Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies Applied by Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines vocabulary learning strategies among eighth graders at SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi during the first semester of the 2024/2025 school year. Using a descriptive quantitative approach, researchers collected data through a validated questionnaire assessing five strategy types: Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive. A pilot test ensured the questionnaire's reliability and accuracy. Findings indicate Memory Strategies were the most frequently used (2.951), closely followed by Metacognitive (2.927). In contrast, Cognitive Strategies ranked the lowest (2.415), likely due to their demanding nature, requiring higher mental processing. This suggests students favor methods that are easier to apply rather than those requiring deep analytical engagement. Given this preference, educators should incorporate Cognitive Strategy-based techniques to strengthen vocabulary retention and application. Methods such as problem-solving with real-life examples, analyzing word meanings in context, and creating mind maps can help students develop a deeper understanding of vocabulary. These strategies challenge learners to engage more actively with words, enhancing their ability to recall and use them effectively in communication. By blending various learning approaches, students can build stronger vocabulary skills that support both academic success and real-world language use.

Keywords: Vocabulary; Preferences; Vocabulary Learning Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) play a crucial role in enhancing English proficiency, facilitating understanding, retention, and application of new words (Hayati, 2020). As a core element of language learning, vocabulary is essential for effective communication, both in speaking and writing (Vedantu, 2024). Despite its importance, research has primarily focused on adult and university learners, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by junior high school students (Holidazia, 2020). There is a growing need to explore strategies tailored to younger learners, ensuring they develop adaptable vocabulary skills for literacy and cross-cultural

communication (Nation, 2001). While students continue using various VLS, many struggle with vocabulary acquisition, especially in English learning contexts (Asyiah, 2020). Limited vocabulary knowledge has been shown to hinder comprehension and proficiency, as highlighted in research conducted in Indonesia (Yulian, 2019).

Students at SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi face notable difficulties in vocabulary learning, with observations indicating that they struggle to understand new words, use them in sentences, and retain them over time. Many fail to memorize effectively, leading to confusion when recalling words. These challenges emphasize the need for research into the frequency and effectiveness of VLS in junior high school settings. Identifying the most and least frequently used strategies can help develop targeted instructional methods that improve retention. Integrating effective vocabulary learning techniques into the curriculum can provide students with a new and enriched learning experience, helping them develop stronger language skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, it has occupied a relatively tiny corpus addressing vocabulary learning strategies and their roles in language acquisition. The vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have been studied thoroughly in the domain of language acquisition. Students could enhance their English proficiency using vocabulary learning strategies. Nation (2001) advocated the strategy involved in the systematic acquisition of vocabulary and then affirms that in practical life, both meanings improve comprehension. Schmitt (2010) also anchored a discussion of VLS as determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, which are variedly effective depending on the learners' preference and needs.

Studies have focused much on challenges that students go through in vocabulary acquisition and retention (Asyiah, 2020; Yulian, 2019), but they primarily involve university students or adult learners who have little attention for younger learners. Holidazia (2020) also adds that it is quite a complex subject to acquire vocabulary and therefore needs effective strategies which will enhance retention and usage. However, at this time, the visible literature shows no comprehensive study on how junior high school students develop and strengthen their vocabulary learning strategies within different education settings. Due to the rising interest about vocabulary learning strategies, this study seeks to theorize and empirically evidence frequent and less frequent strategies among students in SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi.

Contribution and Importance of Study

Despite the extensive research on VLS, studies have mainly focused on adult or university learners, leaving a gap in how junior high school students deal with vocabulary learning. The current research intends to fill this gap by describing the vocabulary learning strategies used by students at SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi. It focuses on the most effective vocabulary learning strategies. It differs from

previous studies that have also often focused on frequency use rather than effectiveness in vocabulary strategy application. Furthermore, it provides instructional recommendations relevant to junior high school instruction by exploring the contextual factors that shape students' strategic preferences. This study closes certain gaps in existing research like being limited to older learners and not having context-specific investigations or even discussions on how developmental strategy adaptation happens, offering a nuanced dimension to vocabulary learning strategies in early English being taught in K-12.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is fundamental to communication and language learning, serving as a key factor in mastering a second or foreign language (Schmitt, 1997). Defined as the words a person knows and uses, vocabulary plays a crucial role in speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Nation, 2001; Renandya, 2002). Insufficient vocabulary hampers language acquisition, making effective vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) essential for students. VLS includes five main subtypes: Determination, Memory, Social, Cognitive, and Metacognitive Strategies (Schmitt, 1997), each validated by research (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). Techniques such as dictionary consultation (Peter, 2019), repetition, and linking words to imagery (Gu & Johnson, 1996) aid retention and deeper processing. A structured, integrated approach to vocabulary learning enhances proficiency, ensuring effective long-term language development.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This research used a quantitative, descriptive method, utilizing a structured questionnaire to gather numerical data in a systematic way. As Creswell (2012) points out, quantitative research depends on structured instruments to observe and analyze data effectively. The questionnaire made it possible to conduct thorough statistical analysis, providing precise measurements that could be generalized to a larger population. The study included 41 eighth-grade students from classes VIII B and C at SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi, chosen because they actively participated in English classes and were capable of accurately filling out the questionnaire. To guarantee the study's accuracy, we meticulously gathered data. We first got the green light from the Dean of the Faculty of Education, then the school principal officially gave us the go-ahead. We crafted the questionnaire with great care, taking cues from tried-and-tested tools, making sure it matched what we aimed to discover. We collected the data right there at the school, and we walked the students through the questionnaire, encouraging them to answer honestly. Once they were done, we thoroughly checked their responses for precision and completeness, which really bolstered the dependability of our results.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, this study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing descriptive statistical techniques such as mean, median, and percentiles to identify patterns and trends within the collected data. Statistical software like LPPM (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) aids in data processing to ensure accuracy and reliability. Following data analysis, interpretation is conducted to derive meaningful insights from statistical findings. The interpretation process involves linking empirical results with relevant theoretical frameworks, exploring the implications of the findings, and drawing conclusions that support or challenge research hypotheses. Additionally, special attention is given to the Likert scale values to classify responses effectively (Sugiyono, 2020): 5 (4.50–5.00) Always, 4 (3.50–4.49) Often, 3 (2.50–3.49) Sometimes, 2 (1.50–2.49) Rare, 1 (1.00–1.49) Never. Through this systematic approach, the study ensures that ethical guidelines are maintained while producing valid and interpretable research outcomes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, descriptive data was collected from 41 respondents who completed a questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies, providing insights into students' preferences and tendencies in acquiring new vocabulary. The data analysis focuses on identifying the frequency and effectiveness of each strategy, categorizing them based on their application and impact on vocabulary retention. Additionally, demographic factors such as students' language proficiency levels, learning backgrounds, and exposure to English may influence their choice of strategies. The results aim to highlight which strategies are most frequently adopted and which are less utilized, offering implications for educators seeking to optimize vocabulary instruction. Through this descriptive analysis, patterns and trends in vocabulary learning behavior can be examined, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective pedagogical approaches for vocabulary acquisition.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistic of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Descriptive Statistic	Determination Strategy	Social Strategy	Memory Strategy	Cognitive Strategy	Metacognitive Strategy
Valid	41	41	41	41	41
Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	2.732	2.927	2.951	2.415	2.927
Std Deviation	1.049	0.787	0.893	1.024	1.127
Minimum	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Maximum	4.000	4.000	5.000	4.000	5.000

(Data from SPSS Version 20, 2024)

It looks like students really lean on memory strategies when they're picking up new vocabulary words. This is pretty clear from the fact that they scored highest in this

area (average score of 2.951). Memory strategies, like repeating words, linking them to pictures, or using mnemonic tricks, are probably so popular because they're just plain practical and easy to use. These methods help students hang onto new vocabulary over time by making sure they remember the words through lots of practice. On the flip side, cognitive strategies seem to be the least used by students, judging by their lowest average score (2.415). Cognitive strategies usually involve digging deeper into the word, like breaking down its parts, making connections through more active thinking, or trying out words in more challenging situations. It's possible that students use these less often because they're simply more complicated. They take more brainpower and effort compared to memory-based methods. Students might just find these strategies less natural to use.

Table 2
The Mean Score of the least frequently used strategy in Learning Vocabulary

	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Memory_1	41	0	3.098	1.044	1.000	5.000
Memory_2	41	0	3.049	1.303	1.000	5.000
Memory_3	41	0	3.366	1.374	1.000	5.000
Memory_4	41	0	3.244	1.463	1.000	5.000
Memory 5	41	0	2.146	1.315	1.000	5.000

(Data from SPSS Version 20, 2024)

The data in Table 2 reveals that Memory_3 is the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategy, with an average score of 3.366. This suggests that students commonly relate new words to personal experiences, making vocabulary more meaningful and easier to recall. For example, associating the word "rain" with joyful childhood memories helps reinforce its meaning. Conversely, Memory_5, which involves saying words aloud, is the least used strategy, scoring 2.146. This indicates that students may feel shy, lack the habit, or prefer silent learning methods. While verbal repetition improves pronunciation and retention, students may favor strategies that better suit their comfort level and learning style.

Overall, Memory Strategies are the most relied-upon approach (average score: 2.951), whereas Cognitive Strategies are less utilized (2.415), aligning with existing research on vocabulary learning preferences. Fan (2020) emphasizes the long-term benefits of memory strategies, explaining their popularity among learners. Similarly, Ghalebi et al. (2020) found that students tend to avoid cognitive strategies due to their complexity, despite their potential for deeper vocabulary mastery. This explains the low rating for Memory_5, which requires active word engagement. Students may feel uncomfortable or lack sufficient classroom practice, reinforcing the need for instructional methods that encourage cognitive strategies in a supportive environment.

Table 3
The Mean Score of the least frequently used strategy in Learning Vocabulary

	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Cognitive_1	41	0	2.293	1.188	1.000	5.000

Cognitive_2	41	0	2.390	1.282	1.000	5.000
Cognitive_3	41	0	2.561	1.205	1.000	5.000

(Data from SPSS Version 20, 2024)

Table 3 indicates that students most frequently use the Cognitive_3 strategy, scoring an average of 2.561. This method involves labeling objects with English names, allowing students to link words to tangible items and improving memory retention. The visual nature of this approach seems effective for contextual vocabulary learning. In contrast, Cognitive_1 is the least utilized strategy, averaging 2.293, likely because students find flashcards with English Indonesian word pairs less engaging or practical compared to real-world labeling. These results underscore the importance of varied instructional techniques, ensuring students not only memorize vocabulary but also develop deeper linguistic understanding. Teachers should create balanced lessons that integrate both memorization and cognitive reflection, fostering a more comprehensive vocabulary learning experience.

This study investigated students' preferences for vocabulary learning strategies through a survey of 41 respondents. The results highlighted key trends in students' vocabulary acquisition techniques, with a particular emphasis on memory strategies as the most commonly employed. The data analysis also shed light on less frequently used strategies, such as cognitive approaches, and how these preferences may relate to students' comfort levels, language proficiency, and learning backgrounds.

The findings reveal that memory strategies received the highest mean score (2.951), suggesting that students rely on techniques such as repetition, association with images, and mnemonic devices to enhance vocabulary retention. These methods are likely favored because they are relatively simple to execute and offer immediate results, making them a practical choice for learners. As Fan (2020) discusses, memory strategies are especially beneficial for long-term retention, which could explain their prominence among students. Furthermore, Table 2 highlights that associating words with personal experiences (Memory_3) is the most frequently used approach, with a mean score of 3.366. This strategy likely facilitates deeper engagement with the vocabulary by creating meaningful connections to the learners' lives, thereby enhancing recall.

However, Memory_5, which involves saying words aloud, had the lowest score (2.146), indicating that it is the least preferred method. This could be due to a variety of factors, such as students' discomfort with speaking English, shyness, or a preference for silent learning strategies. Despite the fact that verbal repetition is proven to improve both pronunciation and retention, students might avoid this method due to its more demanding nature, particularly in a classroom setting where they may feel self-conscious.

The study found that cognitive strategies were used the least, with an average score of 2.415, which aligns with findings from Ghalebi et al. (2020), who noted that students often shy away from cognitive strategies due to their complexity. These strategies require more cognitive effort, as they involve deeper processing of vocabulary through techniques such as word analysis, contextual use, and making connections to other words. Although such approaches can lead to more profound vocabulary mastery, they appear less natural and more challenging for students.

Among the cognitive strategies, Cognitive_3 (labeling objects with English names) was the most frequently used, with a mean score of 2.561. This approach taps into the visual and contextual aspects of language acquisition, which may explain its effectiveness. By associating words with tangible objects, students can create mental connections that aid in recall. On the other hand, Cognitive_1 (using flashcards with English Indonesian word pairs) received the lowest score (2.293), likely because students find this method less engaging or practical. Flashcards may feel repetitive and uninspiring, especially if they do not incorporate real-world context or interaction, which could contribute to their lower usage.

The findings of this study offer important insights for educators seeking to optimize vocabulary instruction. The heavy reliance on memory strategies underscores the need to incorporate techniques that make vocabulary more memorable and easier to recall. However, it is also crucial to address the underuse of cognitive strategies by creating learning environments that encourage students to engage with words on a deeper level. This could involve incorporating more interactive activities, such as word games, real-life application tasks, and visual aids, which can make cognitive strategies more engaging and accessible. Furthermore, the low usage of verbal repetition (Memory_5) and flashcards (Cognitive_1) suggests that educators should explore alternative methods to make these strategies more appealing. For example, incorporating technology, such as digital flashcard apps or interactive speech-based platforms, may reduce students' discomfort and increase their willingness to engage with these strategies.

In conclusion, the study reveals that students predominantly rely on memory strategies, particularly those that link vocabulary to personal experiences. While these methods are effective for retention, cognitive strategies, though potentially more powerful, are less frequently used due to their complexity. By fostering a learning environment that encourages deeper engagement with vocabulary through varied strategies, educators can enhance students' vocabulary acquisition and retention, ultimately leading to more comprehensive language development.

CONCLUSION

Eighth graders at SMP Negeri 2 Airmadidi primarily rely on Memory Strategies for vocabulary learning, favoring simple techniques such as repetition and personal associations to retain new words. Social and Metacognitive Strategies also play a role, as students seek guidance from peers and teachers while reflecting on their

learning process. However, Cognitive Strategies, which require deeper analysis and active engagement, are used less frequently, likely due to their complexity. To enhance vocabulary mastery, teachers should gradually introduce Cognitive Strategies such as mind mapping, contextual word analysis, and problem-solving exercises. By encouraging students to engage with words in meaningful ways, they can develop stronger connections between vocabulary and real-world application. A balanced instructional approach that integrates familiar methods with more analytical techniques can enrich students' learning experience, improve long-term retention, and foster a deeper understanding of the English language.

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