EFL Learners' Strategies and Obstacles in Vocabulary Acquisition at the Second Semester TBI STAIN Mandailing Natal

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Abstract

Vocabulary is a central aspect of second language learning as it provides the foundation for effective communication. However, acquiring and retaining new vocabulary remains a challenge for many EFL learners. This study aimed to analyze the strategies employed by EFL learners in acquiring vocabulary and to explore the obstacles they encountered in the process. The research was conducted among 25 second-semester students of the English Education Department (Tadris Bahasa Inggris) at STAIN Mandailing Natal. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative data from questionnaires with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that cognitive strategies were the most frequently employed by learners, followed by metacognitive, social, determination, and memory strategies. Meanwhile, the major obstacles faced by learners included limited exposure to English, difficulty in memorizing vocabulary, and low motivation. The study concludes that while learners actively adopt various strategies, their progress is hindered by contextual and psychological challenges. These findings suggest the importance of providing meaningful exposure to English and designing strategy-based instruction to enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition.

Kata Kunci: *EFL Learners, Vocabulary Acquisition, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Obstacles Ability.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in mastering a foreign language, as it serves as the foundation for developing the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners find it difficult to comprehend texts, express their ideas accurately, or engage effectively in communication. As Renandya and Richards (2002) pointed out, vocabulary is not only a central component of language proficiency but also the basis for

understanding and expressing meaning in both oral and written forms. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, vocabulary becomes even more significant since learners have limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom. Their opportunities to use and encounter English words often depend on structured classroom instruction, making the learning environment a key factor in vocabulary development.

EFL learners are typically situated in environments where English is not used for daily communication (Richards & Schmidt, 1985, as cited in Inman, 2016). Consequently, they rely heavily on formal instruction, textbooks, and teacher guidance rather than natural language exposure. This dependence creates challenges for developing spontaneous and contextually rich vocabulary use. In Indonesia, English is introduced from primary to tertiary education as a compulsory subject, yet students' real-life interaction with English remains limited (Rahmat & Aripin, 2021). Therefore, understanding how EFL learners acquire vocabulary and the strategies they employ is essential to improving language instruction in such contexts.

Vocabulary acquisition is a complex and dynamic process that requires deliberate learning and frequent exposure. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge is indispensable for communication and comprehension, and learners need strategic approaches to acquire and retain words effectively. Schmitt (1997) provided a widely accepted taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), dividing them into five categories: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Determination strategies involve discovering meanings independently through tools such as dictionaries or contextual guessing; social strategies emphasize learning through interaction with others; memory strategies focus on linking new words with existing knowledge; cognitive strategies involve repetition, note-taking, or using word lists; and metacognitive strategies refer to planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's vocabulary learning process. Oxford (1990) further emphasized that successful learners rarely depend on a single strategy but instead combine multiple approaches flexibly according to their learning needs.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that learners who apply a variety of strategies tend to achieve greater vocabulary retention and communicative competence. Aravind and Rajasekaran (2020) found that EFL learners commonly combined cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as repetition, media use, and self-monitoring to enhance their vocabulary mastery. Similarly, Ghasemi, Yazdani, and Mozaheb (2019) reported that metacognitive strategy training significantly improved learners' ability to monitor and regulate their learning, resulting in better vocabulary retention. More recent research by Putri, Fitrawati, and Haryani (2023) also indicated that integrating technology and reflective practices encourages sustainable vocabulary learning. These findings suggest that effective strategy use is key to successful vocabulary acquisition; however, many students still struggle to apply such strategies effectively in classroom settings.

Despite the existence of various effective methods, many EFL learners continue to rely on traditional practices such as rote memorization, translation, and isolated drilling. These techniques may help short-term recall but often fail to support long-term retention or meaningful use (Lee & Oxford, 2019). Moreover, learners frequently face obstacles that hinder vocabulary acquisition, including internal factors such as low motivation, limited self-regulation, and affective barriers like anxiety or fear of making mistakes (Asyiah, 2017). External constraints such as limited exposure to English, lack of resources, and minimal opportunities for authentic practice further compound these challenges (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Rahmat & Aripin, 2021). Memory retention issues also persist when students do not practice regularly or fail to apply words in context (Schmitt, 1997, as cited in Imamee & Sitthitikul, 2017). Zou and Li (2018) demonstrated that incorporating digital tools and spaced repetition techniques can enhance vocabulary retention, yet such innovations are not always implemented in traditional EFL classrooms.

Previous studies have also examined the connection between vocabulary learning strategies and learners' proficiency levels. Rahmawati and Indrawati (2021) revealed that metacognitive and memory strategies particularly those involving spaced repetition and contextual application significantly improve long-term retention. Likewise, Arifah and Nurmala (2023) observed that Indonesian EFL learners frequently use cognitive and metacognitive strategies but often lack consistency in their application, which limits their progress. In contrast, Ali and Hassan (2022) found that learners with larger vocabulary sizes performed better in both receptive and productive skills, underscoring the importance of continual vocabulary growth. Hidayat and Sari (2024) further identified that Indonesian university students commonly face limited English exposure, low motivation, and difficulty remembering words, reinforcing the need for interactive and supportive learning environments.

While these studies provide valuable insights into vocabulary acquisition, limited attention has been given to how EFL learners in smaller or under-resourced educational institutions manage their vocabulary learning process. This gap is particularly relevant in local contexts such as the English Education (Tadris Bahasa Inggris) Program at STAIN Mandailing Natal, where students often encounter difficulties in retaining vocabulary due to restricted English use outside the classroom. Preliminary observations suggest that although students employ certain strategies, the variety and effectiveness of these strategies remain limited, and external factors such as exposure and motivation continue to hinder progress. Therefore, further research is needed to explore both the strategies learners use and the obstacles they face in vocabulary acquisition within this specific learning context.

The present study aims to explore and analyze the vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL learners at STAIN Mandailing Natal and to identify the obstacles that hinder their acquisition and retention of new vocabulary. Specifically, this research seeks to examine how learners apply various strategies cognitive,

metacognitive, social, determination, and memory and to understand how contextual factors influence their effectiveness. By addressing these issues, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how vocabulary learning occurs in real EFL settings and provides pedagogical implications for improving vocabulary instruction and learner autonomy in Indonesian classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach integrating both quantitative and qualitative designs to provide a comprehensive understanding of EFL learners' strategies and obstacles in vocabulary acquisition. The quantitative method was applied to identify general patterns through a questionnaire, while the qualitative method explored students' experiences and challenges through semi-structured interviews. A convergent parallel design was adopted, allowing both data types to be collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation to validate and enrich the findings.

The research was conducted at the English Education Department (Tadris Bahasa Inggris) of STAIN Mandailing Natal, involving second-semester students who were actively engaged in English learning. Using purposive sampling, 25 participants were selected based on their availability, willingness to participate, and active involvement in vocabulary learning activities.

Data were collected using two instruments: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, covering both *discovery* (determination and social) and *consolidation* (social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive) strategies. It consisted of 42 statements 30 items on strategies and 12 on obstacles rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Very Often). The questionnaire results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the most frequently used strategies and common obstacles.

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants selected based on their dominant strategy use identified from the questionnaire. The interviews explored learners' experiences, motivation, learning environment, strategy use, and challenges in acquiring vocabulary. Each interview lasted about 10–15 minutes, was recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The quantitative data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, and mean scores, while the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to learners' strategies and obstacles. The integration of both data sources provided a more holistic understanding of EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition processes.

RESULT/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the vocabulary learning strategies and obstacles encountered by second-semester students of the English Education Program at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The research employed a mixed-method design, combining quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with eight selected informants. The participants consisted of 25 students (5 males and 20 females) aged 18–21 years. Overall, the findings indicate that the students' vocabulary development remains in progress. Although they have applied various strategies to enhance their vocabulary mastery, the process is still constrained by both internal and external factors such as limited exposure, memorization difficulty, and motivation issues.

A. The Most Frequently Employed Vocabulary Learning Strategy

Quantitative data showed that the most frequently used strategy among students was the cognitive strategy, accounting for 52% of all responses.
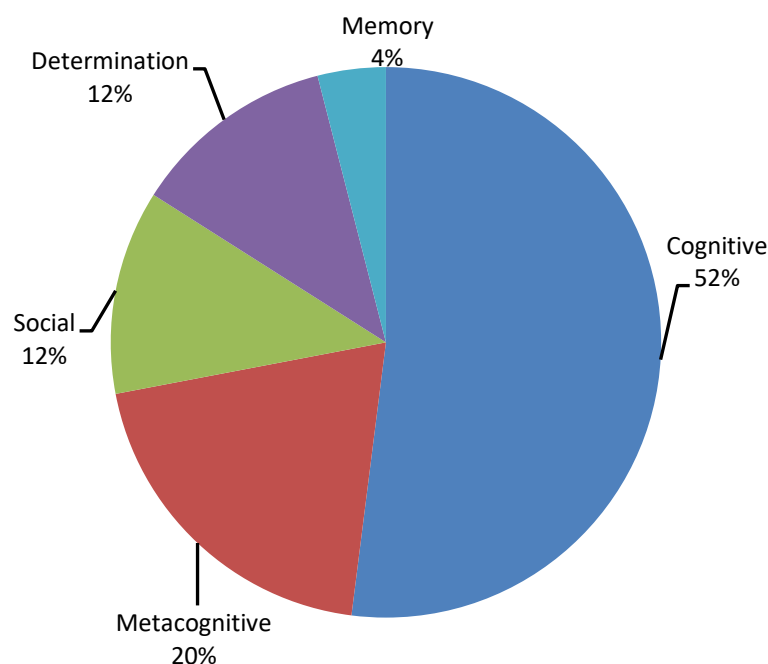
Pie Chart of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Vocabulary Acquisition

This finding suggests that most students tend to rely on direct learning techniques, such as repeating, rewriting, translating, and using words in sentences to strengthen their understanding and retention. The metacognitive strategy was the second most frequently used (20%), followed by social and determination strategies (12% each), while the memory strategy was the least used (4%). This pattern shows that students predominantly depend on direct learning techniques while showing limited variation in strategy use.

The qualitative interview data supported these results. Four out of eight informants described the cognitive strategy as their main learning approach.

They emphasized repetition, organization, and active engagement with vocabulary.

"I usually write down new words in my vocabulary notebook. I also copy example sentences from the internet or dictionary. I repeatedly read or rewrite the words so they stick better." *(Informant 1)*

"I often make lists of new words after reading articles. I reread them every morning before class. I also try to use those words in my own sentences so I can remember them." *(Informant 2)*

"I use a flashcard app called Anki to review words regularly. It helps me schedule when a word reappears, making it easier to remember." *(Informant 3)*

"I have a special notebook for vocabulary. Every time I finish reading, I write down new words and repeat them several times a week." *(Informant 4)*

These excerpts illustrate that repetition, note-taking, and the use of digital tools are essential practices in reinforcing vocabulary. Students' consistent engagement with new vocabulary items shows their dependence on practical and accessible methods. However, the limited diversity of strategies also reflects a lack of metacognitive and social engagement, which may hinder deeper vocabulary retention and contextual use.

B. Obstacles Faced by EFL Learners in Vocabulary Acquisition

The second part of the research focused on identifying the major obstacles students encounter in acquiring English vocabulary. The quantitative results revealed that the most dominant obstacle was limited exposure to English, reported by 80% of students.
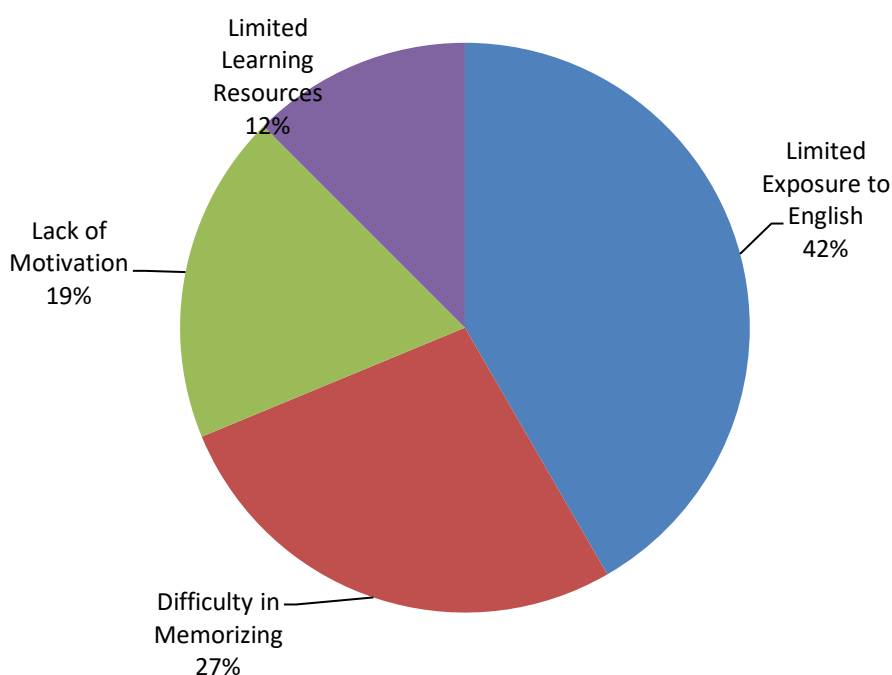
Pie Chart of Obstacles in Vocabulary Acquisition

Other obstacles included difficulty in memorizing vocabulary (52%), lack of motivation (36%), and limited access to learning resources (24%). These findings demonstrate that environmental and affective factors strongly influence students' vocabulary learning outcomes. Limited exposure reduces opportunities for natural language practice, while weak motivation and insufficient resources further limit progress.

The qualitative data deepened this understanding. Most informants expressed that the lack of English exposure in their environment was their greatest challenge.

"The biggest challenge for me is the lack of exposure to English in my environment. Not many people here speak English, so it's hard for me to practice." (Informant 1)

"Sometimes I can remember a word for a day, but the next day I forget again because I rarely use it." (Informant 2)

"If words are similar, I often get confused about how to use them like affect and effect or borrow and lend."(Informant 3)

"My environment doesn't support English use. I rarely speak it, so sometimes I forget vocabulary I've already learned."(Informant 6)

"I don't have many chances to speak English outside class. So I only study vocabulary passively using online media or movies."(Informant 8)

These statements highlight that external conditions, such as an unsupportive environment, greatly limit opportunities for authentic English practice. As a result, students' learning becomes passive and dependent on repetition or translation-based strategies. In addition, cognitive challenges, such as poor long-term retention, further restrict their progress. Several students admitted forgetting words within a short period due to lack of contextual usage. Moreover, motivational and resource-related issues though less dominant still hinder consistent learning, as students with low motivation or limited access to tools like dictionaries or apps are unable to apply strategies effectively.

Overall, the interview data confirm that external and internal factors are interrelated: limited exposure restricts practice opportunities, difficulty in memorizing hinders vocabulary retention, and low motivation reduces learners' engagement with metacognitive and social strategies.

The integration of both data types reveals that students primarily depend on cognitive strategies to overcome external barriers such as limited English exposure. However, their heavy reliance on repetition and translation-based learning often leads to surface-level understanding. The interview evidence indicates that those who use technology (e.g., flashcard apps, online reading, or media) tend to achieve better retention, suggesting that combining cognitive strategies with metacognitive and digital approaches could yield more sustainable results.

These findings echo Schmitt's (1997) classification of vocabulary learning strategies, where cognitive strategies are often dominant among early-stage EFL learners due to their practicality and simplicity. Yet, as suggested by Alqahtani (2015) and Alhaysony (2017), without sufficient exposure and motivational reinforcement, these strategies may not guarantee long-term retention.

In short, students' vocabulary acquisition is significantly shaped by both strategy use and contextual limitations. While they demonstrate strong effort and consistency in applying cognitive strategies, their learning outcomes remain constrained by environmental, motivational, and cognitive factors that limit the depth and sustainability of vocabulary learning.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the vocabulary learning strategies and obstacles experienced by second-semester students of the English Education Program at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The findings revealed that cognitive strategiessuch as writing new words, repetition, keeping word lists, and using flashcards were the most frequently employed due to their simplicity and practicality. In contrast, metacognitive, social, and memory strategies were used less frequently. The main obstacle identified was limited exposure to English, followed by difficulty in memorizing vocabulary, low motivation, and limited access to learning resources. These challenges significantly shaped students' strategy choices, leading them to rely primarily on individual, traditional methods. In conclusion, while cognitive strategies help students manage vocabulary learning, their effectiveness remains limited without broader exposure and varied strategy use. Thus, fostering more diverse learning strategies and providing richer English environments are essential to enhance EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.

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