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Article

Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by EFL Undergraduate Students at University

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A B S T R A C T

Vocabulary knowledge underpins EFL learners' academic success, yet many students experience difficulties retaining and using newly learned words. Previous research on vocabulary learning strategies has frequently employed questionnaire-based approaches, which provide information about strategy preferences but may offer limited insights into learners' actual experiences and the factors shaping their strategy choices. This study aimed to (1) identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by undergraduate EFL students at Tadulako University and (2) explore the factors influencing their use of these strategies. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving five seventh-semester students from the English Education Study Program who were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to provide information-rich accounts of vocabulary learning experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The findings revealed that all participants used determination and cognitive strategies, while four employed activation strategies, two used social strategies, two used metacognitive strategies, and only one used memory strategies. Three main factors shaped their strategy use: motivation associated with their identity as future English teachers, social environment, and self-regulation. These findings highlight the importance of understanding vocabulary learning strategies through learners' personal experiences and contextual influences. Explicit instruction in vocabulary learning strategies is recommended to help EFL students develop more effective and independent vocabulary learning practices.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategies, EFL Undergraduate Students, Descriptive Qualitative Study, Schmitt's Taxonomy, Self-Regulation*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in developing the four language skills. Students with adequate vocabulary knowledge are better able to comprehend texts, participate in conversations, and communicate their ideas effectively. Vocabulary knowledge involves not only recognizing word forms and meanings but also understanding how words function in different contexts (Nation, 2013; N Schmitt, 2000). For undergraduate students in English education programs, vocabulary competence is particularly important because it supports their academic development and prepares them for their future roles as English teachers. Despite having studied English for several years, however, some students at Tadulako University still experience difficulties acquiring and retaining vocabulary. Informal discussions with students revealed that they sometimes struggled to recall familiar words, avoided using specific vocabulary when speaking, relied on a limited range of expressions, and quickly forgot newly learned words. These difficulties suggest a need to examine how students develop their vocabulary knowledge and the strategies they use to support vocabulary learning.

To cope with these difficulties, learners use vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Nation (2013) describes them as the actions and techniques learners use to understand word meanings

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and remember them over time. Schmitt (1997) defines them as the actions and procedures learners use to discover the meaning of new words and consolidate them in long-term memory. Strategic vocabulary learning contributes to vocabulary development and general language proficiency (Gu, 2018; Oxford, 1990). However, many EFL learners still depend heavily on memorization and repetition, which may not be enough for long-term retention (Ghalebi et al., 2020; Simanjuntak, 2021). Knowing which strategies students actually use is therefore necessary to identify gaps between recommended practice and real learning behavior. In this study, vocabulary learning strategies refer to the conscious actions that undergraduate EFL students use to acquire, understand, and retain English vocabulary.

Frameworks of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Several frameworks have been proposed to classify these strategies. Oxford (1990) divides language learning strategies into direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) and indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social). Nation (2001) groups vocabulary strategies by function: planning vocabulary learning, finding information about words, and establishing vocabulary knowledge. The most widely adopted vocabulary-specific classification is Schmitt (1997) taxonomy, which distinguishes strategies for discovering the meaning of new words from strategies for consolidating them. It has five categories. Determination strategies are used to find the meaning of unfamiliar words independently, for example by using dictionaries, analyzing prefixes and roots, or guessing from context. Social strategies involve learning through interaction, such as asking teachers or classmates or discussing words in groups. Memory strategies help learners store and retrieve words by linking them with prior knowledge, images, sounds, or categories. Cognitive strategies involve direct practice, such as repetition, note-taking, word lists, and using words in sentences. Metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own vocabulary learning.

Gu (2018) complements this taxonomy by emphasizing self-regulation. In his framework, metacognitive strategies regulate the learning process. Activation strategies refer to using newly learned words in meaningful communication, such as conversations, presentations, or writing. Selective attention strategies refer to focusing on words that learners consider important or useful. Gu also recognizes that learners' beliefs about vocabulary learning, for example whether words should be memorized or learned through use, shape the strategies they choose. The present study used Schmitt's taxonomy as its main framework for describing the strategies and Gu's framework for activation strategies and self-regulation.

Factors Influencing Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use

Strategy use is shaped by personal, social, and contextual factors. Dörnyei (2007) argues that motivation is one of the main determinants of second language attainment, and motivated learners tend to use a wider variety of strategies. Gu (2018) points out that learner beliefs influence strategy choice, while Oxford (1990) highlights learner autonomy and self-regulation: learners who set goals, monitor their progress, and adjust their strategies tend to learn more successfully. Proficiency and prior learning experiences also matter, because more proficient learners tend to use a wider range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The learning context is another factor. In EFL settings such as Indonesia, where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, strategy use may depend on available resources, lecturers' instructional approaches, and access to digital tools such as online dictionaries and vocabulary applications.

Previous Studies

Most previous research on university students has been quantitative. At Tadulako University, Khayinah (2023) used a questionnaire and found that English Education students employed memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, although some were used more often than others. Simanjuntak (2021) reported that undergraduate students used various strategies, with social and memory strategies being the most common. Komari et al. (2022)

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found a similar pattern among university students in Papua. Al Fraidan & Alamdar (2024) found that English major students used a wider range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies than preparatory-year students, who relied more on memorization and repetition. AlBatel & Ahmed (2024) showed that the beliefs of Saudi EFL undergraduates influenced their selection of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In a qualitative case study using interviews and classroom observation, Amalia & Sulistyani (2025) found that learners' strategy choices were influenced by previous learning experiences, personal preferences, and study habits. That study, however, was conducted in a different institution with a limited number of participants.

These studies show that students use many strategies and that beliefs, academic background, and experience affect their choices. However, because most of them focused on strategy types and frequency, they say little about how learners experience strategy use in their daily academic activities or why they choose particular strategies. Even Khayinah (2023) study at Tadulako University did not explore students' personal experiences or the contextual factors behind their strategy use, and qualitative studies in this setting remain scarce. This study therefore explored, through a descriptive qualitative approach, the vocabulary learning strategies used by undergraduate students at Tadulako University and the factors influencing their selection and use. It was guided by two research questions: (1) What vocabulary learning strategies are employed by undergraduate students at Tadulako University? (2) What factors influence their selection and use of these strategies? Theoretically, the study adds contextual, experience-based evidence to VLS research in Indonesian higher education. Practically, it offers information that can help students become aware of different strategies and help lecturers and curriculum developers design vocabulary instruction that fits students' actual learning practices.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore how undergraduate students learned English vocabulary, the strategies they used, and the factors influencing their strategy choices. This design was appropriate because the study focused on understanding students' experiences and perspectives rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses. Qualitative research enables researchers to interpret the meanings individuals or groups attach to particular social and educational phenomena (J. W. Creswell, 2014). In this study, the phenomenon of interest was students' use of vocabulary learning strategies throughout their academic experiences. The research was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, Palu, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. This setting was relevant because the program prepares prospective English teachers who engage with English language learning throughout their undergraduate studies. The study did not involve experimental treatment or hypothesis testing, as its primary purpose was to provide an in-depth description of students' vocabulary learning practices within their academic context.

Participants

The participants consisted of five seventh-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. They were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: enrollment in the seventh semester, prior experience in learning English vocabulary throughout their university studies, and willingness to participate in interviews and share their learning experiences. Seventh-semester students were considered relevant participants because they had completed most of their coursework and had accumulated substantial experience learning English, including developing and applying different vocabulary learning strategies. The selection of five participants was consistent with the exploratory and descriptive purpose of the study, which emphasized obtaining detailed information rather than achieving statistical representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Guest et al. (2006) also suggest that relatively small samples may provide sufficient information

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when investigating a focused phenomenon within a defined population. Given the specific research focus and the participants' shared academic context, five participants were considered appropriate for exploring recurring patterns in their vocabulary learning experiences. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code, namely P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5.

Instruments

The main instrument was a semi-structured interview guideline consisting of five open-ended questions about how students learned new words, how they remembered and reviewed them, what challenges they faced, and what motivated them. A semi-structured format was chosen because it balances structure and flexibility. The prepared questions kept the discussion focused on vocabulary learning strategies, while participants could still explain their experiences in their own words. The questions were developed from Schmitt (1997) framework, with Gu (2018) and Dörnyei (2007) perspectives guiding the questions on challenges and motivation. Table 1 shows the interview questions and their focus.

Table 1 Interview Questions and Their Focus

No	Interview question	Focus
1	Can you briefly describe the strategies you usually use to learn and improve your English vocabulary during your study at Tadulako University?	Overall strategies (Schmitt's categories)
2	When you find a new or unfamiliar word, what do you usually do?	Discovering meaning (determination strategies)
3	How do you improve or review vocabulary that you have just learned?	Retaining and practicing words (memory and cognitive strategies)
4	What challenges do you face in learning vocabulary, and how do you overcome them?	Challenges and self-regulation (metacognitive strategies, Gu, 2018)
5	What motivates you to learn new vocabulary?	Motivation (Dörnyei, 2007)

Procedures

The interviews were conducted individually with each participant in [month, year], and each was planned to last approximately 20–40 minutes. [State the language used in the interviews and how the quotations were translated into English.] With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded, and the researcher also took brief notes on important ideas that emerged. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed into written form for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which has three steps. In data condensation, the researcher read the transcripts carefully, highlighted important statements, explanations, and examples, and categorized them. Information unrelated to vocabulary learning was excluded. In data display, the participants' responses were organized into categories guided by Schmitt (1997) five strategy categories, with activation strategies from Gu (2018) used for the use of new words in communication. This made it easier to see patterns, similarities, and differences across participants. In conclusion drawing and verification, the researcher interpreted the organized data, identified the strategies commonly used, and checked the conclusions repeatedly against the original data.

Trustworthiness

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the interview findings of the five participants and discusses them in relation to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and previous studies. Table 2 gives an overview of the strategy categories reported by each participant.

Table 2 Strategy Categories Reported by Each Participant

Participant	Determination	Social	Memory	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Activation
P1	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
P2	✓	–	✓	✓	–	–
P3	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓
P4	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓
P5	✓	–	–	✓	–	✓
Total	5	2	1	5	2	4

Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by The Students (Research Question 1)

All five participants combined several strategies, but each had a different mix and emphasis.

Determination strategies. All participants discovered the meanings of new words independently, using media, applications, and dictionaries. P1 learned through English songs, podcasts, and TikTok: "I more often improve through listening to English music, watching podcasts, and also scrolling TikTok." P2 used DeepL or a dictionary and also checked the word class: "Usually I look up the meaning first in DeepL or in the dictionary, then how it is written, and after that whether it is a noun, verb, or adjective." P3 read light articles on the medium platform and looked up unknown words afterward. P4 took unfamiliar words from songs, films, and classroom materials and analyzed their context: "I dissect it, in what context is this vocabulary used, whether it is formal, informal, in education, or in another context." P5 used Duolingo, dictionaries, videos, and podcasts.

Cognitive Strategies

All participants also practiced vocabulary directly by writing new words down and making sentences. P3 explained, "I note down which words I do not know. And after I finish reading the article, I will find out the meaning... the next day I make those words into sentences." P4 went further and made paragraphs containing the words she was learning. P5 wrote words down and reopened them repeatedly.

Activation Strategies

Four participants used new words in real communication. P3 said, "I practice using the word when speaking with my family or friends, so it will be stored in our long-term memory." P1 practiced with friends or alone in front of a mirror, and P4 and P5 applied new words in daily conversation and daily life.

Social Strategies

P1 asked fluent friends directly when she met an unknown word, and P4 also interacted with fluent peers.

Metacognitive Strategies

Two participants managed their own learning. P3 chose reading materials suited to his level, and P4 monitored her own motivation through self-talk: "I tell myself that if I do not do this, I will not improve my own vocabulary."

Memory Strategies

Only P2 used a clear memory routine, memorizing five words every day and repeating them aloud: "The strategy I usually use is memorizing 5 vocabulary words every day."

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These findings support Schmitt (1997) view that vocabulary learning is multifaceted and that learners use different strategies at different stages: discovering a word's meaning, practicing it, and using it. They also agree with Oxford (2017) view that successful learners select and combine strategies according to their goals and contexts. The participants' strategies did not follow a single method. Instead, each participant built a personal combination, for example media-based discovery followed by sentence making and then use in conversation.

The results partly differ from earlier studies. Simanjuntak (2021) and Komari et al. (2022) reported that memory and social strategies were among the most frequently used. In the present study, memory strategies were reported by only one participant and social strategies by two, while cognitive and activation strategies were the most visible. One possible reason is that this study asked students to describe their own practices in interviews, whereas those studies measured strategy use through questionnaires. The small sample may also have played a role. The study extends earlier work by showing that activation strategies mattered as much as memorization: the students did not only memorize words but also tried to use them in meaningful contexts, which fits Gu (2018) emphasis on productive use. Metacognitive strategies, which Gu treats as central to self-regulated learning, were reported by only two participants, so planning and monitoring were less visible in the students' accounts than practice and use.

Factors Influencing the Students' Strategy Use (Research Question 2)

Motivation and Beliefs

Motivation was the most prominent factor, and for most participants it was closely tied to their identity as English Education students. P2 said, *"We have to master English, so that becomes my motivation because I realize my status is as an English Education student."* P3 likewise felt he had to expand his vocabulary, and P1, who also worked as a private tutor, wanted to be able to answer her students' questions. P5 was motivated by her wish to become fluent in English. This supports Dörnyei (2007) argument that motivation is a primary determinant of second language attainment. It also fits Gu (2018) point that learners' beliefs influence strategy choice, because the participants' belief that they must master vocabulary for their professional future shaped how actively and persistently, they studied.

Social Environment

P4 described her environment as her main source of motivation: *"My friends are very fluent in English and they have a lot of vocabulary, so I am motivated to improve my own vocabulary."* P1 and P4 also learned through interaction with fluent peers. Their accounts show that strategy use is influenced by the people around learners, as well as by the learning context. The students' heavy use of songs, podcasts, TikTok, Medium, and Duolingo suggests that access to digital resources shapes how they discover and practice words, which is consistent with the role of the learning context in EFL settings with limited exposure to English.

Challenges and Self-Regulation

The participants faced several challenges. P1 found it hard to memorize many words whose meanings change with context, P2 struggled with pronunciation, and P3 forgot new words the next day. P4 often felt lazy and bored, and P5 was affected by unstable internet connections and also forgot words she had learned. The students overcame these problems in different ways: P1 understood words according to their context, P4 used self-talk to keep going, and others relied on digital resources. These challenges are similar to the retention and pronunciation problems reported by Ghalebi et al. (2020). They also show that vocabulary learning is not only a cognitive matter but also an emotional and contextual one, which supports Dörnyei (2007) argument that affective factors influence engagement in language learning. The way participants monitored their motivation, adjusted their practice, and took responsibility for their progress reflects the self-regulation that Gu (2018) and Oxford (2017) emphasize.

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Taken together, motivation, beliefs about the importance of vocabulary, the social environment, the available resources, and self-regulation were interrelated in shaping how the students approached vocabulary learning. Strategies were therefore not fixed techniques but choices shaped by learners' goals, identities, and contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the vocabulary learning strategies used by undergraduate EFL students at Tadulako University and the factors influencing their choices. The findings showed that determination and cognitive strategies were consistently used, while activation, social, metacognitive, and memory strategies were less frequent. This indicates students' preference for independent vocabulary discovery, understanding, and practice. Their strategy choices were influenced by motivation as future English teachers, social environments, digital resource availability, and self-regulation. However, students faced challenges involving vocabulary retention, pronunciation, contextual understanding, motivation, and internet accessibility. These findings highlight the importance of explicit vocabulary strategy instruction and learning activities that integrate individual, social, cognitive, and metacognitive approaches. Students should also be encouraged to set learning goals, practice regularly, and collaborate with peers. Nevertheless, the findings are limited to five seventh-semester students from one study program. Future research should involve diverse participants and institutions and examine relationships between vocabulary learning strategies, language proficiency, motivation, and academic achievement.

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I realize that this research proposal still has limitations. Therefore, I welcome constructive criticism and suggestions to improve the quality of this research. Thank you to everyone who has contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this proposal.

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Informed Consent: All interview participants provided consent to take part in the study.

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Use of Generative AI: AI tools, if used, assisted with language refinement only. Data analysis and interpretation were undertaken by the authors.

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