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ASSESSING VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES OF ESL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Despite playing a crucial role in language learning, vocabulary knowledge is often not emphasised in the classroom setting, and even more so in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. As language instructors, investigating students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) helps in understanding how the students develop their vocabulary knowledge, hence giving language instructors insights on appropriate activities during the language learning process that encourage active learning. This study was therefore done to assess VLS used by ESL students from Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. In this quantitative study, a purposive sampling of 36 students in an intact group was given an adapted version of Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) consisting of 39 items. The data gathered was then analysed through statistical analysis (SPSS). The results of the study revealed the most and least preferred VLS among the participants. An observable difference in the least preferred VLS was also found among the male and female participants. The study thus concluded that assessing students' VLS is necessary in planning suitable vocabulary activities that can cater to them.

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge has long been identified as essential to successful language learning. Numerous studies, like Alahmadi (2019) and Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021) to name a few, have reported that low vocabulary knowledge could inevitably negatively affect students' proficiency of all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and ultimately, their whole language acquisition process. Having adequate vocabulary knowledge involves not only acquiring a substantial number of words (vocabulary breadth) but also understanding word forms and functions (vocabulary depth). This task is considered challenging for any language students, including those learning English as a Second Language (ESL) (Zabidin, Dellah, Nordin, Kamaludin, & Sharif, 2024).

Despite its irrefutable importance, vocabulary knowledge is still not given much emphasis (Linda & Shah, 2020) and is not explicitly taught in language classrooms while more focus is directed towards grammar, writing, and reading (Mustapha & Hatta, 2018). Vocabulary knowledge should, in fact, be equally developed alongside other necessary language skills to encourage successful language acquisition. One way of achieving such an objective is by having a better understanding of students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). Language instructors need to pay attention to the students' VLS in order to implement teaching methods that correspond to and match their VLS. At the same time, it helps in making students aware of their own VLS and encouraging vocabulary growth since such awareness can lead to active and autonomous learning (Besthia, 2018).

Having the benefits of focusing on VLS in mind, the researchers were keen on analysing the participants' VLS. From the academic planning perspective, as the language instructors of the participants themselves, the data gathered could contribute to their lesson plan development. The execution of this study was also hoped to add to the existing body of knowledge with data on VLS used by ESL undergraduate students in a public university in Malaysia, including the difference found in VLS use between male and female participants.

Hence, this study was done to assess VLS used by ESL undergraduate students from Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. In particular, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the most preferred vocabulary learning strategies among the participants?
2. What are the least preferred vocabulary learning strategies among the participants?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference in the most preferred VLS between male and female participants?
4. Is there any statistically significant difference in the least preferred VLS between male and female participants?

Literature Review

Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary can be defined as the words used to communicate effectively: to express own ideas and to understand others' ideas well (Pratami & Margana, 2020). It has always been considered fundamental in mastering a language (Risco, 2019). Students need to master vocabulary in order to be considered proficient in the language they are learning. In other words, the better students' vocabulary knowledge is, the more successful their language acquisition will be. However, developing vocabulary knowledge is not an easy task, but rather a long, demanding one. Gu (2018) aptly explained this by stating that students begin language learning process by acquiring the most basic, common words and phrases and never actually stop developing it even when they are at the highest level. Zabidin *et al.* (2024) also added that vocabulary knowledge involves more than just knowing word meaning. In order to acquire the target language successfully, students not only need to develop vocabulary breadth where they must possess a substantial amount of words, but they must also obtain vocabulary depth, the knowledge on the usage of the word forms and functions, especially in terms of spelling and collocations.

Despite having such a vital role in language learning as empirically proven in countless studies, vocabulary knowledge has not been given much emphasis in actual language classrooms. This situation stems either from language instructors' oversight where they believed more attention should be directed towards grammar or other language skills (Mustapha & Hatta, 2018) or their reluctance to focus on vocabulary teaching as they were not confident in the best practices to do so (Tyas, Ariyanto, & Suharjito, 2023). Recent studies in vocabulary teaching have stated calls for language instructors to direct the same focus on vocabulary teaching as they do others. Some studies have advocated vocabulary teaching practices that can be employed in the classrooms, such as using humour as a teaching material (Zabidin *et al.*, 2024).

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

One more way to help language students develop their vocabulary knowledge is by focusing on their vocabulary learning strategies. Past research has developed various definitions and classifications of VLS. Hadi and Guo (2020) cited Schmitt (1997) who 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). Gu (2018), on the other hand, noted that Gu (2013) categorised VLS into two: metacognitive (beliefs about VL and metacognitive regulation of VL) and cognitive (initial handling, reinforcement, and activation). Essentially, VLS can be described as conscious mental and behavioural actions or approaches that language learners apply in developing their word knowledge. These studies, along with others like Hendrawaty and Retnomurti (2021) and Besthia (2018), agreed that focusing on and identifying students' VLS in language classrooms can benefit both instructors and students. It facilitates instructors in matching their teaching strategies with the students' learning strategies as well as encourages students to be active and autonomous in their own vocabulary learning.

Analysis of students' VLS has spread far and wide in foreign or second language studies, across many classroom settings. For instance, Linda and Shah (2020) Pratami and Margana (2020), Ye (2021), and Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023) involved school students in their studies. Many other VLS studies, meanwhile, can be found focusing on university students such as

Besthia (2018), Alahmadi (2019), Hadi and Guo (2020), Hanh (2021), and Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021). In the Malaysian context, studies like Mustapha and Hatta (2018), Hendrawaty and Retnomurti (2021), and Yip (2021) are some examples that included tertiary students in the local universities. All of these studies maintained that it is crucial and beneficial to investigate students' VLS in an effort to facilitate their vocabulary knowledge development and eventually, their language acquisition. They have also subsequently articulated callings for more attention and studies on students' VLS in language classrooms. Given the findings and the recommendations found thus far, the present study was executed not only to serve a practical teaching and lesson planning purpose, but also to add to the existing body of knowledge on VLS with data from a sample of local undergraduate ESL students.

Methodology

The study is quantitative in nature where a questionnaire was distributed to a purposive sampling of participants and data analysis was executed using SPSS. It involved an intact group of 36 ESL undergraduate students, from the Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. This particular group was chosen as the researchers were interested in analysing their VLS as a contributing factor in their lesson plan development. According to Creswell (2012), a purposive sampling of 15 people in an intact group would suffice to avoid disruptive lessons in any educational research. The group comprised of 9 male students (25%) and 27 female students (75%), with ages ranging from 18 to 20 years old. At the time of the study, the participants were in semester one of their academic years. The students' language proficiency levels could be considered as ranging from average to low. Table 1 presented their English Language grades in the national exam, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), to further illustrate their language proficiency levels. Most of the students received the grades of B, C, and D for their English Language.

Table 1: Participants' English Language Grades in SPM

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

For the instrument, this study adapted Alahmadi's (2019) version of Schmitt's (1997, 2000) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) as it is one of the most comprehensive lists of strategies available and fits the context of the current study. The questionnaire has also been extensively adapted and employed in previous VLS studies such as in Mustapha and Hatta, (2018), Risco (2019), Hanh (2021), Karmi (2021), as well as Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023) to name a few. In this study, the questionnaire consists of a demographic section and another section with a total of 39 items on vocabulary learning strategies. The participants were asked to take some time to answer the questionnaire and submit it back to the researchers once they were done. Table 2 presents the reliability statistics of the VLSQ. The reliability of the questionnaire was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha. Based on the results, the value for Cronbach's Alpha for the survey is $\alpha = .950$. This indicates that the survey shows high reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics of VLSQ Used

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.950	39

Results

Research Question 1: What Are The Most Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among The Participants?

Table 3 shows the descriptive analysis of the most preferred VLS by the participants. The findings show that the highest mean score is M=4.51, SD=.612 where the participants guessed the meaning of the words from the context/sentence when they did not know the meaning of new English word (item 5). The second frequently used VLS with the mean score, M=4.29, SD=.825 is where they used English language media when they wanted to remember new words and built their vocabulary (item 37). The participants also looked for any word parts that they knew if they did not know a new English word (item 2) with the mean score M=4.20, SD=.868.

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

Research Question 2: What Are The Least Preferred Vocabulary Learning Strategies Among The Participants?

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

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 Question 3: Is There Any Statistically Significant Difference In The Most Preferred VLS Between Male And Female Participants?

Independent Sample Test was conducted to identify the significant difference between male and female participants. Table 5 shows that there is no significant difference 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

Research Question 4: Is There Any Statistically Significant Difference In The Least Preferred VLS Between Male And Female Participants?

Table 6 shows that the male participants (M=2.89, SD=1.537) least preferred VLS of drawing a picture to remember words compared to female participants (M=3.04, SD=.806). The difference was 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

With regard to the most preferred VLS, the participants of this study guessed the meaning of the words from the context or sentence when they did not know the meaning of new English word, used English language media when they wanted to remember new words and built their vocabulary, as well as looked for any word parts that they knew if they did not know a new English word. These three most preferred VLS appeared to be the most common strategies and consistently preferred across a few other VLS studies such as in Besthia (2018), Alahmadi (2019), Linda and Shah (2020), and Hadi and Guo (2020). Concurrent with these studies, language students mostly opted to guess from context and associate words with other sources or words in building their vocabulary knowledge. However, this finding contradicts some other studies like Mustapha and Hatta (2018), Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021), and Hanh (2021) that found the use of dictionary as one of the most preferred VLS among their participants. In this study, using the dictionary, either English-Malay or English-English, was not even listed as one of the three most preferred VLS.

Meanwhile, in terms of the least preferred VLS, the participants of the current study did not prefer to draw a picture of the words if they wanted to remember the words, to use flashcards to record new words, and to talk with native speakers if they wanted to remember new words. The finding corroborates with the participants' least preferred VLS presented in studies like

Besthia (2018), Mustapha and Hatta (2018), and Tyas, Ariyanto, and Suharjito (2023). Another finding from the analysis worth noting is that the students reported a combination of VLS that they preferred to either use or not use instead of opting only for one particular VLS. Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2021) and Karmi (2021) highlighted this in their studies and asserted that it was, in fact, an effective practice of good language students as they make conscious decisions on what works best for them. Similar to the participants in their studies, the participants in this study appeared to actively and consciously select or disregard VLS to suit their needs and interests as they encountered new words and they, in turn, developed their own vocabulary knowledge.

In addition, further analysis of the data in this study found that a statistically significant difference was not 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 means that male and female students in this study equally preferred that specific VLS, which was in accordance with most studies reviewed. On the contrary, a statistically significant difference was detected in the least preferred VLS where more male students did not prefer drawing a picture to remember words as compared to female students. The significant difference reported was in contrast with the findings in Alahmadi (2019) and Mustapha and Hatta (2018) who found no significant difference in their studies. In this particular study, both genders appeared to prefer drawing pictures of the new words the least out of all VLS, but more female participants were detected to opt for said strategy as compared to male participants.

Conclusion
This study was primarily done to assess the most and the least preferred VLS in an intact group of ESL undergraduate students from Business Management faculty in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia, as a step in lesson plan development for them. The major findings reported that the most preferred VLS among the students was guessing the meaning of new words from the context or sentence while their least preferred VLS was drawing a picture of the words when they encountered new words. A statistically significant difference was also found in the least preferred VLS between the male and female students, where more female participants used the strategy than their male counterparts. The analysis also revealed variations in VLS among the students which was an indication of good language learners, and that training can further develop their vocabulary development. The findings presented in this study, as well as the review of other VLS studies, further solidify the need to assess students' VLS in language teaching. It can essentially assist language instructors in employing vocabulary teaching activities that match the students' VLS. In addition, VLS awareness and training among students can also help develop active and autonomous learning among language students (Besthia, 2018). These benefits ultimately would encourage successful language acquisition. Similar to past studies, the present study found assessment of students' VLS as a crucial step in developing vocabulary activities in the classrooms. Doing so made it possible to align vocabulary activities to students' VLS in order to assist their vocabulary development.

Everything has its own limitations, and this study is not an exception. The small sample size and the use of a self-reported survey led to a disadvantage in data generalisation. The data gathered was only able to add to the existing body of knowledge by representing said sample and achieved this study's main purpose which was to assist in lesson plan development for the participants. Future VLS studies can perhaps include qualitative data in their research design

or introduce experimental design apart from self-reported surveys to provide enriched data and insights into their studies as well as to achieve generalisation.

Acknowledgement

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