

Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies in the English Education Program at STKIP Al Amin Dompu: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge is a cornerstone of English language proficiency, yet many EFL students struggle with vocabulary acquisition. This qualitative study explores the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) employed by students in the English Education Program at STKIP Al Amin Dompu. Using a phenomenological approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve second-semester students. Thematic analysis revealed that students employ a range of strategies across Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy, including determination strategies (bilingual dictionary use, contextual guessing), social strategies (consulting teachers and peers), memory strategies (repetition, note-taking), cognitive strategies (media engagement), and metacognitive strategies (self-monitoring). However, students predominantly relied on surface-level strategies such as bilingual dictionary use and verbal repetition, while deeper processing strategies like systematic goal-setting and contextual analysis were underutilized. Key challenges included limited awareness of diverse strategies, difficulties in vocabulary retention, and the gap between declarative knowledge of strategies and their consistent application. The findings suggest pedagogical implications for explicit VLS training to foster autonomous, self-regulated vocabulary learning among EFL students in Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Strategies, EFL Students, Qualitative Study, Strategy Taxonomy, Self-Regulated Learning

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary serves as the fundamental building block of language proficiency. As Wilkins (1972) famously asserted, "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (as cited in Lestari & Puspitasari, 2021). This observation underscores the critical role that vocabulary knowledge plays in all aspects of language learning, including reading comprehension, writing, speaking, and listening skills. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia, vocabulary acquisition often presents a significant challenge. Research has consistently documented that vocabulary is one of the most problematic language areas for Indonesian students, with studies showing vocabulary scores as the lowest among language skill components .

The English Education Program at STKIP Al Amin Dompu aims to prepare future English teachers who possess strong language competence. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many students in the program struggle with vocabulary learning, impacting their overall language development and their readiness to become effective English educators. Understanding how these students approach vocabulary learning is essential for developing more effective pedagogical interventions.

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) refer to the specific actions, behaviors, and techniques that learners employ to understand, remember, and use new words. Schmitt (1997) developed a comprehensive taxonomy of VLS that categorizes strategies into five main groups: determination strategies (discovering word meanings independently), social strategies (interacting with others to learn vocabulary), memory strategies (techniques for storing and retrieving words), cognitive strategies (mechanical means of learning), and metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning). This framework has been widely used in VLS research across diverse EFL contexts .

While substantial research has examined VLS use among EFL students in various contexts , limited studies have specifically investigated vocabulary learning strategies among English Education students in Eastern Indonesia, particularly in Nusa Tenggara Barat. This gap is significant because strategy use is influenced by contextual factors including educational background, cultural norms, and available resources . Furthermore, the transition to digital learning environments has introduced new dimensions to vocabulary learning that warrant investigation.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating the following research questions, 1) What vocabulary learning strategies do English Education students at STKIP Al Amin Dompu employ?, 2)What challenges do students face in their vocabulary learning?

By exploring these questions through a qualitative lens, this study aims to provide rich, contextualized insights into the VLS practices of Indonesian EFL students in a teacher education context. The findings are expected to inform pedagogical practices and contribute to the growing body of literature on vocabulary acquisition in Indonesian higher education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of EFL students in using vocabulary learning strategies. Phenomenology was chosen for its capacity to capture participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to their learning practices . This approach enabled the researcher to gain deep, contextualized insights into how students think about and engage in vocabulary learning.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at STKIP Al Amin Dompu, a private teacher education institution in Dompu, West Nusa Tenggara. The participants were twelve second-semester students enrolled in the English Education Program. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich information relevant to the research questions . Inclusion criteria included: (1) enrollment in the English Education Program, (2) completion of at least one semester of English language courses, and (3) willingness to participate in the study. The sample comprised eight female and four male students, representing diverse linguistic backgrounds typical of the region.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could express themselves comfortably and comprehensively . An interview protocol was developed based on Schmitt's (1997) VLS taxonomy, with questions exploring:

- Strategies used to discover meanings of new words
- Strategies used to consolidate and remember vocabulary
- Sources of difficulty in vocabulary learning
- Perceptions of effective vocabulary learning practices

Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in a private setting to encourage openness and were supplemented with field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were developed inductively from the data while also drawing on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy as a sensitizing framework. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to participants for verification. Peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research further enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's research ethics committee. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participants' identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed that students employed a variety of vocabulary learning strategies spanning all five categories of Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. However, the frequency and depth of strategy use varied considerably, with students predominantly relying on a limited set of strategies while demonstrating less awareness of others. The strategies reported by participants aligned with patterns observed in other Indonesian EFL contexts.

Determination Strategies

Determination strategies, used when learners discover word meanings independently without recourse to other people, were among the most frequently reported strategies.

Bilingual Dictionary Use. The most common determination strategy reported by participants was consulting bilingual (Indonesian-English) dictionaries. This finding aligns with research conducted in Indonesian junior high schools, where dictionary use ranked as the highest strategy in the determination category. Similarly, studies in Saudi tertiary contexts have reported students' heavy reliance on bilingual dictionaries as a primary vocabulary learning tool. Participant responses indicated that dictionary use was often a default strategy when encountering unfamiliar words:

"When I find a new word, I usually open the dictionary on my phone. It's the easiest way to know the meaning directly." (Participant 3)

"I use Google Translate mostly. It's quick and practical." (Participant 7)

However, reliance on bilingual dictionaries was not without limitations. Some participants acknowledged that dictionary use often led to superficial understanding and that they rarely explored word usage or collocational patterns. This observation is consistent with findings suggesting that while dictionary use is common, it may not facilitate deep lexical processing unless accompanied by other strategies.

Contextual Guessing. Several participants reported attempting to guess word meanings from context, particularly when reading academic texts or engaging with English-language media. As one participant explained:

"When I read a text, sometimes I try to understand the meaning from the sentence. The words before and after give a clue about the meaning." (Participant 5)

This strategy has been identified as effective for vocabulary learning, with research demonstrating that explicit training in contextual clue use can significantly improve vocabulary scores. However, many participants indicated that they used contextual guessing inconsistently and often abandoned this strategy in favor of immediate dictionary consultation when encountering multiple unknown words. This finding echoes research by Boonkongsan (2019), who found that contextual guessing may be underutilized due to students' perceptions of its difficulty.

Social Strategies

Social strategies involve interacting with others to learn vocabulary, including seeking help from teachers, peers, or native speakers.

Teacher Consultation. Participants reported consulting teachers for vocabulary clarification, particularly when encountering words in classroom materials. This strategy was perceived as valuable because teachers could provide authoritative explanations and contextual examples. Research in Indonesian contexts has similarly found that students frequently rely on teachers as credible sources for vocabulary learning.

"I ask my lecturer directly when I don't understand a word from the reading materials. The lecturer explains the meaning and how to use it." (Participant 8)

However, participants noted that opportunities for teacher consultation were limited by time constraints, leading them to rely more heavily on alternative strategies.

Peer Collaboration. Peer collaboration emerged as a significant social strategy, with students frequently discussing word meanings and sharing vocabulary knowledge. This finding aligns with research highlighting the role of peer interaction in vocabulary learning.

"Sometimes we learn together with friends. We ask each other about words we don't understand. Some friends have better vocabulary knowledge." (Participant 11)

Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that peer collaboration was not always effective, particularly when the group lacked sufficient vocabulary knowledge to resolve uncertainties. This observation underscores the importance of balanced peer interactions where learners are appropriately matched.

Memory Strategies

Memory strategies are techniques for storing and retrieving vocabulary, including repetition, association, and imagery.

Repetition. Verbal and written repetition was reported as a primary memory strategy. Participants described repeating words aloud or writing them multiple times to facilitate memorization. Research has found that written repetition is often preferred over verbal repetition in EFL contexts.

"I repeat the word several times, write it down, and try to remember it. I also check the translation so I know the meaning." (Participant 2)

While repetition is widely used, research suggests that rote rehearsal may be less effective for long-term retention compared to strategies that involve deeper processing, such as using words in meaningful contexts. Participants in this study expressed awareness of this limitation but struggled to adopt alternative strategies.

Note-taking and Vocabulary Notebooks. Taking notes of new words in notebooks was commonly reported. As one participant stated:

"I write new words in my notebook. If I don't write them, I'll forget them. When I have time, I review them." (Participant 4)

Research in Turkish EFL contexts found that vocabulary notebooks, note-taking, and skipping unknown words were among the most frequently employed strategies. However, participants in the present study noted that notebooks were often used passively, with words recorded but not systematically reviewed.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies involve mechanical means of learning, including using media, making lists, and applying words in tasks.

Engagement with Digital Media. Participants reported using digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Duolingo for vocabulary exposure. This finding reflects broader trends in Indonesian EFL contexts, where digital tools shape personalized learning ecosystems. Studies on Indonesian students' experiences with game-based learning platforms have shown that multimodal approaches combining text, audio, and visuals enhance vocabulary retention and motivation.

"I watch English movies and listen to songs. The subtitles help me understand new words. This is more fun than just memorizing from a book." (Participant 10)

Translation. Using translation as a cognitive strategy was common, with participants often translating words into Indonesian to understand them. However, research suggests that reliance on translation may inhibit the development of direct lexical processing in the target language. As one participant noted:

"I use my own language to understand English words. Sometimes it's still hard because not all words have the exact same meaning." (Participant 6)

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating vocabulary learning.

Self-Monitoring. Participants demonstrated some awareness of their vocabulary learning processes, but systematic self-monitoring was limited. This finding is consistent with research on self-regulated vocabulary learning in Indonesian higher education, where students reported difficulties in sustaining consistent learning strategies.

"I know I need to learn more words, but sometimes I get lazy or don't have time. I try to learn when the exam is coming." (Participant 9)

Media-based Learning. Using English-language media (movies, music, social media) was identified as a metacognitive strategy for improving vocabulary. Research indicates that learners who consciously decide to engage with media for vocabulary learning demonstrate metacognitive awareness in strategy use.

Challenges in Vocabulary Learning

Analysis of participants' responses revealed three primary challenges in vocabulary learning.

Limited Strategy Awareness. Most participants demonstrated limited awareness of the range of available VLS. They predominantly relied on a narrow set of strategies, often those requiring minimal cognitive effort. This finding aligns with research showing that EFL students in Indonesia often use only a limited number of strategies and lack knowledge of effective vocabulary learning approaches.

Difficulty in Retention. Participants consistently reported difficulties in retaining vocabulary over time. Many expressed frustration at learning new words only to forget them shortly afterward. As one participant lamented:

"I memorize many words, but after a few days I forget them. It's frustrating because I try hard but the results are not good." (Participant 1)

This challenge is well-documented in the literature, with studies showing that vocabulary retention depends on frequency of exposure and depth of processing .

The Awareness-Action Gap. A significant finding was the gap between students' declarative knowledge of effective strategies and their actual implementation. Participants expressed understanding that strategies such as contextual guessing and regular review were beneficial, yet they often resorted to less effective strategies such as rote memorization. This awareness-action gap has been identified as a key challenge in self-regulated vocabulary learning .

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on vocabulary learning strategies in Indonesian EFL contexts. Several themes warrant further discussion.

Prevalence of Surface-Level Strategies. The predominance of strategies such as bilingual dictionary use, repetition, and note-taking suggests that students favor strategies that provide immediate gratification rather than those requiring deeper processing. This finding echoes previous research showing that Indonesian EFL students prioritize meaning-focused strategies and are less inclined to engage with word form and usage . While such strategies may support initial acquisition, they are less conducive to developing automaticity and deep lexical knowledge .

The preference for surface-level strategies may be attributed to several factors. First, students' prior learning experiences likely shape their strategy choices, as many have been socialized into rote learning approaches through their educational backgrounds. Second, the demands of the curriculum and assessment systems often emphasize immediate recall, reinforcing the use of strategies that yield quick results. Finally, limited explicit instruction in VLS may leave students unaware of more effective alternatives.

The Role of Digital Technologies. The integration of digital tools into vocabulary learning represents a significant shift in strategy use. Participants reported using social media platforms, streaming services, and language learning applications to supplement formal study. This finding aligns with research on self-regulated vocabulary learning in Indonesia, where digital tools create personalized learning ecosystems blending formal and informal learning . The multimodal features of digital platforms—combining text, audio, and visual elements—support vocabulary retention through multiple sensory channels, a finding that aligns with studies on game-based learning .

However, the effectiveness of digital learning was constrained by challenges including poor internet connectivity, technical issues, and limited teacher interaction . These limitations highlight the need for pedagogical support to help students optimize their use of digital resources .

The Importance of Strategy Training. The gap between students' awareness of strategies and their consistent application suggests the need for explicit strategy training .

Research has demonstrated that targeted intervention can significantly improve both strategy use and vocabulary outcomes. Modeling cognitive processes through think-aloud methods, for example, enables students to internalize effective strategies and adapt them to their learning needs. Similarly, strategies such as mind mapping have been shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition, particularly when combined with visual aids and consistent practice.

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for vocabulary instruction in the English Education Program. First, instructors should explicitly teach a range of VLS, helping students understand when and how to use each strategy. Second, students should be encouraged to develop self-regulated learning practices, including setting vocabulary learning goals and monitoring their progress. Third, technology integration should be supported by guidance on selecting appropriate digital tools and using them effectively. Fourth, peer collaboration should be structured to maximize learning opportunities, such as through cooperative learning activities.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the vocabulary learning strategies employed by English Education students at STKIP Al Amin Dompou. The findings revealed that students employ a range of strategies spanning determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive categories. However, their strategy use was predominantly limited to surface-level strategies such as bilingual dictionary use, verbal repetition, and note-taking, while deeper processing strategies were underutilized. Students reported significant challenges in vocabulary retention and demonstrated limited awareness of the range of available strategies. The study also highlighted the potential of digital technologies in supporting vocabulary learning, along with the challenges associated with their use.

These findings have important implications for vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts. Explicit strategy training, integration of digital tools, and support for self-regulated learning are essential components of effective vocabulary pedagogy. Future research should explore the effectiveness of strategy intervention programs in this context and investigate how students' strategy use evolves over time. Longitudinal studies examining vocabulary development across the teacher education program would provide valuable insights into the trajectory of strategy development.

While this study provides rich, contextualized insights into VLS use among Indonesian EFL students, it is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single institution. Future research could employ larger samples and include multiple institutions to enhance generalizability. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches combining questionnaire surveys and observational data could provide more comprehensive understanding of VLS use in naturalistic settings.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on vocabulary learning in Indonesian EFL contexts and offers practical insights for language educators working to enhance their students' vocabulary learning outcomes.

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