Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among University Students Taking an ESL Course

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ABSTRACT

A common scenario in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms depicts less emphasis on vocabulary knowledge, despite it having an essential role in language learning. Research revealed that assessing students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) assists in understanding how the students develop their vocabulary, thus giving language instructors ideas on appropriate activities that stimulate active learning during the language learning process. This study was done to explore VLS used by ESL students from Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. This quantitative study included an intact group of 36 students, as its sample, and applied an adapted version of Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) consisting of 39 items, as its instrument. Statistical analysis (SPSS) was used to analyse the data gathered. The results revealed the most and the least preferred VLS among the participants. The study also found an observable difference in the least preferred VLS among the male and female participants. The study hence concluded that exploring VLS among ESL students is necessary in planning suitable vocabulary activities in the language classrooms.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, VLS, vocabulary knowledge, ESL, language learning

INTRODUCTION

Research has long established that vocabulary knowledge is essential to successful language acquisition. Many studies, such as Alahmadi (2019) and Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021) to name a few, have found that low vocabulary knowledge could affect students' proficiency levels negatively in all language skills development, be it listening, speaking, reading, writing. This inevitably could hinder their whole language learning process. In building adequate vocabulary knowledge, a language student needs to not only acquire an ample number of words (vocabulary breadth), but also comprehend the word forms and functions (vocabulary depth). This specific task is often viewed as a challenging feat among language learners, including students taking English as a Second Language (ESL) course (Zabidin, Dellah, Nordin, Kamaludin, & Sharif, 2024).

Due to its significance, vocabulary knowledge should be equally developed alongside other necessary language skills to aid successful language learning. However, common scenario in language classrooms displays a lack of emphasis on vocabulary knowledge (Linda & Shah, 2020) where it is not explicitly taught while more attention is given to grammar, writing, and reading instead (Mustapha & Hatta, 2018). In order to develop students' vocabulary knowledge in line with other skills, language instructors have to gain a better understanding of the students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) as the means to implement teaching methods that correspond to and match their VLS. By focusing on the students' VLS, language instructors can, in turn, assist in making their students aware of their own VLS since awareness can actually lead to active and autonomous learning and eventually better vocabulary knowledge development (Besthia, 2018).

Realising the importance of VLS in vocabulary knowledge development, this study was done to add to the existing body of knowledge with data on VLS used by students taking an ESL course in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. Additionally, and more importantly, the researchers who were the language instructors of the

participants at the time of the study aimed to gather the data that could contribute to their lesson plan development.

This study was done with the following objectives in mind:

1. To explore the most preferred and the least preferred vocabulary learning strategies among the participants.
2. To investigate if there was any statistically significant difference in the most preferred and the least preferred VLS between the male and female participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary has long been identified as fundamental in language acquisition (Risco, 2019). It can be defined as the words used to communicate effectively: to express own ideas and to understand others' ideas well (Pratami & Margana, 2020). It is necessary for language students to master vocabulary to be successful in their language learning. The better students' vocabulary knowledge is, the more successful their language learning will be. However, Gu (2018) aptly depicted how gruelling the process of developing vocabulary knowledge can be as he explained that language students begin by acquiring the most basic, common words and phrases and never actually stop developing the vocabulary even when they are at the highest proficiency level. Zabidin *et al.* (2024) also added that successful vocabulary knowledge development involves more than just knowing word meaning. In learning a language, students not only need to develop vocabulary breadth where they must acquire a vast number of words, but they must also attain vocabulary depth, the knowledge on the usage of the word forms and functions, such as in terms of spelling and collocations.

However, despite it being empirically proven to be crucial and essential in language acquisition, vocabulary knowledge has not been given much attention in the language classrooms. This might be due to language instructors' lapse in believing more focus should be given to grammar or other language skills (Mustapha & Hatta, 2018) or their reluctance to emphasise vocabulary teaching as they were not confident in the best practices to do so (Tyas, Ariyanto, & Suharjito, 2023). Recent studies in vocabulary teaching have called for language instructors to put similar emphasis, if not more, on vocabulary teaching as they do others.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

In developing language students' vocabulary knowledge, language instructors can begin by focusing on their students' vocabulary learning strategies. Past studies have developed a number of definitions and classifications of VLS. Schmitt (1997) defined VLS as the process of obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using vocabulary items, and divided VLS into two: discovery strategies (determination and social) and consolidation strategies (social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive) (Hadi & Guo, 2020). Gu (2013), meanwhile, categorised VLS into two: metacognitive (beliefs about VL and metacognitive regulation of VL) and cognitive (initial handling, reinforcement, and activation) (Gu, 2018). In simple words, VLS can be described as the conscious mental and behavioural actions or approaches that language learners use in developing their word knowledge. These studies and others like Hendrawaty and Retnomurti (2021) and Besthia (2018) all concluded that identifying language students' VLS can benefit both instructors and students. It not only assists language instructors in matching their teaching strategies with the students' learning strategies, but also supports students to be active and autonomous in their own language learning.

Many studies have analysed language students' VLS in a variety of classroom settings. Linda and Shah (2020), Pratami and Margana (2020), Ye (2021), and Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023) are some studies that involved school students as their participants. Other VLS studies, meanwhile, included university students as the participants, such as in Besthia (2018), Alahmadi (2019), Hadi and Guo (2020), Hanh (2021), and Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021). In the Malaysian context, Mustapha and Hatta (2018), Hendrawaty and Retnomurti (2021), and Yip (2021) are some examples that involved university students in the local universities as the participants. All of these studies have concluded that an analysis of students' VLS can facilitate vocabulary

knowledge development and their language acquisition, and thus called for more studies on language students' VLS. Therefore, the present study was executed not only to serve practical teaching and lesson planning purposes, but also to add to the existing body of knowledge on VLS with data from a sample of local undergraduate ESL students.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative study employed a questionnaire as the instrument that was distributed to a purposive sampling of participants while SPSS was used as the data analysis method. The study involved an intact group of 36 year-one university students from the Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia, who were taking an ESL course. The group was chosen as the researchers were interested in analysing their VLS in developing lesson plan that catered to them. According to Creswell (2012), in any educational research, a purposive sampling of 15 people in an intact group would suffice to avoid disrupting the lessons. The group, with ages ranging from 18 to 20 years old, comprised of 9 male students (25%) and 27 female students (75%). Table 1 presented their English Language grades in the national exam Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), taken before they entered the university. Most of the students received the grades of B, C, and D for their English Language. In other words, the participants' language proficiency levels ranged from average to low.

TABLE 1 Participants' English Language Grades In SPM

SPM English Grade	Frequency
A	8
B	10
C	8
D	7
E	3
Total	36

The study adapted Alahmadi's (2019) version of Schmitt's (1997, 2000) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) as its instrument since it is one of the most comprehensive lists of strategies available and suits the context of the study. The questionnaire has also been extensively adapted and employed in previous VLS studies like in Mustapha and Hatta, (2018), Risco (2019), Hanh (2021), Karmi (2021), and Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023). In this study, the questionnaire consists of a demographic section and a section with 39 items on vocabulary learning strategies. The participants were given ample time to answer the questionnaire. Table 2 presents the reliability statistics of the VLSQ. Using Cronbach's Alpha, the value for Cronbach's Alpha for the survey was found to be α = .950, which indicates a high reliability value.

TABLE 2 Reliability Statistics of VLSQ Used

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.950	39

RESULTS

Research Objective 1: To explore the most preferred and the least preferred vocabulary learning strategies among the participants.

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive analysis of the most preferred VLS by the participants. The results indicated that participants mostly preferred to guess the meaning of the words from the context/sentence when they did not know the meaning of new English word (item 5), with the highest mean score of M=4.51, SD=.612. The

second most preferred VLS with the mean score, M=4.29, SD=.825, is using English language media when they wanted to remember new words and built their vocabulary (item 37). In addition, with the mean score M=4.20, SD=.868, the participants also looked for any word parts that they knew if they did not know a new English word (item 2).

TABLE 3 The Most Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among the Participants

Items	Mean	SD
1. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I check the new word's form (verb, noun etc.)	4.03	.954
2. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I look for any word parts that I know (e.g.: impossible, colourful)	4.20	.868
3. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I check if the word is also a Bahasa Melayu word. (e.g. amok - amuk)	3.54	1.146
4. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I use any pictures or gestures to help me guess the meaning.	3.29	1.405
5. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I guess the meaning from context/sentence.	4.51	.612
6. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I use an English-Malay dictionary.	3.57	1.243
7. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I use an English-English dictionary.	3.57	1.037
8. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I ask the teacher/lecturer to give me the definition or a sentence of the new word.	3.00	1.000
9. When I find a new English word that I don't know, I ask my classmates for the meaning.	3.97	1.043
37. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I use English language media (songs, movie, the internet).	4.29	.825

Meanwhile, the least preferred VLS among the participants are presented in Table 4. The descriptive analysis has shown that the participants' least preferred VLS was to draw a picture of the words if they wanted to remember the words (item 3), with the mean score M=2.40, SD=1.265. Another least preferred strategy is using flashcards to record new words (item 5), where M=2.46, SD=1.197. Additionally, with the mean score M=2.71, SD=1.341, the participants also did not talk with native speakers if they wanted to remember new words (item 2).

TABLE 4 The Least Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among the Participants

Items	Mean	SD
1. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I ask the teacher/lecturer to check my definition.	2.86	1.141
2. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I talk with the native speakers (people whose first language is English).	2.71	1.341
3. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it.	2.40	1.265
4. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I make a mental image of the words' meaning.	2.91	1.031
5. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I use flashcards to record new words.	2.46	1.197

6. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I study the words with my classmates.	2.91	1.245
7. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I remember words on 'scales' (always-often-sometimes-never).	2.91	1.222
8. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I group the words together to study them.	3.06	1.259
9. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I put English labels on physical objects.	2.77	1.330
10. When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I keep a vocabulary notebook.	2.97	1.294

Research Objective 2: To investigate if there was any statistically significant difference in the most preferred and the least preferred VLS between the male and female participants.

Further analysis was done to explore the participants' VLS more. Independent Sample Test was conducted to investigate if there was a statistically significant difference between male and female participants with regard to both the most preferred and the least preferred VLS. Table 5 indicates that there was no statistically significant difference found between male and female participants in terms of the most preferred VLS where t=1.22, p<.005.

TABLE 5 Comparison of the Most Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Between Male and Female Participants

		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
The most preferred VLS: 'When I find a new English word that I don't know, I guess the meaning from context/sentence'	Equal variances assumed	.054	.818	.122	31	.904
	Equal variances not assumed			.122	14.425	.905

Meanwhile, Table 6 proves that there was a statistically significant difference, where the male participants (M=2.89, SD=1.537) least preferred VLS of drawing a picture to remember words compared to their female counterparts (M=3.04, SD=.806). The difference was statistically significant where p<.05.

TABLE 6 Comparison of The Least Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Between Male and Female Participants

		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
The least preferred VLS: 'When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it'	Equal variances assumed	8.221	.007	-.374	31	.711
	Equal variances not assumed			-.284	9.702	.782

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the participants of this study mostly preferred to guess the meaning of the words from the context or sentence when they did not know the meaning of new English word, use English language media when they wanted to remember new words and built their vocabulary, and look for any word parts that they

knew if they did not know a new English word. The three most preferred VLS were the most common strategies and even repeatedly revealed as the most preferred in other VLS studies such as in Besthia (2018), Alahmadi (2019), Linda and Shah (2020), and Hadi and Guo (2020). Similar to these studies, the participants of this study mostly guessed from context and associated words with other sources or words in building their vocabulary knowledge. However, the findings differed from other studies like Mustapha and Hatta (2018), Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021), and Hanh (2021) that reported the use of dictionary as the most preferred VLS among their participants. In this study, on the other hand, using the dictionary, be it English-Malay or English-English, was not even listed as one of the three most preferred VLS.

The results also indicated that the three least preferred VLS among the participants of this study were drawing a picture of the words if they wanted to remember the words, using flashcards to record new words, and talking with native speakers if they wanted to remember new words. The same least preferred VLS were presented in studies like Besthia (2018), Mustapha and Hatta (2018), and Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023). One finding from the analysis that should be highlighted is that the participants admitted that they preferred to use or not use a combination of VLS rather than opting only for one specific VLS. Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021) and Karmi (2021) mentioned this in their studies, asserting that it was rather an effective strategy since language students are conscious and aware about what works best for them. Similarly, the participants in this study also appeared to consciously choose to use or not use a combination of VLS that suits their needs and interests when they found new words. They, subsequently, were able to develop their own vocabulary knowledge independently.

Further analysis of the data of this study also reported that no statistically significant difference was detected in the most preferred VLS: guessing the meaning of the words from the context or sentence when they did not know the meaning of new English word. This indicated that both male and female participants in this study preferred that specific VLS equally, which corroborated most studies reviewed. However, a statistically significant difference was found in the least preferred VLS where more male participants did not prefer drawing a picture to remember words as opposed to their female counterparts. This statistically significant difference contrasted with the absence of a statistically significant difference reported in Alahmadi (2019) and Mustapha and Hatta (2018). In this study, drawing pictures of the new words was the least preferred VLS among the participants, but more female participants chose said strategy than the male participants.

CONCLUSION

This study was primarily done to explore the most and the least preferred VLS in an intact group of university students from Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia, in developing effective lesson plans that specifically catered to them at the time of the study. The results revealed that the most preferred VLS among the participants was guessing the meaning of new words from the context or sentence while they least preferred drawing a picture of the words when they encountered new words. Additionally, it was proven that the most preferred VLS was equally chosen by both male and female participants. Meanwhile, the statistically significant difference found in the least preferred VLS between the male and female students indicated that although drawing pictures of new words found was the least preferred out of all, more female participants chose to use the strategy than their male counterparts.

The analysis of the data also revealed combinations and variations in VLS preference among the participants. This was, in actuality, an indication of good language students, and that further training can assist them in developing their vocabulary knowledge. All of the findings presented in this study, along with the review of other VLS studies, further emphasise the need to explore language students' VLS for successful language learning. It not only aids language instructors in employing suitable vocabulary teaching activities that align with the students' VLS, but also assists in developing autonomous and active learning among language students (Besthia, 2018). These benefits would eventually lead to successful language acquisition.

This study was not without limitations. The small sample size and the use of a self-reported survey could not allow for data generalisation. The data found was only able to represent said sample and achieve this study's primary objective, which was to aid language instructors in developing suitable lesson plans for the participants. Future VLS studies can introduce experimental design or include qualitative data in their research, apart from

self-reported surveys, to obtain enriched data and generalisation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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