Investigating the Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies among ESL Learners in Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition is a vital component of English language learning, particularly for ESL learners at the primary level who require strategic support to build linguistic knowledge. This study investigates the types of language learning strategies (LLS) in vocabulary acquisition employed by primary school ESL pupils in Malaysia, using a survey instrument adapted from Young Learners Language Strategy Use Survey. The questionnaire, comprising both English and Malay versions, was administered to 45 Year 3-5 pupils and categorized strategies into memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective types. Data collection involved self – reported learner behaviors and preferences when encountering new vocabulary. The findings suggest that metacognitive strategy was the most frequently utilised by pupils (M = 2.55), indicating strong learner autonomy through planning, monitoring, and evaluating vocabulary learning. Social strategies followed closely (M = 2.46), highlighting the importance of peer and teacher interaction. Moderate use was observed in cognitive and affective strategies (M = 2.38), while compensation (M = 2.27) and memory strategies (M = 2.31) were less prevalent. Pupils demonstrated a preference for digital tools over traditional resources, aligning with research advocating for gamified and collaborative digital environments to enhance engagement, motivation, and vocabulary retention. The study provides insights for teachers and curriculum developers to design more targeted interventions that align with learners' cognitive and emotional profiles.

Keywords: Language learning strategies (LLS), ESL pupils, vocabulary acquisition, primary school

INTRODUCTION

The context of second language acquisition, vocabulary knowledge forms the backbone of language proficiency, particularly among young ESL learners who are still developing their foundational linguistics skills. Malaysian primary school students, particularly in rural areas, face challenges in learning vocabulary due to limited exposure and resources. This lack of support makes it difficult for them to discover effective strategies to improve their language skills. This study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by rural Malaysian primary school students, framed within Oxford's (1990) language learning strategies (LLS) taxonomy.

Vocabulary acquisition has been a major branch of second language (L2) development. It serves as a fundamental pillar for students to achieve linguistic competence. A strong vocabulary foundation enables students to comprehend reading and also listening materials, enabling themselves to express themselves better in writing and speech and participate meaningfully in classrooms sessions [1]. In Malaysia, ESL learners especially those in rural areas are often to encounter challenges in mastering vocabulary due to limited exposure, insufficient materials, resources, lack of practice and solely relying on memorization methods [2].

In response to these challenges, Vocabulary Learning Strategies also known as VLS, one of the subsets of Language Learning Strategies (LLS), have been receiving increasing attention in ESL research. Some of the strategies, ranging from metacognitive planning self-monitoring to the usage of memory aids and digital tools. These instruments offer ESL learners an approach in obtaining, retaining and retrieving vocabulary [3].

Research Objectives:

To identify which vocabulary learning strategies are most and least frequently used by primary school ESL learners of SK Jimah Baru, Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan.

Research Questions:

What are the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies among primary school ESL learners of SK Jimah Baru, Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learning in second language contexts has grown increasingly complex, requiring learners to become more strategic and autonomous. In this regard, language learning strategies (LLS), particularly towards one of the branches of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), play a critical role in developing English proficiency, especially among ESL learners. This review synthesizes recent literature of language learning, LLS, vocabulary and VLS including the infamous Oxford's strategy classification system and its direct as well as indirect components to contextualize their roles in ESL learning.

Language learning refers to the systematic acquisition of ESL, encompassing multiple domains including vocabulary, grammar, speaking and writing. Recent studies have proven in emphasizing the increasing need for learners to become proactive and independent in the language learning process, particularly in ESL and EFL contexts [3]. English Vocabulary knowledge is widely acknowledged as the very base of second language acquisition. A strong vocabulary base allows learners to comprehend texts, express ideas and engage in conversations effectively. Learners of second or foreign languages are the ones who recognize the value of vocabulary the most [4]. As Wilkins famously stated, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed: without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (as cited in [6]).

Vocabulary is one of the main aspects of language proficiency. It also acts as an important component when it comes to second language acquisition. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, our students will be struggling to comprehend spoken nor written texts to express themselves effectively [3]. As we all know, vocabulary represents the building blocks of communication, having it mastered is highly crucial for both receptive and productive language skills [5]. Vocabulary is not merely a list of words to be memorized but it functions as a core element for communication and comprehension. As noted by [1], vocabulary knowledge directly influences language skills such as reading comprehension, listening accuracy and oral fluency. In the Malaysian ESL context, vocabulary learning remains a major component of ESL learning, particularly at the primary level. With Malaysia being a multilingual country, curriculum demands and not to mention various proficiency levels among students present both opportunities and challenges for vocabulary acquisition. Some studies have shown that while Malaysian ESL learners are constantly exposed to English in formal school settings, their access to authentic language use and strategic vocabulary learning is often limited by some certain drawbacks.

Consequently, vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), a subset of language learning (LLS), have gained substantial attention in recent TESL research. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) are the specific techniques learners use to acquire, store, and retrieve new words effectively [3]. Whereas in ESL context, VLS helps students in ESL settings increase their vocabulary in order to improve language production and comprehension. For primary and lower proficiency learners, who frequently have trouble remembering words because they haven't had enough exposure to and practice with them, these techniques are especially important.

VLS are nested within Oxford's (1990) broader classification of LLS, which divides strategies into direct and indirect types. Direct strategies involve interaction with the language itself, while indirect strategies support the process of language learning though mental and social engagement. [7] have observed that vocabulary learning benefits most when learners use a blend of strategies. They found out that learners who frequently engage in memory (e.g., grouping or repetition) and metacognitive strategies (e.g., planning and monitoring

progress were more likely to succeed in vocabulary acquisition. This supports the view that VLS should not be taught or used in isolation but rather as an integrated of broader learning strategies.

Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies remains widely referenced framework for categorizing LLS. It divides strategies into two branches: direct strategies which consist of memory, cognitive and compensation strategies and indirect strategies that include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. This system is still used in a contemporary setting when it comes to researches because it aligns with how learners cognitively and socially process new information. [7] confirmed that Oxford's framework in ESL classrooms, especially in terms of strategic learning, is still relevant to utilize until now.

Direct strategies involve mental processes used directly with the language. Some of the strategies including memory, cognitive and compensation. When it comes to the strategy of memory, it usually helps learners store and retrieve vocabulary. For example, through grouping association or imagery. As for cognitive, it involves manipulation of language material, including repetition, note – taking or summarizing. Finally, we have the compensation strategy where it usually revolves around in assisting in overcoming gaps in knowledge by guessing or using synonyms [8]. [3] has stated that frequent use of memory and cognitive strategies correlate with higher linguistics retention among ESL learners.

Whereas we have the indirect approach (metacognitive, affective and social) where it facilitates language learning indirectly. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning. It is essential for efficient vocabulary learning since it enables students to control and monitor how they learn. It allows learners to establish objectives, choose suitable tactics, and track their progress, resulting in enhanced effectiveness and effective vocabulary acquisition [9]. Next, we have affective strategies that revolve around managing emotions, motivation as well as anxiety. Lastly, we have social strategies that involve interaction with others, such as asking questions or collaborating on tasks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative research design is used in the study aimed at investigating the language learning strategies employed by primary school students in acquiring English vocabulary. A survey method was used to gather information from participants concerning the particular language learning strategies they utilized, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. [10] claimed that the survey approach is particularly useful when a researcher aims to describe the characteristics, attitudes, behaviours, and views of a large population, allowing the discovery of common strategies and patterns among learners. The study aimed to examine strategies that may be particularly beneficial or necessary in rural primary schools, where ESL pupils encounter different problems compared to urban schools.

Participants

The study involved 45 primary school pupils from a rural school in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Participants were chosen by purposive sampling; a non-random strategy aimed at identifying individuals with specific qualities essential for the research requirements. The criteria for this study were based on three main factors: ESL learner status, primary school level, and variation in English competence levels. The participants were selected from Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5 pupils, with 15 pupils from each year. The selected grade levels ensure representation of learners at various phases of primary education, facilitating an investigation of language learning strategies across diverse age groups. Moreover, the learners exhibited varying levels of English competence, which was essential for comprehending how various levels of language skill influence the strategies employed in acquiring English vocabulary.

Research Instrument

The data for this study were gathered using a questionnaire adapted from the Young Learners Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen & Oxford, 2002). The questionnaire targeted to examine the language learning

strategies utilised by primary school ESL pupils in acquiring English vocabulary. The questionnaire comprised two sections: Section A and Section B. Section A collected demographic data, including age, gender, and pupils' language proficiency, which offers contextual insights about the participants.

Section B contains 12 questions, each including 2 items, intended to identify the particular language learning strategies used by the participants. The strategies included various areas such as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. These categories reflect different approaches that learners may employ to acquire vocabulary and enhance their language skills [11]. Section B responses were measured using a 3-point Likert scale, comprising the options Agree, Neutral, and Disagree by using emoji icons. This scale was utilised to determine the participants' degree of agreement with each statement, offering insight into the frequency and usefulness with which learners implement various language learning strategies. Moreover, the items were structured using clear and simple sentences to accommodate diverse participant abilities.

Data Collection & Analysis

The survey was administered to 45 primary school pupils in a classroom setting. Participants completed the survey under the researcher's supervision that spanned two days to accommodate the school's two-session schedule (Level 2 in the morning and Level 1 in the afternoon), ensuring comprehensive participation from all students.

On the other hand, descriptive analysis was employed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 15 to analyse the data. This is supported by Alabi & Bukola (2023), descriptive statistics enable researchers to effectively analyse data and draw validated results.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates the summary of participants' demographic information for this study (n=45). It shows a slightly higher percentage of females (55.6%) than males (44.4%) participants in the study. The participants were Year 3, 4 and 5 pupils from a rural primary school in the Port Dickson district of Negeri Sembilan. The age distribution is uniformly distributed among the three groups, with each age category (9, 10, and 11) having (n=15) 33.3% of respondents. In terms of proficiency levels, the majority of the participants n=29 (64.4%) is classified as medium proficiency, while n=10 (22.2%) is classified as high proficiency, and n=6 (13.3%) as low proficiency. The sample demonstrates a balanced mix of gender and age, with a predominance of the participants at medium proficiency levels.

TABLE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Demographic Information	N	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	20	44.4
Female	25	55.6
Age		
9	15	33.3
10	15	33.3
11	15	33.3
Proficiency Level		
Low	6	13.3
Medium	29	64.4
High	10	22.2

The findings of the study are directly related to the research objective, which seeks to identify the vocabulary language learning strategies employed by primary school pupils. The six language learning strategies (LLS) were Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Social, Affective, and Metacognitive strategies. The questionnaire employed a 3-point Likert scale (Agree, Neutral, Disagree) to assess the pupils' preferences for each strategy,

specifically on vocabulary acquisition. Table 2 to 7 show the mean and the standard deviation for the six language learning strategies and table 8 presents the collective mean and standard deviation values for each LLS.

TABLE 2 MEMORY STRATEGY

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
1	I try to guess the meaning of a new word by looking at the picture or story.	2.58	0.621
4	I draw a picture (an object, symbols or a scene) to help me remember what the word means.	2.04	0.824

As shown in Table 2, the highest mean score (M = 2.58, SD = 0.621) was recorded for item 1 *"I try to guess the meaning of a new word by looking at the picture or story,"* suggesting that the pupils moderately prefer assuming meanings through contextual visual cues. While, in item 4, "*I draw a picture (an object, symbols or a scene) to help me remember what the word means,"* showed a lower mean (M = 2.04, SD = 0.824), indicating it is a less often used memory strategy among the participants. This study found that the higher mean for integrating contextual visual cues indicates that pupils gain benefits from linking new words to visuals or story contexts, hence reinforcing dual coding theory. This finding is consistent with that of [12] who claimed that visual stimuli are recognised to improve information processing and memory retention by simultaneously engaging multiple sensory pathways. This multisensory engagement aids learners in encoding and retrieving language more effectively, therefore enhancing vocabulary acquisition. However, the lower utilisation of self-created drawings may indicate a gap in knowledge or confidence with visual aids as a pedagogical method, or it could result from restricted time and opportunity to integrate drawing activities inside lessons. This further supports the idea of [13] as students' lack of confidence in their drawing skills may discourage them from using self-created visual aids, resulting in the limited application of this memory strategy.

TABLE 3 COGNITIVE STRATEGY

No	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
2	I repeat the word many times to help me remember it.	2.42	0.657
6	I like using a dictionary to help me understand new words.	2.11	0.859

Table 3 reveals that cognitive strategy was used with different frequency among pupils. The practice of repeating word as in Item 2 *"I repeat the word many times to help me remember it"* was highly used, as indicated by a mean score of 2.42 (SD = 0.657), highlighting that repetition is a rather common technique for vocabulary retention. Conversely, in Item 6, *"I like using a dictionary to help me understand new words*" was less preferred, evidenced by a mean score of 2.11 (SD = 0.859). This may indicate pupils' growing preference towards quicker, more convenient options like translation software. This trend is supported by [14], indicating that although conventional methods produce moderate improvement, technological methods tend to facilitate quicker vocabulary retention.

TABLE 4 COMPENSATION STRATEGY

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
3	If I forget a word, I try to explain it using other words I know.	2.22	0.765
7	I use online translation platforms (Google Translate) to find the meaning of words in Malay language.	2.53	0.757

Table 4 shows the use of compensation strategies among pupils when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. Pupils exhibited a stronger inclination to utilise online translation platforms as in Item 7, *"I use online translation platforms (Google Translate) to find the meaning of words in Malay language."* (M = 2.53, SD = 0.757) instead of applying paraphrase approaches to clarify lost terms with other familiar words as in Item 3, *"If I forget a word, I try to explain it using other words I know."* This study signifies a preference for digital tools as a compensation strategy, implying that pupils depend more on external technological help than on internal language resources to address vocabulary limitations. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies, demonstrating that applications such as Google Lens and Google Translate markedly enhance vocabulary retention and understanding in learners, hence promoting engagement and confidence in their language skills [15] [16]. Nevertheless, the limited application of paraphrasing strategies may indicate insufficient knowledge of vocabulary or a lack in confidence regarding the use of descriptive language. This further confirms the perspective of [17], who propose that the limited application of paraphrasing strategies could result from students' hesitance to express ideas independently, indicating a potential lack in their vocabulary range. This indicates a necessity to enhance pupils' lexical and expressive skills to promote greater independence in vocabulary application.

TABLE 5 SOCIAAL STRATEGY

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
5	I ask my teacher or friend what the word means.	2.73	0.495
8	I play games with my friends (like word bingo or flashcards) to learn new words.	2.18	0.886

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that the most frequently used social strategy was Item 5 *"I ask my teacher or friend what the word means"* (M = 2.73, SD = 0.495), highlighting the importance of interpersonal interaction in vocabulary acquisition. This emphasises the significance of social interaction and the collaborative nature of classroom learning, a perspective backed by [18], who claimed that social interaction is crucial for language acquisition since it allows learners to engage with vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

Conversely, the strategy for item 8, *"I play games with my friends (like word bingo or flashcards) to learn new words."* Was less often practiced (M = 2.18, SD = 0.886), possibly due to restricted opportunities or lower interest for such interactive learning methods. The limited utilization of educational games may indicate restricted exposure or chances for game-based learning, implying possibility for enhanced engagement through gamification. This corresponds with the findings of [19], which indicate that gamification improves vocabulary retention, as seen by students achieving higher post-test results with gamified learning approaches.

TABLE 6 AFFECTIVE STRATEGY

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
9	I feel happy when I make up a sentence using the new word that helps me remember it better.	2.42	0.690
12	I feel happy when I listen to songs with new words because it helps me remember them	2.33	0.798

Table 6 indicates that pupils utilised affective strategies to a moderate extent in their vocabulary acquisition. The technique in item 9 *"I feel happy when I make up a sentence using the new word that helps me remember it better."* Received a mean score of 2.42 (SD = 0.690), suggesting that pupils gain satisfaction from applying new vocabulary. The results indicate that emotional engagement influences vocabulary retention. The enjoyment gained from using new vocabulary in context indicates that pupils appreciate meaningful application as it aligns with [20], who stated that integrating vocabulary within emotionally charged circumstances improves memory, consistent with the Emotion-Involved Processing Hypothesis. On the other

hand, the statement in item *12 "I feel happy when I listen to songs with new words because it helps me remember them"* received a marginally lower mean score of 2.33 (SD = 0.798), indicating that although music possesses some emotional resonance, it is utilised less frequently. This may result from the insufficient integration of songs into lessons or difficulties in understanding song lyrics. [21] support this by noting that fast-paced lyrics and the presence of slang can hinder understanding, highlighting the need for adaptations like slowing down the audio or providing additional learning aids.

TABLE 7 METACOGNITIVE STRATEGY

No	Item	Mean	Std. Dev
10	I plan to use the new word when I speak or write to make sure I remember it better.	2.51	0.589
11	I think about whether if I have heard the word before.	2.58	0.621

As depicted in Table 7, pupils demonstrated a considerable frequency of metacognitive strategies in language acquisition. Participants frequently indicated their memories of prior encounters with words, as in item 11 (M = 2.58, SD = 0.621) and their intention to incorporate new vocabulary into their speaking or writing (M = 2.51, SD = 0.589), signifying active involvement in language acquisition. The findings demonstrate that these pupils exhibit a strong sense of self-awareness and purposeful involvement in their learning, hence fostering their autonomy. This aligns with [22], whose study indicates that learners had favourable attitudes towards vocabulary learning autonomy and actively use different strategies to enhance their vocabulary skills. Moreover, encouraging greater use of metacognitive strategies can facilitate the development of independent, lifelong learning practices. [23] emphasises that primary school pupils develop metacognitive knowledge in conjunction with vocabulary skills, highlighting the essential role of self-reflection in their learning development.

TABLE 8 LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGY (LLS)

LLS	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Social	Affective	Metacognitive
Mean (Std. Dev)	2.31 0.723	2.27 0.758	2.38 0.761	2.46 0.691	2.38 0.744	2.55 0.605

The findings from Table 8 highlight that metacognitive strategy is the most utilised strategy by the pupils, achieving the highest mean score of 2.55 (SD = 0.605). This indicates that pupils are proactively planning, monitoring, and assessing their vocabulary acquisition, demonstrating a strong sense of learner autonomy. Social strategy was followed closely (M = 2.46, SD = 0.691), highlighting the significance of interpersonal interactions such as consulting peers or teachers in enhancing vocabulary learning. The result is confirmed by [24], who noted that collaborative learning fosters collective problem-solving, and that learners participating in peer interactions are better at addressing lexical challenges, resulting in enhanced vocabulary retention. Meanwhile, cognitive and affective strategies exhibited similar mean scores of 2.38, indicating moderate engagement in both the direct processing of language information and emotional involvement. Compensation strategies (M = 2.27, SD = 0.758) and memory strategies (M = 2.31, SD = 0.723) were employed with marginally less frequency, indicating that pupils may prioritise immediate comprehension and assistance over remembering or organising vocabulary using conventional memory techniques.

The inclination towards online tools instead of conventional resources such as printed dictionaries indicates a transformation in pupils' approach to language acquisition in the digital era. This transition is mostly driven by the demand for quicker, more convenient, and interactive vocabulary learning. [25] and [26] claim that platforms like Google Translate and language learning websites provide students with continuous accessibility and enhanced engagement, thus making the learning experience more adaptable and stimulating which ultimately play crucial elements in maintaining learners' interest and motivation. While social and digital-

based strategies like Google Translate can be seen frequently used by the students, their effectiveness can be uncertain at times. As we all aware, these online tools are proven to be a huge help in assessing these students to retain such information in a fast – paced learning environment, nevertheless, they cannot promote long-term retention unless paired with a deeper, more meaningful processing strategies such as sentence-making or application in writing tasks.

In addition, the incorporation of technology into vocabulary instruction can significantly enhance student engagement and retention. By integrating digital tools with opportunities for social interaction, teachers can create dynamic and engaging learning environments that facilitate meaningful language use. This approach is supported by [27], who discovered that gamified applications enhance vocabulary retention more effectively than conventional techniques. Moreover, [28] underlines that promoting student collaboration on digital platforms enhances communication and strengthens vocabulary through peer engagement. Consequently, lesson designs must include stimulating digital resources and promote collaborative activities that enrich vocabulary acquisition through social interactions.

Incorporating metacognitive strategy like goal-setting, self-monitoring, and planning into vocabulary acquisition improves students' intentional involvement and reflective learning. [29] claim that when students monitor their progress, they can more effectively modify their learning practices, thereby enhancing their independence and confidence. Furthermore, [30] points out that planning, as a metacognitive tool, involves organising vocabulary acquisition activities, hence enhancing the retention and practical utilisation of new words. Collectively, these findings underscore the need to provide learners with metacognitive strategy to take responsibility for their vocabulary development. Therefore, these insights can guide teachers in customising vocabulary instruction that integrates social interaction, metacognitive strategies, and interactive tools such as games and media presents a modern and efficient method for vocabulary acquisition, according to students' learning preferences and reflecting contemporary educational practices.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

This study explored and looked into the use of language learning strategies in vocabulary acquisition used by primary ESL students at SK Jimah Baru in Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan with a focus on identifying the most and the least frequently used strategies. The findings revealed that metacognitive and social strategies were most commonly used, indicating that learners are very much active in engaging themselves in planning, monitoring and collaborating within their peers to acquire new vocabulary. Whereas research has concluded that memory and compensation strategies were used less since a lot of students prefer to use digital tools like Google Translate, showing a shift from traditional learning methods to more modern, technology-based approaches.

The implications of the study urge the need of teachers to include strategy-based lessons that focus on metacognitive skills, teamwork and digital learning tools. Tailoring vocabulary instruction to learners' strategic preferences can enhance students' motivation, engagement and long-term retention as it has been proven to be effective and way more enjoyable. Furthermore, schools can also consider in embedding gamified and interactive tools in curriculum to align with students' preferences.

However, like most studies, this research also has its own limitations. Firstly, with the sample that was limited to only one rural primary school, so the results may not apply to all of the students in different areas. The use of self-reported questionnaires may also lead to response bias, since students around the age 9-11 years old might not accurately reflect their actual strategy use. Furthermore, this particular study has employed a cross-sectional survey design, which captures only a snapshot of the students' vocabulary strategy use at a single point in time. This can be seen to limit the ability to observe how strategies evolve or change as these students progress. Lastly, this study provides a rather detailed frequency data on strategy use but it does not directly measure the effectiveness of each strategy on learning outcomes such as vocabulary retention, usage or students' performance in assessments. This study concurred, future research should consider expanding the sample size, including urban schools for comparison as well as incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations for deeper and meaningful insights. Plus, a longitudinal approach would be more beneficial in future studies in order to track the development of strategy use and its potential impact

on vocabulary acquisition over time. Future research should also consider incorporating vocabulary tests or performance-based tasks alongside strategy use surveys to form clearer connection between strategies and learning success. Overall, understanding and supporting the strategic behaviors of young ESL learners is essential for effective vocabulary development.

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