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STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN ESL PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

Siti Nur Badriah Mohd Tahir (a), Mohd Radzi Manap (b)*, Nor Fazlin Mohd Ramli (c)
*Corresponding author

(a) University Technology Mara, Malaysia, msitinurbadriah@gmail.com
(b) University Technology Mara, Malaysia, moham830@uitm.edu.my
(c) University Technology Mara, Malaysia, norfa707@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

The effectiveness of vocabulary instruction on language development has been of interest in the field of language teaching, especially with the rise of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Effective vocabulary instruction should balance both explicit and incidental learning. However, the strategies employed by teachers in teaching vocabulary remain under-explored, particularly in the Malaysian context. To address this gap in research, this study aimed to investigate the strategies used by Malaysian ESL primary school teachers in teaching vocabulary, using a survey instrument based on the Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). A total of 57 teachers participated in the online survey. The high reliability of the survey items, as indicated by a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.92, confirms the usefulness of the survey instrument in future research. The results of the study showed that teachers predominantly rely on explicit teaching methods, such as rote memorization, to teach vocabulary. Although the teachers perceived these methods as effective, they may limit students' language development. Hence, the findings suggest a need for teachers to adopt a more diverse and implicit approach to vocabulary teaching. In conclusion, this preliminary study highlights the reliability and feasibility of using the VLS survey instrument in examining vocabulary teaching strategies in the Malaysian classroom. Further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies used by teachers and the impact of these strategies on students' vocabulary development.

Keywords: Explicit vocabulary instruction, incidental learning, vocabulary instruction, vocabulary strategies

1. Introduction

The significance of vocabulary in language learning was once underestimated. Early teaching methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method, placed a strong emphasis on grammar rather than vocabulary. Campbell and Wales (as cited in Winch, 2019) believed that language ability goes beyond building grammatical competence. The advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) shifted the focus towards communicative competence, leading to an increase in research on the role of vocabulary in language mastery.

In Malaysia, English is taught using a Communicative Language Teaching syllabus. In the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) for primary schools, it is highlighted that by the end of Year 6, pupils should be able to communicate with peers and adults confidently and appropriately in formal and informal situations (Curriculum Development Division, 2017). This is in line with one of the shifts outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) in which the aspiration is to produce bilingual students that are operationally proficient in both Bahasa Malaysia and English (Ministry of Education, 2013). The English curriculum in Malaysia, align with CLT focuses on developing the four main language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing, to build the students' communicative competence.

However, for students to achieve communicative competence, they need to have an adequate vocabulary. As Krashen (1982) posits, more vocabulary equals more input comprehension. Thus, the greater the vocabulary one possesses, the better he understands what he hears or reads. While the progress that students made in their vocabulary acquisition would determine their overall ability in learning a language (Ali, 2020), the teachers hold the responsibility to ensure students acquire enough vocabulary to begin with as they are the ones involved in planning and delivering lessons.

It is found that the teaching of vocabulary should not include just incidental learning but also explicit vocabulary instruction by the teachers (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019). Effective vocabulary instruction involves the teaching of meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output (Dang & Webb, 2020). Teaching with meaning-focused input is related to the repeated encounter of words by the students through listening and reading while meaning-focused output involves strategies and activities that opens the room for the students to use the words through speaking and writing (Dang & Webb, 2020). Fundamentally, ensuring that vocabulary is taught both incidentally and explicitly would require teachers to have at least good knowledge of vocabulary teaching itself.

2. Problem Statement

Good vocabulary teachers should know the ways that vocabulary can be acquired and make use of suitable strategies in the classroom. Vocabulary lessons that are both student and teacher centred and at the same time involve the use of various strategies that promote student-student interactions are reflections of teachers' good understanding and knowledge of vocabulary development (Moody et al., 2018). Consequently, a lack of variation in teaching methods will lead to students to become less interested in learning materials and become passive. Thus, the importance of teachers introducing the students to different vocabulary learning strategies could not be understated.

Vocabulary learning strategies, a sub-category of language learning strategies, can be defined as "a wide spectrum of strategies used as part of an on-going process of vocabulary learning" (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Oxford (1990), who described learning strategies as the specific actions that learners take when learning a language to make learning more successful, categorized learning strategies into direct and indirect. Oxford's direct strategies include memory, cognitive and compensation while metacognitive, affective and social are classified as indirect strategies. Schmitt (2000), on the same note, believes that vocabulary learning strategies can facilitate one's vocabulary learning. Schmitt divided vocabulary learning strategies into discovery and consolidation strategies. He outlined that learners would use determination or social strategies when they first try to find a meaning of a new word and use consolidation strategies when they want to reinforce the meaning of a word they previously encountered. Schmitt's taxonomy has been extensively used in several studies within the context of vocabulary learning strategies.

Teachers' role in students' vocabulary development is paramount. Primarily, teachers need to ensure that vocabulary strategies are taught to their students when planning and delivering their lessons as application of vocabulary learning strategies can help them obtain significant number of vocabulary items (Nation, 2001, as cited in Kafipour & Naveh, 2011). As students' learning achievement relies on how well teachers vary their teaching methods (Munawaroh, 2017), teachers would also need to be able to model the strategies, remind and practice to motivate learners to learn vocabulary both inside and outside of the classroom (Ghalebi et al., 2020). Suppose teachers only rely on the same strategies that students have already known like asking teachers directly for meaning, in that case it is doubtful that students will make good progress in their vocabulary development. This relates to the findings from the study by Mohd Tahir et al. (2020) that showed that the types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) used by the teachers influence the way they teach the students to a certain extent.

Tan and Goh (2020) believe that these strategies should be taught in schools. Yet, there is little known about how far these strategies are taught in Malaysian classroom by teachers as many studies were centred upon students' preference of the use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). Thus, this context has led to the development of this research paper. By looking at the Vocabulary Learning Strategies that teachers employ in their classroom, it is hoped to provide insight into how vocabulary is being taught in Malaysian primary school classroom by using Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies as base.

3. Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

i. What are the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) commonly adopted by Malaysian primary school teachers?

ii. What are the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) least adopted by Malaysian primary school teachers?

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate on Strategies Used by Malaysian ESL Primary School Teachers in Vocabulary Teaching and to obtain preliminary data on the types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) adopted by Malaysian ESL primary school teachers using Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of VLS.

5.   Research Methods

This study is a quantitative study. The instrument of this study is in the form of an online questionnaire via Google Form. A homogenous purposive sampling technique was used to select 57 respondents that are primary school teachers that teach English through dedicated Telegram channels for English teachers.

The questionnaire was designed to gather information about the strategies used by teachers in teaching vocabulary to primary school students in Malaysia. It consisted of two sections: the first section contained demographic questions, while the second section contained 45 vocabulary learning strategies in the form of statements. The strategies were adopted from Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), which served as the framework of the study, as shown in Figure 1 below.

The vocabulary learning strategies were divided into two categories: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies, which Schmitt defines as strategies used when learners first encounter a word, include determination and social strategies such as using a dictionary, asking teachers for translation, using word lists and flashcards, and asking classmates for meaning. Consolidation strategies, on the other hand, are strategies used to reinforce the meaning of learned words and include social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies.

The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale to measure teachers' responses: 1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often, and 5=Always. This helped to quantify the frequency with which teachers use different vocabulary learning strategies in their classrooms.
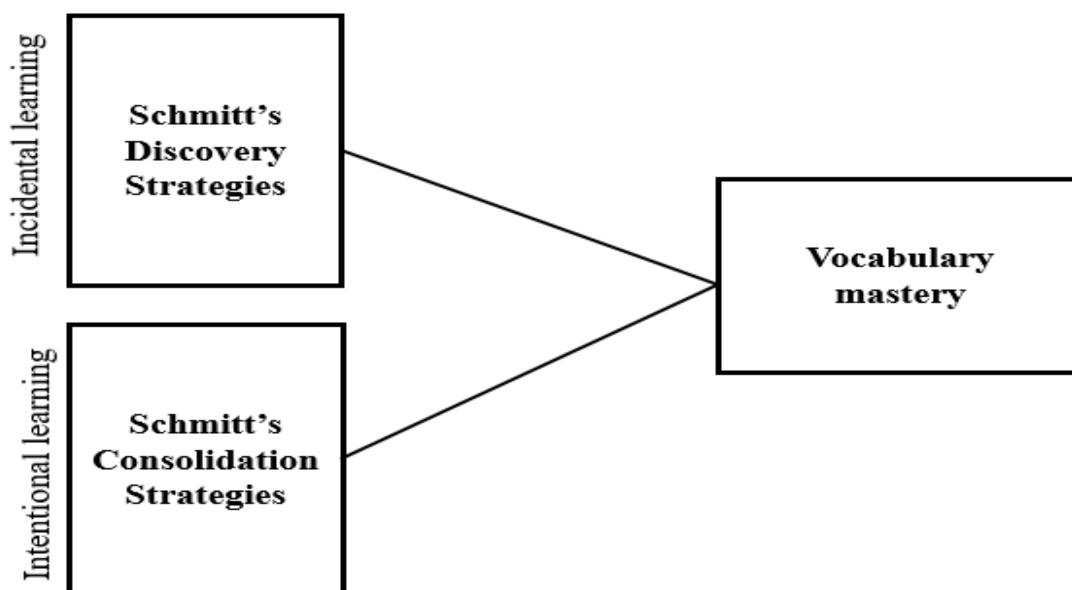
Figure 1. Framework on using VLS in developing vocabulary mastery

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 where the descriptive and reliability analyses were conducted. The results from the data were then analyzed in terms of demographics as well as the least and most used vocabulary strategies used by the teachers in the classroom. The vocabulary strategies were then grouped according to Schmitt's Discovery and Consolidation Strategies, where the relationship between the strategies chosen and how vocabulary is taught were further looked at.

6. Findings

6.1. Demographics

Since this is a preliminary study a total of 57 primary school teachers participated in this survey. Table 1 shows that the highest participation came from the 40 and above age group (54.4%) with 31.6 % have more than 20 years of teaching experience and majority of the participants are English option teachers (89.5%) at Sekolah Kebangsaan (84.2%).

Table 1. Demographic information

		n (%)
Age range	25 – 29	10 (17.5)
	30 – 34	10 (17.5)
	35 – 39	6 (10.5)
	40 and above	31 (54.4)
Type of school	Sekolah Kebangsaan (SK)	48 (84.2)
	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina (SJKC)	5 (8.8)
	Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil (SJKT)	4 (7.0)
Option	English-option	51 (89.5)
	Non-English-option	6 (10.5)

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	2 - 5 years	15 (26.3)
	6 - 10 years	9 (15.8)
Teaching experience	11 – 15 years	6 (10.5)
	16 – 20 years	9 (15.8)
	More than 20 years	18(31.6)

6.2. Reliability analysis

Reliability analysis was performed by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha value in SPSS to assess the consistency of the results from Section B of the questionnaire which involved the Vocabulary Strategies used by the teachers. The Cronbach's Alpha value achieved was 0.92 which indicated high reliability of the survey items used (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.920	.921	45

6.3. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used for this study. The mean and standard deviation for each of the items on vocabulary strategies used by the teachers were calculated and 10 most and least used vocabulary strategies by the teachers are tabulated as explained below.

6.3.1. The 10 most commonly used VLS

As shown in Table 3, the mean score for the 10 most used VLS range from 4.07 to 4.63. In the most commonly used strategy, 'I ask students to read out loud (say the new word aloud when studying)' has the highest mean (M=4.63, SD=0.55). This is followed by 'I ask my students to repeat the word verbally again and again' (M=4.49, SD=0.65). The lowest mean is 4.07 (SD=0.884), 'I ask my students to match the word with picture representing the word'. The are 6 memory, 2 cognitive and 1 metacognitive consolidation strategies. Only one determination discovery strategy, that is 'I ask my students to guess the meaning from textual context'. This indicates that the teacher heavily employs memory strategies like instructing students to repeat or practise the vocabulary orally or in written. As Rasinski and Rupley (2019) mentioned that teachers should teach vocabulary explicitly to ensure the students learn the intended vocabulary.

Table 3. Most used vocabulary strategies

Vocabulary Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	Type of Strategy
I ask students to read out loud (say the new word aloud when studying).	4.63	0.555	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to repeat the word verbally again and again.	4.49	0.658	Consolidation (Cognitive)
I focus on teaching my students pronunciation of the new word.	4.44	0.627	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to memorize the spelling of the word.	4.33	0.787	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to relate a word to their personal experience. Example; when learning the word celebration, they think of their birthday party / festivals.	4.28	0.75	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to guess the meaning from textual context.	4.25	0.662	Discovery (Determination)
I ask my students to listen to English songs in my classroom or at home.	4.21	0.861	Consolidation (Metacognitive)
I ask my students to use the vocabulary section in their textbook to learn new words.	4.16	0.862	Consolidation (Cognitive)
I ask my students to link the word to its related word. Example; banana, think of other fruits, apple	4.09	0.786	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to match the word with picture representing the word	4.07	0.884	Consolidation (Memory)

6.3.2. The 10 least used VLS

Table 4 shows the results for the 10 least used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) among teachers in which the mean ranges from 3.23 to 2.77. Results showed that three of the least used are metacognitive strategies with *'I give online task for my students to review the vocabularies they learned using Google Form, Wordwall or any other online application'* being the lowest (M=2.77, SD=1.16). Four memory strategies also appeared as the least used strategies by the teacher which included asking students to memorize roots, prefixes and suffixes of a word (M=3.16), asking students to underline the initial letter of a word (M=3.14), asking students to combine all word to form a story (M=3.00) and teaching students a word in the form of idiom (M=2.89). It is found that the four least used memory strategies to some extent involve the teaching of linguistic system. Teachers' preference on the types of memory strategies used in vocabulary teaching will be discussed in the next section. It's also worth noting that the standard deviations of the ratings are relatively high, which suggests that there is a large amount of variability in how these strategies are perceived by different teachers and students.

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Table 4. Least used vocabulary strategies

Vocabulary Strategy	Mean	Std. Deviation	Type of Strategy
I encourage my students to interact with native-speakers outside classroom.	3.23	1.195	Consolidation (Social)
I ask my students to use English-English dictionary to look up the meaning of new words.	3.21	1.206	Discovery (Determination)
I ask my students to memorize the roots, prefixes and suffixes of the words.	3.16	0.941	Consolidation (Memory)
I ask my students to underline the initial letter of the word.	3.14	1.217	Consolidation (Memory)
I put English labels on physical objects in my classrooms.	3.12	1.166	Consolidation (Cognitive)
I assign my students to read English newspapers in my classrooms / at home.	3.02	1.217	Consolidation (Metacognitive)
I ask my students to combine all the words to form a story.	3.00	1.018	Consolidation (Memory)
I teach my students the word in the form of idiom (Spill the bean - teach them the word spill & bean together)	2.89	0.88	Consolidation (Memory)
I have scheduled vocabulary tests online using application such as Quizizz and Word Wall to see if my students remember the new words learned.	2.88	1.151	Consolidation (Metacognitive)
I give online task for my students to review the vocabularies they learned using Google Form, Wordwall or any other online application.	2.77	1.165	Consolidation (Metacognitive)

6.4. Discussion

The results of this preliminary study indicated that when teaching vocabulary, teachers often resort to using cognitive strategies to reinforce the meaning of the words that students have already encountered. These strategies are mainly memory-based and involve rote memorization techniques such as reading out loud, repeating words verbally, and focusing on pronunciation. This method of explicit vocabulary teaching may be effective at the primary level, but as students' progress to higher levels, it may become less relevant. To help students learn a language through vocabulary acquisition, they need to be taught how to learn independently (Ali, 2020).

However, the study also found that teachers tend to avoid memory strategies that involve teaching linguistic systems, such as memorizing the roots, prefixes, and suffixes of words, underlining the initial letter of words, combining words to form a story, and teaching words in the form of idioms. This difference in preferred memory strategies reflects the rote versus meaningful learning debate discussed by other researchers. Sari and Wardani (2019) found that teachers face difficulties in teaching vocabulary

due to their limited knowledge of words and techniques. This is reflected in the results of this preliminary study, as teachers preferred rote memorization strategies while memory strategies that involved teaching linguistic systems were not favoured.

A study by Muhamad and Kiely (2018) found that vocabulary teaching is largely incidental and only occurs when students face difficulties in understanding word meanings. However, the preliminary data from this study suggests otherwise. The data shows that the strategies preferred by the teachers were mostly intentional or explicit vocabulary strategies. Effective vocabulary instruction is one that combines both intentional and explicit vocabulary learning (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019), and further interviews with the teachers are necessary to understand the reasons for these differences.

7.   Conclusion

The results of the Cronbach's Alpha test showed that the survey instrument, which was adopted from Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), is reliable. Hence, this instrument will be used in the follow-up study with a larger sample size to explore the strategies used by primary school teachers in Malaysia for teaching vocabulary. The study findings indicate that memory strategies are commonly used by teachers, yet they are also the least frequently utilized. To gain a deeper insight into these results, further investigation through teacher interviews is necessary. Additionally, conducting interviews will help in understanding why teachers in the survey predominantly chose explicit vocabulary strategies over incidental ones.

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