



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
MODERN EDUCATION
(IJMOE)
www.ijmoe.com



ASSESSING VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES (VLS) ACROSS DIVERSE PROFICIENCY LEVELS

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 18.04.2024
Revised date: 13.05.2024
Accepted date: 15.06.2024
Published date: 30.06.2024

To cite this document:

Kamaludin, P. N. H., Md, Sharif, N. F., Zabidin, N., Nordin, N. A., Mohd Juned, A. (2024). Assessing Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Across Diverse Proficiency Levels. *International Journal of Modern Education*, 6 (21), 531-539.

DOI: 10.35631/IJMOE.621038

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the application of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) between low level of proficiency students from faculty of Business Management and high level of proficiency students from faculty of Computer Science. This research paper employs quantitative approach where data were collected using purposive sampling from a sample of 71 participants representing various proficiency levels of English language in a public university in Melaka, Malaysia. To gauge learners' awareness and application of VLS, a survey adapted from Alahmadi's (2019) version of Schmitt's (1997, 2000) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) was administered to participants. Findings revealed that there are significant differences of VLS utilization among English language learners of various proficiency levels where students with high proficiency levels display better strategy awareness and application contrasted to the lower proficiency level of English language learners. Thus, from these results, it is pertinent for educators to modify vocabulary instructions and strategies to boost vocabulary attainment among different proficiency levels in English language learning settings.

Keywords:

Language Learning Techniques, Linguistic Competence, Second Language Acquisition, Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Introduction

Vocabulary is the base of any language in the world. Vocabulary is defined as an inventory of words a person uses to communicate using the language (Mustapha & Mohd Hatta 2018). Undoubtedly, the acquisition of vocabulary plays a crucial role in the development of language learning and proficiency. This is supported by Webb & Nation (2017), acquiring vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to the education of Language. In the initial stages of language learning, preschoolers are introduced with words or vocabulary for them to know not only the meaning of the words but also the spelling of the words presented to them. This will help them further in mastering the language for them to not only able to communicate but also using the language in reading and writing especially for the second language learners. At advanced stages, learners with good knowledge of technical and academic vocabulary can access diverse domains and discourses (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). This shows that learning and acquiring vocabulary would be the first important step in learning language and improving proficiency levels.

However, in order to effectively acquire vocabulary knowledge especially in English language learning and improve proficiency levels, learners must know the suitable strategies. According to Nation (2006), at least 8000 vocabularies are needed for a person to comprehend oral and written text without difficulty. To acquire such number of words, learners can learn through Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). VLS comprise a variety of approaches and techniques that can be utilised by students to boost their vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, learners with different levels of proficiency learn differently and utilise different strategies. Learners with high level of proficiency might prefer to use different VLS than the low level of proficiency learners. Nation (2021) mentioned that when students have a good understanding of VLS, then they are able to use those strategies to obtain a great number of words. So, it is important for educators to identify strategies suitable for second language learners especially while considering their level of proficiency.

Undeniably, learners with different level of proficiency learn differently and the amount of knowledge they gain are not equivalent depending on the strategies they applied. Thus, it is imperative to recognize the application of VLS throughout the different proficiency levels for effective language learning and teaching. The scope of this research would surround on the most and least used of VLS among students of different proficiency levels.

Statement of Problem

Therefore, this research intends to examine the use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) among low proficiency students from Faculty of Business Management and high proficiency students from Faculty of Computer Science in a IPTA university in Melaka, Malaysia. Based on the objective of this research, these are the research questions being addressed in this research:

1. Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of English SPM Grade?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of the most used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels of the least used of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)?

Literature Review

Having a strong foundation of vocabulary is essential for language learners especially ESL learners. This is because ESL learners would be able to communicate effectively and comprehend better if they have a good understanding of vocabulary knowledge. To have a good vocabulary knowledge, learners need to know the right strategies. This literature review focuses on studies done related Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) as these strategies are helpful in aiding learners to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

Research related to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has emphasized the importance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) in assisting ESL students improving their vocabulary knowledge. VLS can be categorized into three main types which are determination strategies such as dictionary use, metacognitive strategies such as association and social strategies such as collaborative learning (Schmitt, 1997). However, another study categorized VLS into two different categories which are discovery strategies which include determination and social and consolidation strategies which include cognitive, metacognitive, social and memory (Hadi and Guo, 2020).

Previous studies have shown that the successfulness of these VLS differ based on the ESL student's level of proficiency. For example, novice learners prefer to use determination strategies such as by using dictionary and translation (Alhaysony & Alrubail, 2020), advanced learners on the other hand prefer to use more compound strategies such as contextual clues and analysing word family (Alrubail & Alhaysony, 2019). Another study also revealed that students with high level of proficiency are more inclined to use a greater diversity of VLS in language learning and they have higher metacognitive understanding of their learning (Gu, 2003). This shows that there is difference preference of strategies employed by learners depending on their level of proficiency.

Thus, it is pivotal for educators to understand the different strategies preferred by students of different levels of proficiency so that they are able to fit suitable strategies for their students in English language learning. With the advancement of digital technology, new opportunities emerge allowing educators to tailor teaching and learning activities according to their most preferred VLS (Li & Wang, 2019). Although most of the time, more emphasis is given towards teaching grammar, writing, reading, listening, and speaking in class, vocabulary learning should not be ignored or given less attention. Language instructors can use humour as teaching material as one of the vocabulary teaching practices (Zabidin, Dellah, Nordin, Kamaludin, & Sharif, 2024) to help learners improve their vocabulary knowledge.

Methodology

This quantitative research is done to explore the various Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by learners of different proficiency levels in English language learning. A total of 71 ESL students participated in this study were purposely selected from a public university in Melaka, Malaysia where 36 respondents are low level of proficiency students from Faculty of Business Management, and another 35 respondents are high level of proficiency students from Faculty of Computer Science. The participants comprised of 21 (29.6%) of male students and 50 (70.4%) of female students with their age ranges from 18 to 20 years old.

For data collection, a Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) was used as the primary instrument (refer to table 1). To tailor to the context of the present study, this questionnaire was adapted from Alahmadi's (2019) version of Schmitt's (1997, 2000) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ). The questionnaire used for this study has two sections, Section A and Section B. Items in Section A focus on demographic profile which include gender, age, SPM English Grade, semester, programme and English course code and Section B focuses on 39 items related to Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS).

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.950	39

Data for this research was collected via Google Form and then analysed using SPSS. The reliability of the questionnaire was run using Cronbach's Alpha. Table 1 presented the result which shown the value for Cronbach's Alpha for this survey is $\alpha = .950$. This showed that the instruments used in the survey have high internal reliability. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions. Findings related to the participants' different levels of proficiency were presented using descriptive data.

Findings

Research Question 1: Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of English SPM Grade?

Table 2: Group Statistics between Low Proficiency Students and High Proficiency Students in terms of SPM English Grade

Group Statistics				
		N	Mean	SD
SPM English Grade	Low Proficiency	36	2.64	1.268
	High Proficiency	35	1.40	.651

Table 2 shows the difference in the mean score between low proficiency students and high proficiency students in relation to their English SPM Grade. Data shows that there is a significant difference in the mean score between these two groups of students where $p < 0.05$. It

can be seen in the table that the mean score of low level of proficiency students is higher than high level of proficiency students, this shows that their grades ranges towards the lower ends of the grades from grade A to E. Moving forward in this study, Business Management students would be referred to as low proficiency students and Computer Science students would be referred to as high proficiency students.

Table 3: Difference between Low Proficiency Students and High Proficiency Students in terms of English SPM Grade

			F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
SPM English Grade	Equal variances assumed		19.538	.000	5.156	69	.000
	Equal variances not assumed				5.199	52.555	.000

Table 3 shows the difference in the mean score between students with low level of proficiency and students with high level of proficiency in terms of their English SPM Grade. It can be depicted from table 2 that there is a significant difference in the mean score between these two groups of students where $p < 0.05$.

Research Question 2: Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of the most used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)?

Table 4: Group Statistics between Low Level of Proficiency Students and High Level of Proficiency Students in terms of the Most Used of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Group Statistics			
	N	Mean	SD
Most used VLS: 'When I find a new English word that I don't know, I guess the meaning from context/sentence'	36	3.83	1.134
Low Proficiency	35	4.51	.612
High Proficiency			

Table 4 shows the group statistics between two groups of students from different level of proficiency, one low and another one high. Students with high level of proficiency chose "When I find a new English word that I don't know, I guess the meaning from context or sentence" as the most used VLS as evident from the mean score from the findings. Mean score indicates that more learners from high proficiency group preferred this VLS than the other group.

Table 5: Difference between Low Proficiency Students and High Proficiency Students in terms of the Most Used of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Most used VLS: When I find a new English word that I don't know, I guess the meaning from context/sentence.	16.477	.000	-3.136	69	.003
Equal variances assumed			-3.160	54.126	.003
Equal variances not assumed					

Table 5 shows the difference in the mean score in terms of the most used of VLS between students with low level of proficiency and students with high level of proficiency. Based on the independent sample test, the findings show that there is a significant difference between low proficiency learners and high proficiency learners with reference to the most used VLS where $p < 0.05$. The most used VLS for both low and high level of proficiency students is “When I find a new English word that I do not know, I guess the meaning from context or sentence”.

Research Question 3: Is there any statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of the least used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)?

Table 6: Group Statistics between Low Level of Proficiency Students and High Level of Proficiency Students in terms of the Least Used of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

Group Statistics			
	N	Mean	SD
Least used VLS: ‘When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it’	36	2.92	1.052
Low Proficiency			
High Proficiency	35	2.40	1.265

Table 6 displays the group statistics of the least used of VLS between low and high level of proficiency learners. Mean score shows that low level of proficiency students chose “When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it” as the least used VLS. Based on the mean score, it also shows that more learners from low level of proficiency group used this VLS as compared to those learners from high level of proficiency group.

Table 7: Difference between Low Proficiency Students and High Proficiency Students in terms of the Least Used of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS)

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Least used VLS: When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it.	4.185	.045	1.873	69	.065
Equal variances assumed			1.868	66.081	.066
Equal variances not assumed					

Table 7 displays the difference between low level of proficiency students and high level of proficiency students. Independent sample test was conducted to determine the difference between these two groups of students and findings show that there is a significant difference where $p < 0.05$. The least used VLS is “When I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary; I draw a picture of the words to help remember it”.

Discussion

The findings gathered in this study are valuable especially to the language instructors as this significant data can be used to aid educators in choosing suitable VLS in their teaching and learning activities in order to increase their vocabulary knowledge. In this study, it was found that English SPM Grade plays a role in VLS preferred by ESL learners. Another finding also revealed the most used VLS for both high level of proficiency learners and low level of proficiency learners is “when I find a new English word that I don’t know, I guess the meaning from context or sentence”. Recent studies also reported similar findings such as Hendrawaty (2015), Behbahani (2016 and Haryati et al. (2016) as their participants guessed the meaning of unfamiliar words found based on the contextual clues or search the words in online dictionaries. Finding also showed that both low proficiency learners and high proficiency learners used “when I want to remember new words and build my vocabulary, I draw a picture of the words to help remember it” as the least used VLS. Findings from Haryati et. al, (2016) and Mustapha and Mohd Hatta (2018) found that two least used of VLS were “I keep flash cards” and “I use flash cards to learn new English words” in their study. A possible explanation for this is more high proficiency learners were able to guess meaning from context as compared to low proficiency learners, using contextual clues to help them understand new words they found. Meanwhile, more low proficiency learners needed to draw pictures to help them remember new words, using images to remember words they found or learn.

Conclusion

Based on the data findings, it can be concluded that the three objectives of this study have been successfully achieved. The objectives of this study are:

1. To determine if there is a statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of their English SPM grades.
2. To investigate if there is a statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of the most used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS).
3. To examine if there is a statistically significant difference between students with low proficiency levels and students with high proficiency levels in terms of the least used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS).

Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by learners of different proficiency levels is crucial to increase their vocabulary knowledge and improve language proficiency. In English language classroom, language instructors would focus on the four skills namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing with grammar being indirectly taught within the four skills. However, teaching vocabulary knowledge should be paid attention too as it is the first step to improve fluency in the language. A study done by Ghalebi, Sadighi, & Bagheri (2020) revealed that EFL undergraduate and postgraduate students used different VLS while studying, this shows that it is important for ESL instructors to pay attention to various VLS and to match those

strategies with students' proficiency. Based on the findings of this study as well as other studies, ESL instructors need to employ VLS suitable for their ESL learners to help them increase their level of English proficiency. When they are proficient in the language, they would be able to demonstrate the language and excel in their study.

To investigate further on VLS, issues related to it need to be addressed as well. Some of the issues could be measurement validity, motivation and engagement, teacher training awareness, technological intervention and others. It is imperative that these issues be attended, to tackle issue with measurement validity, ESL instructors must make certain that the instruments that were used to investigate VLS are valid and reflect correctly with the strategies being evaluated. In terms of motivation and engagement, researchers should examine the influence of motivation and engagement on their choice of use of VLS not only that, teacher training and awareness can assist instructors to choose different VLS across different proficiency levels. The role of technology also must be paid attention to in vocabulary learning and how it might affect the VLS used by ESL students. Further research can be done to investigate vocabulary teaching activities suitable with VLS in order to enhance English language learning in ESL classroom while taking account these issues as well.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to all those who have contributed to the completion of this research paper.

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