ESL Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Autonomous Learning Among Upper-Primary School Students in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT

Given the foundational role of vocabulary in language proficiency, the introduction of learner autonomy through Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) has emerged as a vital component in enhancing vocabulary knowledge among students. Research has highlighted the need for autonomy in learners to self-guide their vocabulary learning, which is a key determinant of success in second language acquisition. However, insights into the role of VLS and the readiness for Language Acquisition (LA) among primary school students in Malaysia remain underexplored. This study proposes to address this research gap by evaluating the current state of VLS utilization and examining the readiness for LA among primary school students in Malaysia. A quantitative cross-sectional survey will invite all eligible pupils in the school, subject to written parental consent and pupil assent. The questionnaire will comprise a 20-item VLS inventory informed by Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy and a 12-item autonomy readiness module informed by Chan et al.'s (2002) responsibility and decision-making domains. The proposed investigation underscores the importance of assessing readiness for autonomous learning through vocabulary strategies among upper-primary school students. The anticipated findings may offer valuable insights for developing autonomous learning systems that promote effective, personalized, and continuous language learning in the Malaysian primary educational landscape.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies, learner autonomy, autonomous learning readiness, English as a second language (ESL), upper-primary school students, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are the actions pupils report using to discover, remember and practise English words. Following Schmitt (1997), the study will distinguish determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Social strategies may support both discovering meanings and consolidating knowledge. VLS will be measured as reported frequency of use during the preceding four school weeks, rather than as strategy effectiveness or vocabulary proficiency.

Learner autonomy refers to learners' participation in directing and evaluating their learning, with appropriate teacher support. Learner autonomy readiness is defined more narrowly in this study as pupils' self-reported willingness and perceived ability to take responsibility for vocabulary-learning decisions. The two dimensions will be reported separately. They do not constitute a direct test of independent learning competence. This distinction draws on the responsibility and decision-making domains examined by Chan et al. (2002), while recognising that their original study involved tertiary learners.

Learner autonomy is widely recognized as a crucial aspect of education, particularly in language learning, as it empowers students to take control of their learning process and become independent learners (Hu & Zhang, 2017; Tavallali & Marzban, 2015). It enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills and allows learners to tailor their learning to their individual needs and preferences, fostering self-efficacy and

a deeper understanding of the target language and culture. Incorporating autonomous learning strategies in teaching has also been found to promote student creativity and innovation (Ghufron & Ermawati, 2018). Therefore, students should be provided student-centred learning opportunities in order to promote reflective practices and learners' self-efficacy.

In Malaysia, autonomous learning has received significant attention and is considered a key element in improving the quality of education and fostering lifelong learning skills (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Ramamuruthy & Rao, 2015). The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 recognizes the importance of autonomous learning in developing critical thinking skills, self-reliance, and self-efficacy among students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Studies have also shown that implementing autonomous learning in the Malaysian education system positively impacts language proficiency, academic performance, motivation, and interest in learning. Therefore, promoting autonomous learning is essential for enhancing student learning outcomes in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary knowledge in second language learning is imperative in acquiring competence and mastery of the language, and therefore, it is vital for English Second Language (ESL) learners to master as a broad vocabulary repertoire is necessary for aiding them to understand verbal and written communication. However, despite Malaysians using English as a second language, many Malaysian learners have been reported to have a limited number of English language vocabulary repertoires, which contributes to their low proficiency level.

Malaysian Primary-level Context

Wang and Yamat (2019) assessed 36 Year 5 pupils using an adapted Vocabulary Levels Test. They reported low noun knowledge for 21 pupils and low verb knowledge for 26 pupils, while 18 pupils had intermediate adjective knowledge. This provides evidence of difficulties within the assessed group, but neither the sample nor the selected word classes warrants a claim that primary pupils throughout Malaysia have uniformly low vocabulary knowledge. The study also assessed vocabulary knowledge rather than autonomy readiness; it cannot establish that insufficient autonomy caused the reported difficulties.

Kho et al. (2021) investigated 132 Year 5 pupils in two urban Chinese national-type schools in Sarawak using questionnaires and interviews. Pupils reported moderate use of the five strategy categories, with cognitive strategies used most frequently. The interviews added accounts of pupils' reasons for their choices, providing contextual depth beyond frequency scores. Nevertheless, the findings reflect two schools, one year group and a particular school type. They cannot be assumed to describe pupils in a different Sabah school, and frequent mechanical practice should not be interpreted automatically as readiness to manage learning.

Raj et al. (2023) surveyed 100 Year 6 pupils from selected suburban schools in Peninsular Malaysia through an online questionnaire containing 30 items drawn from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning. Memory and compensation strategies were most frequently reported, whereas metacognitive strategies were least frequently reported. This differs from the prominence of cognitive strategies in Kho et al. (2021). The contrast may reflect differences in school context, year group, questionnaire delivery and classification: the general language-learning categories used by Raj et al. are not identical to Schmitt's vocabulary-specific categories. Their rankings therefore should not be treated as directly comparable evidence of a national pattern.

A complementary teacher survey by Mohd Tahir et al. (2025) involved 134 Malaysian primary ESL teachers and found that social and memory strategies were most commonly reported, while metacognitive strategies were least adopted. Teacher reports help contextualise the strategies that may be encouraged in classrooms, but they do not establish what individual pupils use or whether pupils are willing and able to make their own learning decisions. The purposive online recruitment also limits population-wide inference. Together, these studies support collecting pupil-level evidence in the selected school rather than presuming that teacher preferences or findings from other regions apply there.

Autonomy readiness and the research gap

Research outside Malaysian primary schools offers useful concepts but requires careful adaptation. Chan et al. (2002) distinguished learners' perceived responsibilities and decision-making abilities in a Hong Kong tertiary context. Almusharraf (2020) examined six teachers' perspectives and classroom practices at a Saudi university, illustrating the relevance of teacher support to autonomy in vocabulary learning. Such evidence helps frame the present constructs, but differences in age, institutional expectations and language-learning context prevent direct transfer of instruments or conclusions to upper-primary pupils.

The studies reviewed provide evidence about vocabulary knowledge, strategy frequency and teaching practices, but do not establish the autonomy readiness of pupils at the proposed school. The contribution of the present study is therefore to document two distinct profiles within the same setting: reported strategy use and readiness for vocabulary-learning decisions. A pupil may be willing to choose learning goals but feel unable to evaluate progress; another may report frequent strategy use while relying on teacher direction. Separate measures can identify such areas for support without assuming that strategy frequency demonstrates autonomy. A descriptive cross-sectional survey can map these perceptions and reported practices, but cannot establish their causes or determine whether a particular teaching approach improves them.

The learners' limited vocabulary repertoire is due to a lack of interest in learning vocabulary when taught using the traditional method (Alqahtani, 2015). Thus, capturing students' interest and motivating them is crucial in vocabulary learning, as when they stop enjoying lessons, they tend to learn less in class. So, this proposed study attempts to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the level of learner autonomy readiness, in terms of willingness and perceived ability to make vocabulary-learning decisions, among upper-primary pupils at the selected school in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah?

RQ2: Which ESL vocabulary learning strategies are reported most frequently by upper-primary pupils at the selected school in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah?

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The proposed study will adopt a quantitative research approach to examine learner autonomy (LA) readiness and English as a Second Language (ESL) vocabulary learning strategies among Upper Primary students in Kota Kinabalu primary schools. The proposed study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' readiness for autonomous learning and the vocabulary learning strategies they employ within the Malaysian primary school context.

A quantitative approach is appropriate because it enables the systematic collection of numerical data from a large sample of participants, allowing the researchers to describe trends, patterns, and relationships among variables using statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach provides objective and reliable data that can be generalized to the target population and facilitates the identification of prevailing levels of learner autonomy readiness and commonly used vocabulary learning strategies.

Research Design

The proposed study will employ a cross-sectional survey design, in which data are collected from participants at a single point in time. The design is suitable for describing the current level of learner autonomy readiness and identifying the ESL vocabulary learning strategies used by Upper Primary students in Kota Kinabalu primary schools. Data will be gathered through structured questionnaires measuring learner autonomy readiness and vocabulary learning strategies. The responses will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to address the research questions.

Sampling Technique

The proposed study will employ purposive sampling to select one primary school in Kota Kinabalu. The school will be selected based on predetermined criteria, including accessibility, administrative approval, and its suitability for investigating learner autonomy readiness and ESL vocabulary learning strategies among Upper Primary students. Within the selected school, total population sampling will be adopted, whereby all Upper Primary students will be invited to participate in the study. This approach is intended to ensure comprehensive coverage of the target population within the selected school and provides an in-depth understanding of the variables under investigation.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Data will be collected using an adapted questionnaire with three sections. Section A will record year group and broad contextual information relevant to interpreting access to learning resources, such as languages usually used at home and access to a dictionary or English reading materials. Pupils may skip these questions. Names, student identification numbers, exact birth dates and home addresses will not be collected on questionnaires.

Section B will contain a proposed 12-item learner autonomy readiness module informed by the responsibility and decision-making domains in the questionnaire reported by Chan et al. (2002). Six items will address willingness to take responsibility, and six parallel items will address perceived ability. The decisions will concern choosing vocabulary goals, selecting materials, choosing a learning method, arranging practice, checking understanding and evaluating progress. For example, willingness and ability will be distinguished through statements beginning “I am willing to choose…” and “I can choose…”. Each item will use five ordered agreement responses from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with 3 labelled neither agree nor disagree. No combined readiness total or diagnostic ready/not-ready classification will be assumed.

Section C will contain a proposed 20-item VLS inventory informed by Schmitt’s (1997) taxonomy, with four items in each of five categories. The social category will include two discovery and two consolidation items. Pupils will indicate frequency during the preceding four school weeks using 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often) and 5 (always). A separate “I did not have the opportunity” option will distinguish unavailable resources or activities from a decision not to use a strategy; it will be reported separately and not scored as zero. Table 1 specifies the proposed coverage. Final wording and item counts will be documented after pretesting.

Table 1 Proposed questionnaire domains and item coverage

Section and domain	Items	Content to be represented
B Willingness	6	Willingness to take responsibility for six vocabulary-learning decisions.
B Perceived ability	6	Perceived ability to make the same six decisions with age-appropriate support.
C Determination	4	Finding meanings through context, pictures, word parts and dictionaries.
C Social	4	Seeking meanings from a teacher or peer and practising or checking words with others.
C Memory	4	Remembering words through imagery, personal associations, semantic grouping and meaningful sentences.
C Cognitive	4	Using spoken repetition, written repetition, word lists and vocabulary notebooks.
C Metacognitive	4	Self-testing, spaced review, continued practice and deliberate use of English media.

These are proposed adaptations, not instruments already validated for Malaysian upper-primary pupils. The original sources will be acknowledged and any required adaptation permissions obtained. Items will be rewritten as short, single-idea statements with concrete examples appropriate to Years 4–6. An item-to-domain record will document the conceptual source, revised wording and reason for each change. VLS items will ask

about reported actions, while readiness items will ask about willingness or perceived ability, reducing conceptual overlap between the two modules.

Validity and Reliability

Six experts will assess the content validity of the research instrument in terms of its relevance, coverage and age appropriateness. Items must receive agreement from at least five reviewers to meet the content validity criterion of .78 (Polit et al., 2007); weaker items will be revised. English and Bahasa Melayu versions will undergo forward translation, back-translation and reconciliation. For face validity, interviews with six to nine pupils will assess comprehension, completion time and response difficulties. Parental consent and pupil assent will be obtained, and necessary revisions completed before the main survey.

Reliability will be assessed using a pilot study involving approximately 30 pupils from another comparable school. Internal consistency will be examined separately for the willingness and perceived ability subscales using Cronbach's alpha, item–total correlations and inter-item patterns, with an alpha value of .70 serving as an acceptable guide.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee, together with the permissions required by the education authorities and the school, before recruitment or pretesting. School permission will not replace individual consent. The procedures will follow a child-centred approach that respects children's understanding, privacy and ongoing choice, consistent with the principles discussed by Graham et al. (2013).

Expected Contribution

The study is expected to provide a context-specific description of vocabulary strategies and two dimensions of autonomy readiness among participating pupils. The findings may help teachers identify which decisions pupils feel able and willing to make, where guided choice may be appropriate and which strategies or resources merit further discussion. They may also inform the design of a later teaching intervention or a study involving multiple schools, rather than demonstrate that any proposed support is effective.

CONCLUSION

This proposed study seeks to examine the vocabulary learning strategies employed by upper-primary ESL learners and assess their learner autonomy readiness in a selected primary school in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. By identifying commonly reported strategies and pupils' willingness and perceived ability to make vocabulary-learning decisions, the study is expected to provide context-specific evidence to inform vocabulary instruction and age-appropriate learner-centred support. As the investigation has yet to be conducted, its contribution remains prospective and will depend on the findings of the planned survey.

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