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EXPLORING VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: This study tried to analyze the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students. This study employed qualitative descriptive method, involving the distribution of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview session. This study conducted in one of senior high schools in Bandung, 37 students were selected as participants for this study using a purposive sampling technique. They took part in the questionnaire session while, in the interview session, six students participated. Based on the results obtained, the researcher concluded that there are several strategies used to overcome problems in learning English vocabulary such as determination, social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Memory strategies got the highest mean score. It is indicated that the students mostly used this strategy to overcome their problems in learning vocabulary which help them memorize information more effectively. Additionally, this study suggests that providing structured guidance on how to maximize the use of these strategies, such as effective dictionary use, collaborative learning, and utilizing multimedia resources, can further enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency.

Keywords: EFL students, students' strategies, vocabulary learning

INTRODUCTION

The ability to understand and use vocabulary effectively is the main foundation for language skills whether it is in the terms of speaking, listening, reading or writing. It is known that vocabulary is one of the fundamental components in learning English (Alqahtani, 2015), without adequate vocabulary mastery, students will face difficulties in conveying ideas (Susanto, 2017) and understanding the material presented by the teacher (Rohmatillah, 2017). However, it affects the development of their overall language competence.

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the importance of vocabulary mastery becomes more prominent. In contrast to native speakers who are exposed to English naturally, EFL students often face limited exposure to new vocabulary, both in the school environment and outside the classroom. This condition requires students to adopt effective vocabulary learning strategies to broaden and deepen their understanding of new words (Nosidlak, 2013). However, various studies show that many

EFL students do not understand vocabulary learning strategies that suit their learning style (Alahmadi et al., 2018). As a result, their vocabulary mastery tends to be slow and less than optimal. This becomes a challenge for teachers to help students recognize and apply appropriate strategies, so that they can learn vocabulary more effectively and efficiently.

Previous research has been conducted by many researchers such as a study from (Ghazal, 2007). This study resulted that learning new vocabulary is quite challenging to foreign language students. However, the challenges can be addressed by employing certain vocabulary learning strategies. This previous study only presented the literature review related to this issue, while this present study tried to prove the theories into practice. By distributing questionnaire to students to determine whether they had already implemented such strategies to address their difficulties in learning a foreign language and to identify which strategies were most frequently used. Another research conducted by Aji et al., (2023), it has the same purpose to seek alternative solutions students used to overcome problems in building English vocabulary at the eighth grade students of Junior high school. The alternative solutions or the strategies they used are using dictionaries, learning with friends, making vocabulary notes, searching on the internet, and listening to English music. It is different with this present study which used determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies employed by students. another difference is the object of this study which focused on students from one of Senior High school/ SMA in Bandung

Therefore, the research tries to examine students' strategies in learning vocabulary. This becomes relevant to provide deeper insight into the approaches used by students in overcoming these challenges. This research can also provide valuable input for educators to design learning programs that better support sustainable vocabulary mastery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of vocabulary has been presented by many expert such Suryanto et al. (2021) saying that vocabulary mastery is an ability that a person has to be able to master and understand about a word to present ideas and messages. Besides, it is known as the basis of communication by everyone (Mega, 2018). In addition, vocabulary mastery is something that needs to be mastered for someone who wants to understand all skills in language learning such as reading, writing, listening and speaking (Ediger, 1998). On the other hands, Purwanto & Hidayad (2022) argues that the better the quality and amount of one's vocabulary, the more likely one is to be skilled in language. In addition, vocabulary refers to a set of words acquired through language exposure, conversations, and the use of dictionaries, which people utilize in spoken communication (Suhendar, 2018).

According Wallace (2007), vocabulary development is a very important component in learning to read. The number of words with different meanings can affect reading ability. Therefore, the more the number of words they know, the easier it is for them when learning to read. To support vocabulary development, learners can employ various strategies such as using context clues, engaging in extensive reading, practicing with flashcards, and utilizing word association techniques. These strategies not only enhance their understanding of individual word meanings but also improve their overall reading comprehension and fluency.

Vocabulary learning strategies refer to the techniques or approaches used by language learners to expand their knowledge of English words (Goundar, 2015). It is also

considered as a tool that learners use to acquire vocabulary (Goundar, 2019). (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020) defines vocabulary learning strategies and this strategy is divided into five subcategories, namely: determination strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies.

Determination strategies are individual learning strategies. This strategy involves students determining the meanings of new words independently, without relying on others' input. In this method, learners are guided to infer and identify word meanings using context, structural knowledge, and reference resources. In essence, students uncover the meanings of words on their own.

Social strategies involve acquiring new vocabulary through engagement and interaction with others. Social strategies facilitate clearer communication and understanding, contributing to the development of communicative competence. These strategies encompass actions taken by learners to interact with peers or native speakers of the language.

Memory strategies link words with previously learned information using pictures or grouping formats such as using visual material which is much more effective than using verbal material.

Cognitive Strategies are strategies that do not involve students in mental processes, but involves students in mental processes in a more mechanical way. Cognitive strategies are comparable to memory strategies but focus less on mental manipulation and more on repetition and mechanical vocabulary learning. Techniques like using word lists, flashcards, and note-taking, as well as relying on study aids such as language textbooks, fall under cognitive strategies.

Metacognitive strategies are associated with monitoring, decision-making, and evaluating one's progress. They assist students in managing their own cognitive processes, including planning and assessing their advancement. Effective metacognitive strategies for language learners include activities such as reading books, watching films, and engaging with native speakers..

METHOD

This study employed descriptive qualitative research by distributing questionnaire which was adopted from Damari (2019). This questionnaire was used to find data on strategies that students use in learning English vocabulary. This questionnaire consists of 9 statements which shows several strategies in learning English vocabulary. In addition, this questionnaire uses 5 Likert scales, namely: 1 for never; 2 rarely; 3 sometimes; 4 often; and 5 always. The results from questionnaire were supported by the interview session to corroborate and confirms the findings in order to get more comprehensive data. This study conducted in one of senior high schools in Bandung, 37 students were selected as participants for this study using a purposive sampling technique. They took part in the questionnaire session while, in the interview session, six students participated.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were calculated manually using simple statistical methods, such as calculating percentages, to identify the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies among the participants. After that, the interview session was conducted to gather deeper insights and explanations about the participants' experiences and preferences regarding the vocabulary learning strategies they used. This qualitative data complemented the findings from questionnaire and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section contains the findings of the study in which the results and discussion is not done separation. This section refers to the questionnaire which was distributed to 37 participants and is consisted of 20 items. Based on the data from questionnaire, it was found that students used five strategies to overcome their problem in learning vocabulary. The mean scores and percentages of each strategy are tabulated below:

Table 1. Vocabulary strategies: Mean scores and percentages

No	Strategies	Mean Scores	Percentages
1	Determination	3	60,8%
2	Social	3,28	65,5%
3	Memory	3,6	71,4%
4	Cognitive	3,1	62,2%
5	Metacognitive	3,3	66,1%

Based on the above table, memory strategies got the highest mean score. It is indicated that the students mostly used this strategies to overcome their problems in learning vocabulary. Memory strategies include techniques that help students store and retrieve vocabulary more effectively (Pérez & Alvira, 2017). These strategies often involve associating new words with existing knowledge, creating mental images, or organizing information in a meaningful way such as connecting words to personal experiences, sentences, or stories to enhance retention. In other words, it help students memorize information more effectively (Ibarra Santacruz & Martínez Ortega, 2018). It was followed by the other strategies such as social and metacognitive strategies which indicated that more than 65% students used this strategies to help them improving their vocabulary learning such as leaning with friends (Asyiah, 2017) and listening to English songs (Dewi, 2017; Herawati et al., 2022; Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020). Lastly, determination and cognitive strategies received the last two mean scores, namely: 3 and 3,1 . It is identified that more less than 65% of students perceived that these strategies were helpful to support their leaning in English vocabulary. For a more detailed explanation of each strategy, it is provided in the following sections.

Determination Strategies

Determination strategies are techniques that students used independently to support their vocabulary learning by discovering the meanings of unfamiliar words, such as relying on dictionaries (Farrokh & Sharifi, 2019) and guessing the meaning from the context (Abdulmalik, 2020). Based on the result from questionnaire there are four items which are indicated to this strategy, it is presented in the following table.

Table 2. Determination strategies: Mean scores

Items	Mean Scores
1	3,18
2	3,04
3	2,09
4	3,84

In this strategy, item 4 got the highest mean scores. It is identified that most of students relied on dictionary to find the meaning of unfamiliar words which they found in the process of learning English. This finding explains that dictionaries are an important tool in improving students' spelling literacy and vocabulary. Other studies indicated that using dictionaries can enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and improve their writing skills (Al-Harbi, 2024). From the questionnaire results especially in item 3 and 4 that have been answered by students, the majority of them rarely use dictionary books but more often use electronic dictionaries to find out the meaning of various kinds of English vocabulary that they do not know. Besides, it was also mentioned by students in the interviews session that the dictionary is a strategy for students to find out the meaning of various kinds of English vocabulary that they are not familiar with.

Excerpt 1

"Maybe read a lot of dictionaries, and try to find some examples of vocabulary usage"
(S3)

Based on the above interview session, students used dictionaries to support their vocabulary learning by actively searching for word meanings and examples of vocabulary usage. This indicates that dictionaries have a function not only to understand the definitions of unfamiliar words but also to learn how these words are used in context (Summers, 2014). By referring to dictionaries, students can enhance their understanding of word meanings and usage (Alharbi, 2016) and it helps them to integrate new vocabulary into their language skills effectively and progress in their study (Ossai et al., 2021). In addition, student number 4 also answered through an interview that students use dictionaries as a medium or means of learning English to improve or add vocabulary that they do not understand.

Excerpt 2

"At home, when Athar has free time, he likes to open the dictionary. Yes, because Athar has curiosity, if you use google translate, searching for 1 word is only limited to 1 meaning, while in the dictionary there are many meanings, so it is more characterful and not limited to 1 meaning or 1 interpretation." (S4)

From the findings above, the first strategy for students to overcome their problems in learning vocabulary is to use a dictionary especially electronic dictionary. As we know that nowadays, students prefer to use this kind of dictionary since it is more accessible, faster, and convenient compared to traditional printed dictionaries (Mohamad et al., 2017). Electronic dictionaries provide instant results and it is considered faster than a printed one (Nisa, 2022). Besides, it allows students to easily access and look up words anytime and anywhere, as it is available on smartphones or other devices. Therefore, it is not surprising that many students rely on this type of dictionary.

Social Strategies

The second strategy is social strategy this type of strategies used by students through interaction with others. Social strategies involve seeking help, clarification, or feedback from teachers, peers, or native speakers to understand and use new vocabulary. In relation with this issue, students mostly implement this strategy in the form of learning with friends especially their classmates. The following table is the mean score obtained from questionnaire results.

Table 3. Social strategies: Mean scores

Items	Mean Scores
5	3,25
6	3,53
7	3,11
8	3,22

This finding which explains that students can learn English vocabulary by learning together, especially with classmates. By creating a group discussion, students can help each other if they find vocabulary that they do not understand the meaning of. From the results of questionnaires number 6, 7 and 8 given and answered by students, the majority of them prefer to study with their classmates by asking the meaning (more than 70% students), making a group discussion and practicing the words together more than 60%). Besides, in item number 5, it is identified that in some cases students (almost 65% students) asked the teacher about the meaning by making a sentence which contain that unfamiliar word. In relation with this, it is known that learning with friends will increase students' motivation, engagement, and achievement in learning (Ryan et al., 2022). This finding is also reinforced by the results of interviews by students who also said?

Excerpt 3

“Yes, Athar prefers to learn English with people who are more competent, for example with English teachers or with miss or with friends who are better at English. Our classmates also make discussion groups like study groups so if there is something that we don't understand and need to be discussed, we form a study group to learn together.” (S 4)

From the findings above, the second strategy for overcoming the problems students face in learning English vocabulary is learning with classmates. Learning with classmates by creating group discussions will help them understand the vocabulary they don't understand. Therefore, this strategy has successfully increased their motivation in learning English vocabulary as the environment is very supportive.

Memory Strategies

The next strategy is associated with students' memory which help them in recalling new words more effectively such as connecting words to personal experiences, sentences, or stories to enhance retention. By associating new vocabulary with something familiar, students create meaningful connections that make the words easier to remember. For example, they might link a new word to a personal event, visualize it in a specific context, or craft a short story around the word. These methods not only improve recall but also make the vocabulary more relevant and practical, helping students to use the words naturally in conversations or writing. There are four items related to this issue which is tabulated in table 4.

Table 4. Memory strategies: Mean scores

Items	Mean Scores
9	3,7
10	3,58
11	3,33
12	3,69

From the above table, it is shown that in all items more than 65% students considered that this strategy is helpful for their vocabulary enrichments. As it has been explained before that this strategy perceived the highest mean score among all other strategies. The overall positive response suggests that memory strategies play a crucial role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, it is important to note that despite its high perceived effectiveness, its application may vary across different learning contexts or student preferences.

Cognitive Strategies

Another important strategy implemented by students to support their vocabulary learning is cognitive strategy. It is focused on mental processes that help learners understand, process, and retain new vocabulary more effectively (Di Carlo, 2017). Cognitive strategies involve activities that enable students to manipulate and organize the information they encounter. This finding explains that by making special notes of unfamiliar vocabulary is a strategy for students to overcome the problems they face in learning English vocabulary, students can write down the vocabulary they have just heard so that it makes it easier for them to add and repeat new vocabulary (Sprenger, 2017). To know the response of the students, the following table is the result of questionnaire which consisted of four items related to cognitive strategies.

Table 5. Cognitive strategies: Mean scores

Items	Mean Scores
13	3,73
14	2,82
15	2,84
16	3,04

From the results of questionnaires number 13 which got the highest mean score, it is implied that most of the students prefer to repeat the meaning of the word to remember the vocabulary rather than the other techniques mentioned in item 14, 15 and 16, in those items students lean on making notes to facilitate them in learning English vocabulary. Although the mean score is slightly lower, some students still consider that this method provides benefits for them. This finding is also reinforced by the results of interviews with students, that taking notes make them easier to remember and repeat unfamiliar vocabulary.

Excerpt 4

“Yes, when he learns English or from English books, I like to write on the back, for example, there are words that are still unfamiliar to Athar. And if his curiosity has increased, Athar will ask someone who is more competent, and if the answer is still

lacking, Athar will continue to find out, for example to the dictionary or whatever it is. And when the teacher says new vocabulary, Athar will repeat it over and over again, so he won't forget it right away." (S4)

From the findings above, the next strategy to overcome students' problems in learning English vocabulary is by taking notes. By taking notes, students can add new vocabulary, remember how to read it, and memorize it. Besides, this method allows students to actively engage with the new words, reinforcing their understanding through repetition and review. As mentioned in the excerpt, when students encounter unfamiliar words, they not only write them down but also seek clarification by asking competent individuals or referring to dictionaries. This continuous effort to explore and understand new vocabulary further supports their retention and learning process.

Metacognitive Strategies

The last strategy is metacognitive which is related to students' awareness and control over their own learning process (Trujillo Becerra et al., 2015). This strategy involves reflecting on, planning, and monitoring one's vocabulary learning techniques to ensure more effective retention and application of new words (Diaz, 2015). Students using metacognitive strategies are proactive in evaluating their progress, identifying challenges, and making necessary adjustments to improve their learning outcomes. Effective metacognitive strategies for language learners. For instance, through activities like reading books, watching movies, and engaging with native speakers. (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). Based on the result from questionnaire it was found that listening to music makes students know how to pronounce each vocabulary and also get new vocabulary. Majority of them use English songs to improve their understanding of English vocabulary and add new vocabulary. More information related to this finding is tabulated in the following table.

Table 6. Cognitive strategies: Mean scores

Items	Mean Scores
17	4,02
18	3,47
19	3,19
20	2,54

The results of the questionnaire above show that the majority of students use English songs (80,4% students) to increase their understanding of vocabulary and add new vocabulary which was shown by item 17 which got the highest score among all other items. In addition, this questionnaire is corroborated by the results of interviews with several students who assured that they use English songs as a strategy for students to add new vocabulary and know how to pronounce it.

Excerpt 5

"I'm the auditory type who understands more quickly through hearing. From the English songs that I listen to, the vocabulary can really improve my skills. Whereas if I read, I don't know how to read the pronunciation, whereas if I listen, I know how to pronounce it." (S1)

From the excerpt above, it is clearly highlighted that the student was auditory learners, however, it is normal for him/her to use this strategy to support learning. An auditory need something to be listened to effectively process information. For this student, hearing the new vocabulary repeatedly, such as through teacher pronunciation or by listening to recordings, helps reinforce memory and understanding. Auditory learners often benefit from strategies like repetition, listening to vocabulary in context, and using verbal explanations to grasp and retain new words (Suaib, 2017). This approach aligns with their learning style, making vocabulary acquisition more natural and effective.

In addition, the main strategy to overcome students' problems is to use a dictionary, many of them prefer to use electronic dictionaries because using a dictionary is the easiest way to find the meaning of various words in English to Indonesian or vice versa. In addition, dictionaries are available in book form as an alternative for students if they have difficulty accessing online dictionaries on the internet due to poor internet connection. This is similar to the findings of the following study, which concluded that using the Dictionary whether it is physical or electronic dictionary is an effective solution for addressing the problem of limited vocabulary (D. Wulandari & Handayani, 2020). It is also mentioned that dictionaries are a key resource to solve vocabulary problems.

On the other hands, it was found that students' ways to overcome English vocabulary learning problems are practicing with friends (Aji et al., 2023) there many things the students can do when they are practicing the language with friends such as using dictionaries and memorizing, listening, sharing, and discussing. Moreover (Afzal, 2019) proposed that sin this digital era, students can use internet to support their learning vocabulary by chatting with their foreigner friends. In addition, Nurhaliza (2021) also said the way students solve their problems in learning vocabulary is practicing with friends, making notes and memorizing them. Wulandari (2020) said there are way to solve their problems in learning the vocabulary such as using dictionary knowing the meanings of new words, practiced pronouncing new words, making a note to memorizing and learn spelling new vocabulary. In developing English vocabulary, students need to force themselves to memorize the words and practice more if they want to improve their ability in mastering vocabulary.

From the data obtained, researchers found several strategies used by students to overcome the above problems. They make use of available media such as YouTube, music, and movies to make learning enjoyable and to absorb knowledge from what they watch and listen to. Some also keep vocabulary journals in dedicated notebooks to record new words, making it easier to recall them later. They motivate themselves and their peers to practice, listen to conversations, and engage in group discussions with classmates. Additionally, they utilize both offline and online dictionaries on their smartphones.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concludes that each student employs their own strategies and uses various methods to address challenges in learning English vocabulary. Learners who develop their own strategies for studying can be considered effective language learners. Therefore, students who adopt diverse learning strategies are well-equipped to succeed as language learners because they can independently overcome difficulties in their learning journey.

Vocabulary is a crucial component of second language learning. As Wilkins cited in Thornbury (2002) states, "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed," emphasizing the significance of vocabulary acquisition. Similarly, Min (2013) highlights that vocabulary is essential to the learning process, as it underpins the development of the four language skills. Mastering

vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of foreign language education, both in textbooks and classrooms. It is central to language teaching and plays a vital role for language learners.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained, the researcher concluded that there are several strategies used to overcome problems in learning English vocabulary. Memory strategies got the highest mean score. It is indicated that the students mostly used this strategies to overcome their problems in learning vocabulary which help them memorize information more effectively. It was followed by the other strategies such as social and metacognitive strategies which indicated that more than 65% students used this strategies to help them improving their vocabulary learning such as leaning with friends and listening to English songs. Lastly, determination and cognitive strategies received the last two mean scores, namely: 3 and 3,1 . It is identified that students perceived that these strategies were helpful to support their leaning in English vocabulary. However, this study implied that while students employ a variety of vocabulary learning strategies, the effectiveness of these methods depends on their consistent application and the context in which they are used. It highlights the need for educators to encourage students to diversify their strategies and integrate them into regular learning activities. Additionally, the study suggests that providing structured guidance on how to maximize the use of these strategies, such as effective dictionary use, collaborative learning, and leveraging multimedia resources, can further enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency.

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