulary attainment and cognitive development. This aligns with literature signifying that learner motivation and attitudes considerably influence language learning outcomes (Noori et al., 2025; Misbah et al., 2017). The study underwrites by showing that affective obstacles are not peripheral but principal to comprehension problems. Learners' beliefs about English as hard or faraway form psychological conflict that further complexes lexical and cognitive challenges. Addressing vocabulary snags therefore necessitates attention not only to linguistic and cognitive factors but also to learners' attitudes and motivation.

➤ *Systemic and Contextual Constraints Affecting Vocabulary Instruction*

As a final point, the findings emphasised the role of systemic and contextual constrictions in shaping vocabulary teaching and comprehension outcomes. T4 pointed to institutional policies, noting that “*criteria for promotion... rejects English,*” which undercuts its supposed importance. Moreover, disquiets about learner readiness from earlier grades indicate structural gaps in the education system. Within LCREM, these concerns fall under Sociocultural Context (SCC) and Instructional Mediation (IM). The findings endorse that comprehension challenges are not exclusively classroom-based but are swayed by broader institutional and didactic influences. This aligns with literature underlining the role of background in shaping language learning and comprehension (Sinclair, 2025; Sulis, 2025). Additionally, the findings sustain Chi’s (2021) argument regarding the gap between theory and practice, as teachers are mandated to address intricate vocabulary challenges within inhibited and askew educational systems. The study therefore accentuates the need for systemic reforms that support vocabulary development athwart all levels of education.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has established that the challenges teachers bump into in teaching vocabulary-related reading comprehension in Lesotho secondary schools are multifaceted, systemic, and totally interconnected. Drawing on the Lexico-Cognitive Reading Empowerment Model (LCREM), the findings divulge that learners’ meagre performance is engrained in a breakdown of the interface between vocabulary competence and cognitive dispensation, compounded by weak reading engagement, inadequate communicative ability, negative learner attitudes, and background constraints. Vocabulary appears not as a sequestered skill but as the fundamental tool through which comprehension is retrieved, created, and validated. The study thus concludes that RC complications in this context are not purely learner shortfalls but echo bigger instructional, sociocultural, and systemic limitations that dent the expansion and application of VK.

In response, it is recommended that vocabulary teaching be transposed at the core of reading comprehension instruction through integrated, context-based methodologies that concurrently progress vocabulary breadth, depth, and prolific use. Teachers should be buoyed through targeted professional development that furnishes them with approaches for teaching vocabulary within true comprehension tasks, predominantly those demanding inference, paraphrasing, and critical interpretation. Moreover, schools and policymakers should encourage a strong reading culture by increasing entrée to varied and level-appropriate reading materials and entrenching continual reading practices across the curriculum. At a systemic level, curriculum and assessment structures should be aligned to safeguard that vocabulary growth is

progressively scaffolded from earlier grades, thus plummeting the encumbrance on secondary school teachers. Jointly, these intercessions are indispensable for consolidation of vocabulary proficiency, improving reading engagement, and refining whole reading comprehension performance.

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