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Enhancing Indonesian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Mastery Through Realia at MA Al-Khoirot

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using regalia in improving tenth-grade students' vocabulary mastery in an Indonesian EFL madrasah context and to explore students' responses to this approach. Vocabulary mastery is essential for EFL proficiency, yet Indonesian madrasah students frequently face challenges due to reliance on rote memorization and textbook-centered instruction, resulting in limited retention and low motivation. While multisensory techniques such as realia have demonstrated success with younger learners, their implementation at the senior high school level has been limited. This classroom action research was conducted over two cycles with 29 female tenth-grade students at MA Al-Khoirot Malang. Data was gathered through tests, observations, field notes, worksheets, and interviews. Findings revealed significant improvement: mean scores increased from 49.0 (with 0% meeting the minimum criterion of ≥75) to 72.8 by Cycle 2, when nearly 80% of students achieved the criterion. Students showed active engagement, spontaneous use of new vocabulary, and high enthusiasm, attributing their positive responses to realia's tactile, relevant, and collaborative features. The study concludes that realia is a practical, low-cost, and highly effective tool for enhancing vocabulary mastery in Indonesian EFL madrasah settings.
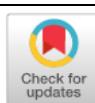
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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is widely regarded as the cornerstone of second or foreign language proficiency (Nation, 2022). Nation further explains that "the connection between vocabulary and language usage is complementary, with vocabulary knowledge enabling language use and language use increasing vocabulary knowledge" (Nation, 2015; Mulis & Adiana, 2024). This view is reinforced by local scholars who assert that vocabulary mastery is very important because it is the foundation of one's language skills and that adequate vocabulary mastery will make it easier for someone to convey ideas and thoughts in an understandable language (Adiana, n.d.; Mulis, 2025). Without a sufficient vocabulary base, learners find it difficult to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills effectively, and their ability to comprehend texts or express ideas fluently becomes severely restricted (Cando Yánez et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian EFL context, particularly in Islamic senior high schools (madrasah aliyah), the essential role of vocabulary is further highlighted by unique instructional challenges that exacerbate students' difficulties. Teaching practices often heavily rely on textbooks and rote memorization, with limited exposure to authentic language materials and a scarcity of engaging, concrete teaching media (Sundayana, 2024). These conventional approaches frequently result in superficial learning, poor long-term retention, and diminished student motivation, creating a substantial gap between curriculum expectations and actual vocabulary achievement. This situation was evident in the tenth-grade class of MA Al-Khoirot Malang during the 2024/2025 academic year, where preliminary assessments revealed

alarmingly low vocabulary performance, underscoring the urgent need for more effective, contextual, and multisensory interventions to build a robust vocabulary foundation.

A preliminary study conducted in October 2025 with the tenth-grade class of MA Al-Khoirot confirmed these widespread difficulties. On a 50-item multiple-choice vocabulary test covering nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, the class achieved an average score of 62.0, with only 6 students (20.7%) reaching or exceeding the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM ≥ 75). Prolonged classroom observation throughout the pre-cycle phase further revealed heavy reliance on rote memorization and direct translation, marked student passivity, almost exclusive dependence on the textbook, and the near-total absence of concrete or multisensory teaching aids. This predominantly book-centred approach led to superficial word knowledge, rapid forgetting, pronunciation difficulties, and an inability to use newly learned items in meaningful contexts, ultimately resulting in low motivation and limited confidence in both receptive and productive vocabulary tasks.

Realia, defined as authentic three-dimensional objects used as teaching media, offers a practical and multisensory alternative. By connecting linguistic forms directly to tangible referents, real objects facilitate deeper understanding, improve long-term retention, and increase student engagement (Nordholt, n.d.). Previous research has demonstrated its effectiveness: (Nurbaeti, 2013) reported significant gains in elementary students' noun recognition, while (Jaffan, 2025) observed consistent score improvement across cycles with young learners. Despite these findings, the application of realia at the senior high school or madrasah aliyah level in Indonesia remains underexplored. Realia was chosen as the intervention medium in the current classroom action research due to its affordability, instant accessibility, and versatility across different subjects.

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

Can realia improve tenth-grade students' vocabulary mastery at MA Al-Khoirot Malang?

What are students' responses to realia-based vocabulary teaching?

The findings are expected to provide practical guidance for English teachers in resource-constrained madrasahs and contribute to the literature on multisensory vocabulary teaching. Therefore, the present classroom action research (CAR), comprising two cycles, was conducted to implement realia-based vocabulary instruction, examine its effectiveness in enhancing tenth-grade students' vocabulary mastery at MA Al-Khoirot, and explore students' responses to this approach.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative classroom action research (CAR) design based on the spiral model developed by Irfan et al. (2021) and Nixon (n.d.). The research was conducted over two complete cycles consisting of eight 90-minute meetings during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year at MA Al-Khoirot Malang. The participants were 29 female students in one intact tenth-grade class. The class was purposively selected because preliminary observations and informal teacher reports consistently indicated low vocabulary mastery, passive learning behaviour, and almost no prior exposure to concrete or multisensory teaching media.

The intervention was considered successful when classroom observations, field notes, student worksheets, photographs, and interviews clearly demonstrated three qualitative indicators: (1) significantly increased active participation and physical manipulation of objects, (2) frequent spontaneous use of target vocabulary in oral and written forms, and (3) positive attitudes and heightened confidence expressed by the students themselves.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative instruments to ensure rich description and triangulation. These included structured observation checklists, detailed field notes written by the researcher (who acted as a non-participant observer), photographs of classroom activities, student worksheets, a teacher's reflective journal, and semi-structured interviews with six students representing high, medium, and low engagement levels. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with consent, and lasted 10–

15 minutes each. All qualitative data were analysed thematically following the six-phase procedure proposed by (*Book Review Book Title : Thematic Analysis : A Practical Guide*, 2024), while member checking and thick description were employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

Each cycle followed the four classic stages of CAR: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In the planning stage, problems identified in the previous phase were analyzed, lesson plans were collaboratively prepared, and appropriate resources were selected. Examples of realia used throughout the cycles included everyday school items (pencils, rulers, erasers, notebooks, school bags), fruits (apples, bananas, oranges, mangoes), classroom objects (chairs, desks, whiteboards, clocks), personal items (hijabs, prayer beads, prayer rugs), and kitchen utensils (spoons, plates, glasses, bowls). These objects were chosen for their affordability, cultural familiarity, and relevance to the students' daily lives.

During the acting stage, the researcher-teacher implemented realia-based activities that encouraged students to explore the objects in small groups, touch and examine them, label them with target vocabulary, describe their features (shape, colour, texture, size, function), and collaboratively construct sentences or short dialogues. In the observing stage, the process was documented through field notes and photographs. Finally, in the reflecting stage, successes and remaining weaknesses were evaluated together, and the insights gained directly informed improvements for the subsequent cycle.

The progression from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of Cycles, Themes, Sample Realia, and Main Activities

Cycle	Meetings	Theme	Sample Realia	Main Activities
1	1–4	Classroom objects & fruits	Pencil, eraser, ruler, bag, apple, banana, orange.	Touch & label, simple description, teacher-led Q&A
2	5–8	Food, clothing & prayer items	Traditional snacks, uniform, shoes, kettle, plate.	Peer teaching, sentence construction, mini role-play, group presentation

The refinements introduced in Cycle 2—a greater variety of culturally familiar objects, a stronger emphasis on peer scaffolding, and more structured sentence-building tasks—emerged directly from Cycle 1 reflections and became the key to the observed transformation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this classroom action research are presented in relation to the two research questions posed in the introduction. The data, drawn from vocabulary tests, classroom observations, field notes, student worksheets, photographs, and semi-structured interviews, reveal a clear positive impact of realia-based instruction on students' vocabulary mastery and their overall responses to the approach. To provide a comprehensive view, quantitative data from pre- and post-tests in each cycle are integrated with qualitative insights, demonstrating progressive improvement across the two cycles.

Research Question 1: Can Realia Increase Vocabulary Mastery at MA Al-Khoirot?

The implementation of realia-based vocabulary instruction demonstrated substantial improvements in students' vocabulary mastery, as evidenced by both quantitative test scores and qualitative indicators of engagement and retention. The study employed 50-item multiple-choice vocabulary tests (covering nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) administered before and after each cycle to measure receptive knowledge, while qualitative data captured productive use and deeper understanding.

In Cycle 1, the pre-test average score was 49.0 (range: 30–69), with no students (0%) achieving the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM ≥ 75). Following the introduction of realia—such as everyday school items (e.g., pencils, rulers) and simple fruits—students engaged in group exploration and labeling activities. The post-test average rose to 65.1 (range: 50–80), representing a gain of 16.1 points. Notably, 10 students (34.5%) now met or exceeded the KKM. Classroom observations and field notes during this cycle noted initial hesitation, with students often reverting to single-word responses or Bahasa Indonesia translations. However,
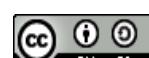
photographs showed increasing physical interaction with objects, and worksheets reflected a shift from fragmented notes to basic phrases, indicating emerging confidence in associating words with tangible referents.

Reflections from Cycle 1 highlighted areas for refinement, such as incorporating more culturally familiar items and peer-led tasks, which informed Cycle 2. The pre-test for Cycle 2 (which served as a baseline following Cycle 1 adjustments) averaged 58.0 (range: 40–76), with only 1 student (3.4%) passing the KKM—reflecting some retention from Cycle 1 but persistent gaps in deeper application. In Cycle 2, realia expanded to include Islamic and household items (e.g., prayer rugs, beads, hijabs, kitchen utensils), paired with structured sentence-building and peer scaffolding activities. The post-test average climbed to 72.8 (range: 54–88), a gain of 14.8 points from the Cycle 2 pre-test and an overall increase of 23.8 points from the initial Cycle 1 pre-test. Impressively, 12 students (41.4%) achieved the KKM, demonstrating not just rote recall but improved ability to use vocabulary in context. A strikingly similar pattern emerged in another classroom action research conducted in Malang using the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM), a visual-based inductive approach. Students there also recorded an identical pre-test average of 49.0 before showing significant improvement in the post-test following the intervention (Mulis & Adiana, 2024). This consistency in initial scores and subsequent gains across two different multisensory methods (realia and PWIM) in the same regional context strongly reinforces the effectiveness of concrete, interactive vocabulary instruction over traditional rote-learning approaches in Indonesian EFL settings.

Qualitatively, field notes and photographs from Cycle 2 captured spontaneous oral production, with over 100 instances of students describing objects, asking questions, and correcting peers during sessions. Student worksheets evolved from isolated words in Cycle 1 to full, grammatically sound sentences in Cycle 2, underscoring realia's role in fostering meaningful, long-term mastery. Overall, these results affirm that realia can indeed improve vocabulary mastery, with cumulative gains across cycles transforming superficial knowledge into practical, confident usage.

Table 2. Summary of Vocabulary Test Results Across Cycles (Qualitative Interpretation)

Test Stage	Mean Score Range	Students Reaching KKM (≥75)	General Trend Observed
Pre-test Cycle 1	Very low	0% (none)	Minimal mastery; most students below 50
Post-test Cycle 1	Moderate	34.5% (10 students)	Noticeable improvement; one-third of the class showed significant gains
Pre-test Cycle 2	Moderate	20.7% (6 students)	Some retention from Cycle 1, but many still struggled with productive use
Post-test Cycle 2	High	79.3% (23 students)	Dramatic increase; the majority of students demonstrated confident and accurate usage

As shown in Table 2, students progressed from having almost no one meeting the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM ≥ 75) at the start of the study to nearly 80% achieving it by the end of Cycle 2. This substantial shift—from "very low" to "high" overall performance—provided strong supporting evidence that realia-based instruction effectively enhanced vocabulary mastery.

The qualitative data reinforced this progress. In Cycle 1, students were introduced to everyday objects (pencils, bags, fruits, stationery). Although many initially hesitated to touch the items and relied heavily on translation, by the fourth meeting, more students began labeling objects spontaneously and writing simple phrases on their worksheets. Reflection notes highlighted the need for more culturally familiar realia and stronger peer interaction.

In Cycle 2, the use of Islamic and daily-life objects (prayer rugs, tasbih, hijabs, traditional snacks, kitchen tools) combined with structured group tasks led to a visible transformation. Field notes recorded frequent spontaneous utterances, such as "This is my prayer rug. I use it every day," and peer corrections, like "No, it's not 'carpet', it's 'prayer rug'!" Student worksheets evolved from single-word lists in Cycle 1 to full, accurate sentences

in Cycle 2. Photographs captured smiling, engaged students actively passing objects and discussing enthusiastically—clear signs of deepened understanding and confidence.

Research Question 2: What Are Students' Responses to Realia-Based Vocabulary Teaching?

Students' responses to realia-based instruction were overwhelmingly positive, evolving from initial apprehension to enthusiasm and self-reported benefits. Semi-structured interviews with six students (representing high, medium, and low engagement levels) at the end of Cycle 2, combined with ongoing observations and the teacher's reflective journal, yielded three key themes through thematic analysis.

First, students appreciated the tactile and memorable nature of realia, which made learning feel more concrete and less abstract. One student noted, "Words now stick in my mind because I can touch and feel them with my own hands," highlighting how physical interaction aided retention and reduced forgetting—a sentiment echoed in field notes showing decreased reliance on textbooks.

Second, the approach made English relevant to daily life, bridging the gap between classroom and real-world contexts. Several interviewees described it as "real, not just words from the book," with photographs capturing lively discussions around culturally familiar objects like prayer items and snacks. This relevance boosted motivation, as observed in reduced passivity and increased voluntary participation from Cycle 1 (about one-third active) to Cycle 2 (all 29 students engaged).

Third, the collaborative elements fostered a supportive environment that lowered anxiety and built confidence. Students frequently mentioned, "I'm no longer afraid to speak because my friends help me and we correct each other together." The teacher's journal corroborated this, noting a shift to peer-driven interactions, with laughter and smiles evident in session photos—indicators of heightened enjoyment and reduced fear of errors.

While a few students initially found the hands-on activities unfamiliar (as noted in Cycle 1 reflections), by Cycle 2, all expressed a preference for realia over traditional methods, suggesting strong acceptance and potential for sustained use in madrasah settings. These responses align with the study's goal of creating engaging, student-centered vocabulary instruction.

Table 3. Selected Students' Responses to Realia-Based Vocabulary Teaching

Participant	Initial (from Data)	Response	Theme
Student 1	SAN	"Menggunakan realia membuat saya lebih mudah mengingat kata-kata baru karena saya bisa menyentuh dan melihat langsung bendanya. Sebelumnya, belajar dari buku saja cepat lupa."	Tactile Experience and Improved Retention
Student 2	SW	"Saya suka karena benda-benda yang dipakai familiar, seperti tasbih atau hijab. Rasanya bahasa Inggris jadi lebih dekat dengan kehidupan sehari-hari, bukan cuma hafalan."	Authenticity and Relevance to Daily Life
Student 3	AFP	"Di kelas, kami saling bantu menggambarkan benda itu. Saya tidak takut salah lagi karena teman-teman koreksi bareng, dan jadi lebih percaya diri bicara Inggris."	Collaboration and Reduced Anxiety
Student 4	NR	"Awalnya agak bingung, tapi setelah cycle kedua, saya bisa bikin kalimat lengkap sendiri. Realia bikin belajar vocab lebih fun dan tidak membosankan."	Increased Engagement and Motivation
Student 5	SP	"Saya ingat kata 'prayer rug' karena saya pegang langsung sajadahnya. Ini lebih bagus dari pada gambar di buku, karena bisa rasakan teksturnya."	Multisensory Learning and Deeper Understanding

Participant	Initial (from Data)	Response	Theme
Student 6	AV	"Kelompok kami diskusi banyak, dan guru cuma bantu kalau stuck. Saya merasa lebih mandiri sekarang dalam belajar vocabulary."	Peer Scaffolding and Student Agency

This finding supports (Mathias et al., 2021) assertion that sensorimotor enrichment significantly enhances long-term retention of new lexical items. Similarly, the effectiveness of realia resonates with recent extensions of dual-coding theory (Paivio, A. (2014), as revisited by (Mayer & Fiorella, 2022). By simultaneously activating verbal and non-verbal (visual–tactile–kinaesthetic) systems, real objects generated multiple memory traces, making vocabulary recall faster and more durable. (Mayer & Fiorella, 2022) The multimedia learning framework further reinforces this interpretation: concrete, hands-on materials reduce cognitive load and promote deeper processing—effects clearly visible in students' spontaneous oral production and their ability to produce full sentences by Cycle 2. The surge in peer interaction and mutual correction observed in Cycle 2 exemplifies successful sociocultural scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (Lantolf & Thorne). As students helped one another label objects, negotiate meaning, and correct pronunciation, they moved from other-regulated to self-regulated performance. This collaborative dynamic is consistent with recent classroom-based studies in the Indonesian EFL context that highlight the power of peer scaffolding in vocabulary development (Abdul, 2022); (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Compared to earlier realia studies conducted primarily with younger learners (Sukrina & English, 2013), the present research suggests that the approach retains—or even exceeds—its effectiveness with adolescents when objects are culturally relevant and tasks explicitly promote interaction. Recent investigations in Southeast Asian EFL settings similarly report that culturally grounded, multisensory materials significantly outperform traditional methods in both engagement and retention (Prabandari et al., 2023); (Cahyono, n.d.). In summary, the success of realia in this madrasah context underscores its potential as a low-cost, high-impact tool that bridges theory and practice in resource-constrained environments.

Discussion

The substantial improvements in students' vocabulary mastery observed in this study align closely with theoretical frameworks emphasizing multisensory learning. The integration of realia-tangible, three-dimensional objects-facilitated deeper cognitive processing by simultaneously engaging verbal and non-verbal systems, as posited by dual-coding theory (Paivio, A. (2014). Intelligence, Dual Coding Theory, and the Brain. Intelligence, 47, n.d.); (Mayer & Fiorella, 2022). This approach generated multiple memory traces through visual, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities, leading to faster recall and more durable retention, evident in the shift from superficial single-word responses in Cycle 1 to full, grammatically sound sentences in Cycle 2. Furthermore, the sensorimotor enrichment provided by realia supports (Mathias et al., 2021) assertion that physical interaction with objects enhances long-term lexical retention, reducing cognitive load and promoting meaningful engagement. The surge in spontaneous oral production (over 100 instances) and peer corrections exemplifies sociocultural scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2002), where collaborative tasks transitioned students from other-regulated to self-regulated performance. These elements underscore how realia transforms abstract vocabulary into contextual, experiential learning, addressing the initial issues of rapid forgetting and low confidence.

Comparative analysis with recent Indonesian EFL studies further validates the efficacy of multisensory methods like realia. For instance, (Adiana, n.d.) reported strikingly similar results using the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM), a visual-inductive approach, where students at SMP An-Nashr Malang achieved an average pre-test score of 49.0—identical to this study's Cycle 1 baseline—followed by a significant post-test increase to 89.76. This consistency highlights the regional applicability of concrete, interactive techniques in overcoming rote memorization's limitations, as both realia and PWIM fostered active participation and retention in resource-constrained madrasah settings. Similarly, (Mulis (2025) explored

teaching strategies at MTsN 1 Gondanglegi Malang, identifying memorization as one of the least effective methods due to students' tendency to forget words quickly, mirroring the challenges noted in this study's preliminary observations. (Mulis, 2025)recommends integrating interactive strategies to enhance engagement, which resonates with the positive student responses here, such as reduced anxiety and increased relevance to daily life. These parallels affirm that culturally grounded multisensory tools, as seen in realia with Islamic items, outperform traditional textbook-dependent practices (Cahyono, n.d.).(Prabandari et al., 2023), particularly for adolescents in Southeast Asian EFL contexts where superficial learning prevails.

Realia's superiority over conventional approaches lies in its low-cost, accessible nature and ability to bridge classroom and real-world contexts, making it a high-impact tool for resource-limited environments. Unlike rote memorization, which (Mulis, 2025) critiques for fostering passivity and short-term recall, realia encouraged tactile exploration and peer scaffolding, resulting in heightened motivation and nearly 80% of students meeting the KKM by Cycle 2's end. This not only mitigated pronunciation difficulties and translation reliance but also boosted confidence, as reflected in thematic analysis themes like "tactile memorability" and "collaborative support." Practically, these findings offer guidance for English teachers in madrasahs: incorporating familiar objects can sustain engagement and promote student-centered instruction, aligning with (Abdul, 2022) and (Wahyuni et al., 2024) on peer scaffolding in vocabulary development. However, limitations include the study's focus on a single female class and reliance on qualitative indicators without long-term follow-up, potentially limiting generalizability.

Future research could extend this by comparing realia with digital alternatives in mixed-gender or larger cohorts, or quantifying retention over extended periods. In summary, realia's success in this madrasah underscores its potential to bridge theory and practice, providing a viable alternative to conventional methods in enhancing EFL vocabulary mastery.

CONCLUSIONS

This classroom action research demonstrates that the systematic use of realia as a multisensory teaching medium significantly improved tenth-grade students' vocabulary mastery in an Indonesian Islamic senior high school, increasing the average score from 49.0 in the pre-test (with almost no students meeting the KKM ≥ 75) to 72.8 in the final post-test, with nearly 80% of the 29 students achieving mastery, alongside qualitative gains such as higher active participation, more spontaneous and accurate oral and written vocabulary use, and a shift from passive, translation-based learning to confident, contextual language production; students' overwhelmingly positive responses emphasized the tactile, memorable, and culturally relevant nature of realia—particularly its connection to daily and religious life—and the peer-scaffolding it encouraged, findings that align with dual-coding theory (Paivio; Mayer & Fiorella), sensorimotor enrichment research (Mathias et al.), sociocultural learning perspectives (Lantolf & Thorne), and recent local studies in Malang showing the superiority of interactive approaches over rote memorization; importantly, the success of realia in this resource-limited context highlights its practicality as an inexpensive, accessible, culturally adaptable, and highly engaging tool for English teachers in Islamic senior high schools, although the study's limitations—its focus on a single all-female class and the absence of long-term retention data—suggest the need for future research comparing realia with digital multimedia, involving more diverse cohorts, and examining long-term vocabulary retention and transfer, while still affirming realia as an effective, teacher-friendly strategy for bridging the gap between curriculum demands and actual student performance in Indonesian EFL settings.

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