

## Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Urban and Rural Good English Language Learners

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### Abstract

In improving learners' language acquisition, the good practice of language learning strategies are crucial to promote active participation in language classroom. This research specifically focuses on investigating the preferred vocabulary learning strategies among Malaysian urban and rural good language learners from two secondary schools. This study was participated by 60 Form 2 secondary students attending a Malaysian government school in Negeri Sembilan and Johor. Schmit (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) was adapted in this study. The adapted version of the questionnaire comprises 25 items from 5 different subcategories. The mean of each strategy was analysed using SPSS Version 26. The study depicted that the most frequently employed VLSs by ESL learners are Determination strategies (**DET**), while Cognitive strategies (**COG**) are less commonly used. These results provide useful information for ESL teachers in analysing the variation in the vocabulary learning strategies employed in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** English Language Teaching and Learning, Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Affective and Cognitive Strategies, Secondary ESL Learners, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Urban and Rural ESL Learners

### Introduction

Language serves as a medium for communication for students to share knowledge and exchange information. To enhance learners' listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary abilities, various strategies have been developed, aiming to make language use more effective (He & Hutson, 2018). Among these language skills, vocabulary acquisition stands out as a crucial foundation for language learning. Nejati et al (2018) suggest that the linguistic foundation of language is vocabulary. Learners are more likely to struggle when trying to understand other linguistic nuances when their vocabulary is insufficient. Therefore,

understanding vocabulary learning strategies that are deemed effective is vital, especially for ESL learners in Malaysia.

English is considered a second language (L2) in Malaysia, and it is essential for ESL learners to possess a vast vocabulary to effectively utilise and interact in English (Adan & Hashim, 2021). However, learners who lack vocabulary proficiency in the English language often encounter difficulties in choosing the right words. According to Zulkefly & Razali (2019), rural learners in Malaysia face limitations in communicating in English due to a lack of language exposure and limited vocabulary. The language abilities of rural learners are different from those of their urban peers (Lahmar, 2019). This issue is particularly prominent among rural learners as they have insufficient exposure to the English language. Urban learners, on the contrary, benefit from local resources, technology, exposure to a variety of language knowledge, and multiple opportunities to improve their language proficiency (Arulchelvan et al., 2019; Karim, 2019; Phung, 2017). However, rural learners often feel disconnected from the English language, perceiving its relevance solely within the context of English lessons and examinations (Khokhar & Sangi, 2018). The limited vocabulary also hinders rural learners' ability to produce high-quality compositions (Boonkongsaen, 2012).

Therefore, acquiring an extensive vocabulary is crucial for successful English language learning performance, as it allows learners to effectively convey meanings and ideas in their writing. In addition to vocabulary acquisition, it is important to explore the preferred vocabulary learning strategies used by students from rural and urban backgrounds. Khairi and Bahri (2020) found that employing various strategies, such as using contextual cues when reading or mnemonics, significantly enhances young learners' cognitive abilities related to word interpretation processes. Moreover, the specific strategies employed by rural and urban secondary school students may be influenced by their language environment, available resources, and exposure to language.

By investigating these differences it will provide insights into the vocabulary learning strategies employed by secondary ESL learners in both rural and urban areas in Malaysia for improving their vocabulary. This study aims to answer the following research questions

1. What are the most and least preferred VLSs among good ESL learners in urban and rural secondary schools?

## **Literature Review**

### **Language Learning Strategies**

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) has been defined by numerous past scholars worldwide. An early definition by Rigney (1978) defined LLS as the actions taken by language learners to improve their understanding, retention, recalling, and the utilisation of new information. (Rigney, 1978, cited in Saranraj et al., 2016). In this definition, the researcher explained strategies as the methods or tools that students may employ to pick up knowledge. In the latter year, Rubin (1987) added that LLS is deemed as actions that language learners use to make learning languages easier. Adding on to the previous definition provided, Oxford (1990) further elaborated that language strategies are certain acts made by the student to make learning simpler, quicker, more pleasurable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to different settings. This is in line with Susanto et al (2019) which emphasises that learners will consequently become active participants of their own learning when implementing a variety of language learning strategies, thus instilling self-directed values in them. The expansion of the language system that the language learner has developed

emphasises the crucial notion of LLS in enhancing learners' learning performance (Zare, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for learners to be aware of their strategies and receive training to employ them in practice effectively.

### **Typology of Language Learning Strategies**

According to Oxford (1990), learning strategies can be classified into two distinct categories which comprises the direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are the language learning strategy which directly engage the subject matter, as opposed to the indirect strategies which do not directly engage with the subject matter but assist students in taking charge of their learning (Amani & Roumaissa, 2020). These two broad classes (direct strategies and indirect strategies) are separated into six groups which comprise memory, cognition, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Tran, 2021). Oxford's typology of LLSs can be regarded as the most well-known and widely used hierarchy of learning strategies because it is comprehensive and extensive (Adan & Hashim, 2021; Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021).

There are three strategies that fall under the direct strategies which comprises memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies (Tran, 2021). Oxford (1990) states that memory strategies, which are deemed one of the direct strategies, help with storing knowledge in long-term memory and retrieving it when it is required for communication. Cognitive strategy on the other hand is used to acquire and change internal mental models, as well as to render messages in the target language (Oxford, 1990). Adding on to that, the compensation strategy that falls under the direct strategy is deemed as the strategy that allows students to use the language to overcome their knowledge gaps (Amani & Roumaissa, 2020). Meanwhile, for indirect strategies, there are three strategies listed which comprises metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies refer to the strategies that are associated with general competencies that help learners control, direct, regulate, and steer their learning by regulating the internal process of learning (Cao & Lin, 2020). Affective strategies are the methods and practises used by speakers to ease their anxiety, monitor their emotions, and motivate themselves when speaking (El Sakka, 2019). Social strategies refers to the student's interpersonal interactions when learning a language and the target culture (Ranjan & Philominraj, 2019). Oxford (1990) created a survey called Strategy Inventory Language Learning (SILL) by integrating all six strategies which has been widely used among educational researchers worldwide (Nazri et al., 2016; Tigarajan et al., 2016).

### **Good Language Learner**

The notion of good language learners has piqued the interest of many researchers from all across the world where an array of personality traits and learning strategies employed by these learners have been extensively studied in gaining insights on the essence that shape the learners to be successful in their learning (Hardan, 2013; Koleman, 2021). According to Jaikrishnan and Ismail (2021), many past studies have advocated the association between language learning strategies and its significant influence on successful language learning. This is in line with Hasram and Singh (2021) in their study that highlights the main findings where good language learners frequently use various strategies and approaches that are essential for enhancing their language abilities, as they typically experiment with a multitude of learning strategies before selecting the one that best suits their needs and proficiency level. Hence, it is imperative to understand the characteristics of good language learners as well as its association with the learning strategies employed in promoting the strategies to the less

successful learners to enhance their performance (Rubin, 1975 as cited in Nadif & Benattabou, 2021).

Good language learners have been observed to employ optimum usage of LLS by integrating several strategies together to advance in the acquisition of the language, as asserted by (Rubin and Stern, 1975). They are deemed adaptable and flexible in shifting their approaches and strategies depending on the needs of the tasks assigned (Ellis & Ellis, 1994, as cited in Alasmari, 2019). In contrast to their peers, good language learners take a proactive and independent approach to language learning, which involves the process of enhancing their language learning strategies and learning motivation (Alasmari, 2019). In order to comprehend the traits of successful language learners, Rubin (1975) asserts that there are three main factors that successful learning rely on, which constitutes aptitude, motivation, and opportunity. This is in line with Naiman et al (1978), where they highlight that good language learners exhibit high motivation, a favourable attitude towards speakers of the target language, a proactive approach and a desire to use the target language in any communicative opportunities, as well as a good competency with cognitive strategies. Despite the fact that there are numerous indicators of a good learner as presented by numerous past scholars, it is vital to note that personality traits, learning strategies, and learning motivation are the three characteristics that have the most significant impact (Shan, 2020).

### **Vocabulary Learning Strategies in ESL Classroom**

Limited vocabulary could hinder second language learners' language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing performance. It is demotivating and overwhelming for ESL learners when they have a limited size of vocabulary as it could cause confusion and misunderstanding among learners (Dollah and Shah, 2016). Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are one of the ways to explore individual strategies that would assist ESL learners as well as instructors to focus on the strategies and therefore promote self-learning. According to Oxford (2003), learning strategies are deemed as tools that are crucial to develop learners' communicative competence. The researcher also put forth the crucial notion that the purpose of LLS is to assist language learning process, thus improving learners' language learning experience. The development of the techniques is also based on the idea that learners need assistance in enhancing the process by which they learn vocabulary, and that having the capacity to create one's own vocabulary learning strategies would be an effective strategy. (Ali & Kalajahi, 2012).

The comprehensive taxonomy of VLS presented by Oxford (1990) which has been extensively integrated by many past scholars is divided into two primary categories which comprises the direct strategies and indirect strategies. The taxonomy of VLS was further developed by Schmitt (1997) where the researcher explains VLS in five subcategories.

Schmitt (1997) divided the two primary areas of Oxford's vocabulary learning strategies into five subcategories which include Determination, Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive strategies. Determination strategies are the learning strategies that occur when learners explore the meaning of unfamiliar vocabularies independently. Next, social strategies involve active interaction which facilitate one's learning process. Memory strategies on the other hand is a strategy that emerges when learners make connections in learning a new vocabulary by equating the vocabulary with their prior knowledge. Adding on to that, another subcategory introduced is the cognitive strategy which are relevant to repetition and using mechanical methods. Lastly, metacognitive strategies are also deemed

as the subcategory of VLS which involve awareness of the learning process that assist students in selecting the most effective learning techniques that may enhance their learning (Schmitt, 1997).

A study conducted by Dollah and Shah (2016) comparing the VLS employed by urban and rural school students shows that there is no significant difference in VLS employed by them. Nevertheless, it is reported that urban school students have more variation in implementing different categories of VLS as opposed to rural school students. Meanwhile, the study by Cheng (2022) which compares the VLS between rural and urban middle school students in China found out that both schools prefer to use cognitive strategies and memory strategies compared to metacognitive strategies. Due to this, the learners' vocabulary is a bit poor as they struggle to convert receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary. A study conducted by Feng (2023) in a rural junior middle school in China found the main vocabulary learning mode is a cognitive strategy through repeated reading or copying and Chinese translation. However, the least strategy used by rural learners is social strategy. This indicates that these students are less willing to actively communicate with teachers and their friends, thus hindering the process in improving their vocabulary through active communication.

### **Methodology**

This study used a quantitative survey design where a set of questionnaires was distributed in collecting numerical data from a small group of participants which renders the participants' perceptions and practices (Creswell, 2012). The samples for this study which aims to find the vocabulary learning strategies employed by two different secondary schools which are located in the urban and rural area involved 60 Form 2 secondary school students. This study employed purposive sampling as the sampling technique in choosing the research participants. After deciding the research participants, the researcher designed the research instrument where the instrument chosen was adapted from Schmitt (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) as it suits the purpose of the study. The VLSQ was utilised in the context of this study due to its suitability in providing information about participants' VLS, their frequency of using VLS, and their general preferences for vocabulary learning strategies. Nevertheless, adaptations were made to the VLSQ to ensure it is according to the participants' learning environment and competence level. There are 40 items listed in the questionnaire which measure the frequency of the vocabulary learning strategies in a five-point Likert scale ranging from Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Frequently (4), and Always (5). The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics where the mean and standard deviation for each strategy were recorded.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Survey**

In order to examine students' vocabulary learning strategies, a survey questionnaire consisting of 25 items were gathered and measured based on the five subcategories of students' Determination strategies (**DET**), Social strategies (**SOC**), Memory strategies (**MEM**), Cognitive strategies (**COG**) and Metacognitive strategies (**MET**) as factors influencing. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never to Always. The higher mean score depicted a more frequent usage of the VLS among the research participants. Meanwhile, the mean score that is below 3.00 indicates the infrequent use of strategies towards the item.



Table 1  
*Students' vocabulary learning strategies (VLS)*

Group Statistics					
	School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Determination_Strategy	KGI	30	3.5067	.53236	.09719
	SMKSK	30	3.3467	.47251	.08627
Social_Strategy	KGI	30	3.1067	.70805	.12927
	SMKSK	30	3.3667	.73547	.13428
Memory_Strategy	KGI	30	3.0267	.80812	.14754
	SMKSK	30	3.0400	.61116	.11158
Cognitive_Strategy	KGI	30	2.7133	.83325	.15213
	SMKSK	30	3.1067	.62969	.11496
Metacognitive_Strategy	KGI	30	3.3667	.69893	.12761
	SMKSK	30	3.1000	.63842	.11656

Table 1 depicted the results from the survey of students' vocabulary learning strategies in learning English. According to the table, students from the urban area (KGI) employed the Determination strategies (**DET**) most frequently with the highest mean score being 3.50. Plus, these students also responded that their second most frequent strategy employed is Metacognitive strategies (**MET**) with the second highest mean (Mean= 3.36). Therefore, this shows that both of the findings for the students in the urban area are in line with Ghalebi, Sadighi, and Bagheri's (2020) study which indicated that students living in an urban area have better exposure to English language materials such as newspapers, novels and magazines as well as radio programmes. Moreover, the higher means of frequency in Determination strategies (**DET**) showed that the students are taking a proactive and independent approach to language learning, which involves the process of enhancing their language learning strategies and learning motivation (Alasmari, 2019). This will help the students to be good language learners as they are being independent in their learning and at the same time gain as much vocabulary as they can without having to rely on their teachers. In contrast, as shown in Table 1, the least frequent strategy used by the students from the urban area is Cognitive strategies (**COG**) with the lowest mean score (Mean= 2.71) among all sub-categories. This indicates that students of KGI that live in the urban area used fewer guessing strategies, skilful use of dictionaries and note-taking strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996).

Concurrently, students from the rural area which is SMKSK responded that they employed Social strategies (**SOC**) the most with a 3.36 mean score. The results also showed that these students from the rural area have chosen Determination strategies (**DET**) as their second most frequent strategy employed with a mean score of 3.34. Based on these two findings which contradict Feng's (2023) study, the students used more social learning strategies which implies that they are willing to actively communicate with teachers and their friends, thus it would be good to improve their vocabulary learning strategies through active communication. Next, the students in the rural area employed Memory strategies (**MEM**) least frequently with a mean score recorded as 3.04. On the other hand, it is quite similar with the urban area students, the students from SMKSK also showed that they employed fewer Cognitive strategies (**COG**) as it came second lowest (Mean= 3.106) according to the result for the students in the rural area. It can also be seen that Metacognitive strategies (**MET**) came third (Mean= 3.100) as the lowest indirect strategy employed by these students in the rural area. This result corroborated earlier studies, such as Sahbazian's (2004) study, which discovered that metacognitive methods are among the less commonly employed ones. It

shows that students could not or did not take control of their learning due to a lack of language exposure and the limitation of English language materials in rural areas.

### Conclusion

Numerous research have demonstrated that various learning strategies have distinct impacts on students' learning success, in this case, vocabulary learning. Language learning process comprises the process for learners in taking strategic steps to aid their own learning. More importantly, making students acknowledge the learning strategies they employed as well as the potential benefits of integrating the strategies might help these students in selecting and employing the best strategy, as a result, improved their learning experience. Moreover, this research has an added value in providing insight for educational stakeholders into the implications of different language learning strategies as factors influencing students' learning achievement, especially in learning vocabulary. This study may be beneficial for educational stakeholders in providing useful information concerning the vocabulary strategy used by Malaysian secondary school students in both rural and urban areas. To sum up, the findings of this study significantly revealed the most frequent VLSs integrated by ESL learners in both rural and urban areas are Determination strategies (**DET**).

Moreover, the findings of this study depicted that students in rural and urban areas employed fewer Cognitive strategies (**COG**). The data analysis in this study remarkably showed that students in the urban area employed most of the categories on VLSs more frequently as compared to rural school students which is also supported by much previous research. Notwithstanding its strengths, there are several limitations that should be taken into account for future research. Firstly, the small sample size in this study which is the representative of ESL secondary school students in Malaysia, may restrict how broadly the results can be generalised to different contexts. Other than that, this paper recommends future research to further explore the relationship between VLSs and students' learning achievement by conducting qualitative interviews or observations. To confirm the findings of this study and further demonstrate the generalizability of the conclusions, replication of this research may be carried out in the future.

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