

# Identifying Language Learning Strategies in Acquiring English Language Vocabulary among ESL Primary Pupils

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## Abstract

Many theories agree that humans can be classified according to their learning styles and tactics. The variety of preferred learning styles makes it more challenging for an educator to teach in an English Second Language Learning (ESL) classroom. Learning a second language requires a strong focus on vocabulary acquisition. Previous research has indicated that several vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are being examined at the secondary and tertiary levels, but not at the primary level, and that age preference is considered. This study aims to identify common vocabulary acquisition practices and age disparities among Year 4, 5, and 6 students in a rural primary school in Sabah, Malaysia. A purposive sampling of 44 respondents was used to perform a quantitative analysis utilizing four-point-Likert-scale questionnaires based on Oxford's classification of six language learning techniques (LLS). Descriptive statistics analyzes data by calculating the mean. The study found that Social Strategies is the most commonly employed VLS among elementary students, with distinct age preferences. Students of different ages generally use varying techniques, and younger students tend to prefer social strategies. Educators should consider age preferences when constructing differentiated learning approaches to improve vocabulary learning in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** Language Learning Strategies (LLS), Language Acquisition, Education, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), English as Second Language (ESL)

## Introduction

Language learning is a dynamic process influenced by global trends, local contexts, and individual learning experiences. Understanding the strategies employed by primary pupils in Sabah to acquire English language skills is crucial for optimizing educational outcomes in this diverse and culturally rich region. Despite extensive research on language learning strategies (LLS), there remains a notable gap in knowledge regarding their application in primary education settings, particularly in regions with unique socio-cultural contexts like Sabah. Within the realm of LLS research, significant attention has been devoted to the concept of Good Language Learners (GLL). Scholars have explored the characteristics and strategies of GLL, yet the focus has predominantly been on older learners. This leaves a void in

understanding GLL among primary pupils, especially in rural areas like Sabah. Consequently, there is a pressing need for empirical investigations to uncover the strategies utilized by primary school students in Sabah to enhance their English language proficiency.

Learning strategies among language practitioners have been an intriguing research topic, especially concerning the strategies adopted by successful learners and their applicability for less successful learners, specifically in second language acquisition (Oxford, 2003). These strategies encompass various categories such as cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social strategies, as outlined by Oxford (2003). They encompass specific acts, behaviors, procedures, or techniques employed by learners to enhance their own learning, as defined by (Scarcela and Oxford, 1992). Chamot and Kupper (1989); O'Malley and Chamot (1990) further elaborate on language learning strategies, describing them as precise thoughts and activities that maximize the learning process and comprehension of new input and information. These methods serve as valuable tools for active, aware, and purposeful self-regulation of learning, allowing learners to select techniques that align with their learning style and the specific language task at hand. Additionally, individual students' learning styles and strategies can complement or clash with a particular educational methodology Oxford (2003), emphasizing the importance of personalized approaches to language learning.

Moreover, Hashim et al (2018) emphasize the significance of learners recognizing their individual learning styles and preferences to determine which language learning strategies are most effective for them. This understanding allows strategies to evolve into habits, eventually transforming learners into proficient language users. The seminal work of Amin (1996) ignited considerable interest in language learning research, setting the stage for further exploration into effective language learning strategies. Despite this growing body of literature, Saad et al (2016) note the limited research on English teaching practices and language learning strategies in Malaysia, particularly for primary pupils in rural areas like Sabah. This gap underscores the need for empirical investigations into the language learning strategies employed by primary pupils in Sabah, aiming to inform educational policies and practices tailored to their specific needs.

Thus, this research aims to identify the language learning strategies used by primary pupils in Sabah for acquiring English language vocabulary. As the landscape of language learning and instruction continues to evolve, the focus has shifted towards learner autonomy, recognizing learners as active agents in their language learning journey. Unfortunately, primary pupils in rural areas have often been overlooked in this regard, highlighting the urgency of investigating their language learning strategies to ensure equitable access to quality language education.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the most used language learning strategies employed by ESL primary pupils in Sabah to acquire English language vocabulary?
2. What is the preferred language learning strategy in learning vocabulary by age?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To identify the most used language learning strategies employed by upper primary pupils in Sabah to acquire English language vocabulary
2. To identify the preferred language learning strategy in learning vocabulary by age.

## Literature Review

### Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Learning strategies, as outlined by Mayer (1988) as referenced in Gu (2005), encompass the deliberate actions of a learner that hold significant sway over how information is processed. Scarcela and Oxford (1992) describe learning strategies as specific actions, behaviour, methods, or approaches that learners utilize to improve their learning experience. These strategies may include activities like seeking out partners for discussion or motivating oneself to tackle challenging language tasks. Gu proposed his definition, defining Learning Strategies (LS) as "something used by students to accomplish learning" (Gu, 2005). Zare (2012) elaborated on how learning strategies benefit language learners by contributing to the development of their language system. In the context of second language acquisition, Cohen (1995) defined "strategies" as comprising general approaches as well as specific actions or techniques employed to learn a second language.

LLS is recognized as a valuable strategy for enriching language acquisition (Saad et al., 2016). In educational settings, identifying LLS enables teachers to heighten their awareness and become acquainted with the diverse array of strategies (Fathi-Ashtiani et al., 2007). Moreover, it helps bridge the gap between learners (Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Ang et al., 2017) and aids teachers in effectively instructing low-proficiency learners (Simsek & Balaban, 2010; Nasir et al., 2016). A plethora of empirical studies have contributed significantly to understanding the pivotal elements of LLS in the acquisition of second language (L2) and foreign language (Jalal, 2015; Balci & Ügüten, 2018).

Cohen (2002) defines Language Learning Strategies (LLSs) as approaches used to identify the materials requiring learning. Building on this, Macaro (2004) emphasizes that certain strategies necessitate a foundational level of linguistic knowledge to be effectively employed. LLSs can also be seen as sequential actions involving mental processes undertaken by students or language learners to acquire proficiency in a new language. Moreover, LLSs serve as a framework for language learners to deepen their comprehension as they progress toward linguistic competence (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). These strategies involve mental engagement, enabling learners to grasp new language concepts before integrating them into their existing knowledge. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) classify this learning approach as cognitive strategies, wherein learners connect new information with their pre-existing knowledge stored in long-term memory.

Lee (2010) noted the varied interpretations of LLS definitions, with Oxford's definition being prominently referenced in the literature (Zare, 2012). According to Oxford (1990), language learners utilize learning strategies to expedite the overall process of acquiring, storing, retrieving, and utilizing linguistic information. Since LLS reflects learners' intentions and activities during the learning process, the construction of meaning holds significant importance in language acquisition. Cohen (1999) suggested that allowing students to engage in meaning-making activities can enhance L2 learning by facilitating recall, reinforcement, and application of linguistic knowledge. Chamot (2004) defined language learning as the deliberate actions undertaken by learners in language acquisition. Consequently, LLS is perceived as a distinct approach to knowledge processing that enhances comprehension, learning, or the retention of information (Zare, 2012). Drawing from these expert perspectives, LLS can be described as the intentional selection and occasional utilization of specific mental and physical actions to improve the language learning process.

**Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies**

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental aspect of language learning. Developing one's vocabulary is a crucial component of learning a language. Research by Nation (2001); Schmitt (2000) highlighted the significance of intentional vocabulary learning tactics, which include methods like applying imagery, utilizing context, and exposing oneself to new terms repeatedly. Comprehending the methods that first-grade students employ to increase the scope of their vocabulary in English is crucial to supporting their language development as a whole. McCarthy (1990) stated that communication in a second language simply cannot occur in any meaningful way without words to represent a larger range of meanings, regardless of how well a student learns grammar or how successfully they master L2 sounds (p. viii). Researchers such as Nation (2008); Graves (2009) emphasize the need for a complete and balanced vocabulary acquisition curriculum for students. Their model suggests that a successful vocabulary program consists of four interconnected main skills.

**Language Learning Strategies for Vocabulary Acquisition**

The primary school curriculum in Sabah is designed to reflect the region's cultural diversity and educational objectives. Integrating language learning strategies for vocabulary acquisition requires a comprehensive approach that aligns with the curriculum goals and instructional practices. Educators in Sabah play a crucial role in implementing effective vocabulary teaching methods and creating meaningful learning experiences for students. Curriculum reforms have been a staple in education policies in many countries as a way to keep their education system up to date and to reflect the changing demands of society and the economy (Gouedard et al., 2020). Vocabulary is a component of a language and a list of words that people have used to communicate (Zachary et al., 2021). Individuals who have adequate knowledge in language skills are often identified by their written and spoken vocabularies (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2004). According to Linda & Shah (2020), the success of acquiring vocabulary in English is greatly influenced by the application of vocabulary learning methodologies. Vocabulary is the most important component of learning a second language, and as a result, more language learning techniques are being used to help primary students in Sabah improve their vocabulary knowledge and abilities.

**Methodology****Research Design**

In this study, a quantitative research design was used. Research using quantitative methods establishes connections between variables and results. According to Polit and Beck (2012), the process of doing quantitative research includes formulating a hypothesis, which is a description of the expected consequence, relationship, or forecasted result derived from the research questions. The information is gathered in an impartial manner using a methodical process. To gather numerical data for evaluating the relationship between the variables under study, a survey is developed.

**Participants and Sampling**

Using purposive sampling, a class of Year 4, 5 and 6 students from a rural primary school in Sabah, Malaysia were selected. There were 44 participants (15 pupils from Year 4, 15 pupils from Year 5, and 14 pupils from Year 6) because it is an under-enrolled school. A diverse class is formed by a number of factors, including "language knowledge, cultural background, attitude to the language, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning

experiences, knowledge of other languages," according to (Ur, 1996). The target group was diverse, comprising a range of pupils with varying levels of proficiency.

### Research instrument and Procedure

The survey was conducted online using Google Forms. 44 students completed the survey, which yielded 100% valid results. The survey uses Reid's (1995) Perceptual Learning-Style Preference Questionnaire to acquire pertinent data. The questionnaire was designed to determine the pupils' preferred learning strategies. The questionnaire consisted of six sections, each with four items. The sections contained:

Table 1.0  
*6 sections of questionnaire*

Section	Learning Strategies
Section 1	Memory strategies
Section 2	Cognitive strategies
Section 3	Compensation strategies
Section 4	Metacognitive strategies
Section 5	Affective strategies
Section 6	Social strategies

The Likert scale was adapted with four scales: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement by selecting one scale ranging from 1 to 4. Before the participants began answering the questionnaire, the survey's purpose was explained to ensure that the respondents understood the meaning of each item. Participants were free to inquire about the definitions of any words they were unfamiliar with.

### Data Analysis Method

Descriptive statistics are used to analyze the data collected. Mishra et al. (2019) define descriptive statistics as information that summarizes the main aspects of a dataset. The acquired data were analyzed to determine the most preferred learning strategies chosen by the respondents.

### Findings

This section provides the study's findings and how they relate to the research questions. The findings are tabulated using the scales 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree', and 'Strongly Agree', reflecting the students' preferences and frequency of language learning strategies.

**Memory Strategies**

Table 2.0

*Memory Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Memory Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I look at Pictionary to learn new words.	21	18	3	2	3.3
I read the words repeatedly until I remember the correct spelling.	25	14	4	1	2.6
I write the words at least 5 times to memorize the spelling.	16	15	9	4	3.0
I do spelling to remember the new vocabulary.	22	13	5	4	3.2

Table 2.0 displays the Memory Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. Among all strategies, 25 pupils strongly agree that they read the words repeatedly until they remember the correct spelling.

**Cognitive Strategies**

Table 2.1

*Cognitive Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Cognitive Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I know how to read prefixes (eg. un-, dis-, anti-) and suffixes (eg. -ly, -ment, -ness) to understand the meaning of new words.	11	19	9	5	2.8
I read subtitles of movies to learn new words.	25	10	7	2	3.3
I make sentences using new words.	26	14	2	2	3.5
I use flashcards to learn new words.	15	16	6	7	2.9

Table 2.1 shows the Cognitive Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. The most preferred strategy is to make sentences using new words (25 pupils).

**Compensation Strategies**

Table 2.2

*Compensation Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Compensation Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I guess the meanings of new words.	16	15	9	4	3.0
I use synonyms to understand new words.	22	18	3	1	3.4
I use mimes or gestures to understand new words.	8	14	9	13	2.2
I use other clues to understand the meanings of new words.	25	8	5	6	3.2

Table 2.2 illustrates the Compensation Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. Among all strategies, 25 pupils strongly agree that they use other clues to understand the meanings of new words.

**Metacognitive Strategies**

Table 2.3

*Metacognitive Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Metacognitive Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I have a clear goal in learning English	23	15	4	2	3.3
I will take the time to study English vocabulary every day	22	14	6	2	3.3
I will use a different strategy to learn a new vocabulary	14	14	10	6	2.8
I will learn from my mistakes and find a way for improvement	25	10	5	4	3.3

Table 2.3 presents the Metacognitive Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. Among all strategies, 25 pupils strongly agree that they will learn from their mistakes and find a way for improvement.

**Affective Strategies**

Table 2.4

*Affective Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Affective Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I play soft music to learn new words.	23	14	4	3	3.3
I take a deep breath to learn new words.	18	12	5	9	2.9
I write down my feelings in a diary to learn new words.	17	11	8	8	2.8
I discuss my feelings with someone when learning new words.	15	12	6	11	2.7

Table 2.4 shows the Affective Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. The most preferred strategy is to play soft music to learn new words. (25 pupils).

**Social Strategies**

Table 2.5

*Social Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Social Strategies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
I ask to slow down or repeat the meaning when I listen to new words.	26	13	4	1	3.5
I ask teachers to correct me if I make mistakes in learning new words.	23	9	7	5	3.1
I like to practice new words with other students.	25	14	3	2	3.4
I ask for help from peers and teachers when I encounter new words.	31	5	4	4	3.4

Table 2.5 indicates the Social Strategies used by pupils in learning English vocabulary. The most preferred strategy in this section is 'I ask to slow down or repeat the meaning when I listen to new words.'



Table 2.6  
*Mean Score for Language Learning Strategies*

No.	Language Learning Strategies	Mean
1	Memory	3.0
2	Cognitive	3.1
3	Compensation	3.0
4	Metacognitive	3.2
5	Affective	2.9
6	Social	3.4

The mean for each of the six language learning strategies is shown in Table 2.6. The questionnaire results show that the respondents use Social Strategies the most, with a mean score of 3.4 out of six. It was followed by Metacognitive strategy and Cognitive strategy, which scored 3.2 and 3.1, respectively. The Affective strategy has the lowest rank, with an average score of 2.9.

Table 2.7  
*Mean Score for Social Strategy*

Language Learning Strategy	Items	Mean
Social Strategy	I ask to slow down or repeat the meaning when I listen to new words.	3.5
	I ask teachers to correct me if I make mistakes in learning new words.	3.1
	I like to practice new words with other students.	3.4
	I ask for help from peers and teachers when I encounter new words.	3.4

Table 2.7 showed the mean score for each item under the Social Strategy. Among all strategies, it can be seen that the first item 'I ask to slow down or repeat the meaning when I listen to new words' has the highest score which is 3.5.

## Discussion

### Research Question 1: What are the most used language learning strategies employed by ESL primary pupils in Sabah to acquire English language vocabulary?

The findings of this study provide insightful data into the language learning strategies employed by ESL primary pupils in Sabah, specifically identifying *Social Strategies* as the most prevalently used. The social strategy mean score of 3.4, highlighted in Table 2.6, surpasses

that of other strategies, indicating a strong preference among students for interactive learning environments where they can engage in verbal exchanges, seek clarifications, and practice new vocabulary with peers. This preference for social strategies among young learners can be attributed to the social nature of language itself, which is learned and used within the context of human interactions. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. By engaging in social learning strategies, pupils leverage the scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable others (peers and teachers) to acquire vocabulary more effectively.

Further, the emphasis on social strategies in this diverse classroom setting corroborates the findings of Chamot (2004), who notes that students from different cultural backgrounds tend to adopt strategies that are most reflective of their communal and interactive learning preferences. Additionally, according to Tyacke and Mendelsohn (1986), the preference for social learning strategies over more isolated methods can be influenced by cultural norms that favor collective over individual activities, which is particularly relevant in the context of Sabah's multicultural educational environment. These cultural influences on learning strategies highlight the necessity of tailoring educational approaches to the specific cultural context of the learners. This expanded discussion integrates additional perspectives on the influence of culture and educational environment on the choice of learning strategies, providing a more rounded analysis that is supported by the cited literature.

### Research Question 2: What is the preferred language learning strategy in learning vocabulary by age?

Below are the results gained from the questionnaire according to each strategy based on age preference (Indicator: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree):

Table 3.0

*Memory Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary by class*

Memory Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I look at a Pictionary to learn new words.	6	8	-	1	6	5	3	1	9	5	-	-
Total	14		1		11		4		14		-	
I read the words repeatedly until I remember the correct spelling.	8	4	3	-	6	7	1	1	11	3	-	-

Total	12		3		13		2		14		-	
I write the words at least 5 times to memorize the spelling.	2	8	3	2	7	5	2	1	7	2	4	1
Total	10		5		12		3		9		5	
I do spelling to remember the new vocabulary.	6	7	1	1	8	5	2	-	8	1	2	3
Total	13		2		13		2		9		5	
Total Mean Score	3.1				3.2				3.4			

Table 3.1

*Cognitive Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Cognitive Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I know how to read prefixes (eg. un-, dis-, anti-) and suffixes (eg. -ly, -ment, -ness) to understand the meaning of new words.	4	6	4	1	4	7	3	1	3	6	2	3
Total	10		5		11		4		9		5	
I read subtitles of movies to learn new words.	8	4	3	-	9	2	2	2	8	4	2	-
Total	12		3		11		4		12		2	
I make sentences using new words.	6	9	-	-	13	-	1	1	7	5	1	1
Total	15		-		13		2		12		2	
I use flashcards to	7	5	1	2	5	7	2	1	3	4	3	4

learn new words.												
Total	12		3		12		3		7		7	
Total Mean Score	3.2				3.2				2.9			

Table 3.2

*Compensation Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Compensation Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I guess the meanings of new words.	6	3	5	1	6	5	3	1	4	7	1	2
Total	9		6		11		4		11		3	
I use synonyms to understand new words.	4	9	1	1	8	6	1	-	10	3	1	-
Total	13		2		14		1		13		1	
I use mimes or gestures to understand new words.	3	3	4	5	3	6	5	1	2	5	-	7
Total	6		9		9		6		7		7	
I use other clues to understand the meanings of new words.	7	4	1	3	7	3	4	1	11	1	-	2
Total	11		4		10		5		12		2	
Total Mean Score	2.8				3.1				3.0			

Table 3.3

*Metacognitive Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Metacognitive Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I have a clear goal in learning English	5	5	4	1	10	5	-	-	8	5	-	1
Total	10		5		15		-		13		1	
I will take the time to study English vocabulary every day.	7	6	2	-	7	4	2	2	8	4	2	-
Total	13		2		11		4		12		2	
I will use a different strategy to learn a new vocabulary.	5	5	3	2	3	6	5	1	6	3	2	3
Total	10		5		9		6		9		5	
I will learn from my mistakes and find a way for improvement.	6	4	3	2	10	2	2	1	9	4	-	1
Total	10		5		12		3		13		1	
Total Mean Score	3.0				3.1				3.3			

Table 3.4

*Affective Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Affective Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I play soft music to learn new words.	7	7	1	-	11	2	2	-	5	5	1	3
Total	14		1		13		2		10		4	
I take a deep breath to learn new words.	7	3	1	4	6	6	2	1	5	3	2	4
Total	10		5		12		3		8		6	
I write down my feelings in a diary to learn new words.	7	4	2	2	7	4	4	-	3	3	2	6
Total	11		4		11		4		6		8	
I discuss my feelings with someone when learning new words.	5	4	3	3	6	7	2	-	4	1	1	8
Total	9		6		13		2		5		9	
Total Mean Score	3.0				3.3				2.5			

Table 3.5

*Social Strategies used by pupils to learn English Vocabulary*

Social Strategies	Year 4				Year 5				Year 6			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
I ask to slow down or repeat the meaning when I listen to new words.	8	4	2	1	9	5	1	-	9	4	1	-
Total	12		3		14		1		13		1	
I ask teachers to correct me if I make mistakes in learning new words.	5	3	5	2	8	4	1	2	10	2	1	1
Total	8		7		12		3		12		2	
I like to practice new words with other students.	8	6	-	1	9	5	1	-	8	3	2	1
Total	14		1		14		1		11		3	
I ask for help from peers and teachers when I encounter new words.	9	3	2	1	11	1	2	1	11	1	-	2
Total	12		3		12		3		12		2	
Total Mean Score	3.2				3.4				3.5			

Table 4

*Mean Score obtained by Year 4, 5, and 6 according to LLS*

No	Learning Strategies	Mean Score		
		Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
1	Memory strategies	3.1	3.2	3.4
2	Cognitive strategies	3.2	3.2	2.9
3	Compensation strategies	2.8	3.1	3.0
4	Metacognitive strategies	3.0	3.1	3.3
5	Affective strategies	3.0	3.3	2.5
6	Social strategies	3.2	3.4	3.5

The strong inclination toward social strategies, with the highest mean scores of 3.4 for Year 5 and 3.5 for Year 6, indicates that pupils predominantly engage in learning through interaction. For Year 4, there is an equal preference for both cognitive and social strategies, each with a mean score of 3.2. This demonstrates that while younger pupils (Year 4) balance between cognitive and social approaches, older pupils (Years 5 and 6) show a stronger preference for social strategies. These social strategies involve learning through interaction, such as group activities and discussions, which enable pupils to enhance their vocabulary acquisition by engaging with peers. The prominence of social strategies in Years 5 and 6 supports the findings of Hacker et al. (2009), who proclaimed that such strategies facilitate self-directed learning and the generation of methods to overcome obstacles encountered in learning vocabulary. The preference for social strategies indicates that students, particularly in Years 5 and 6, benefit from an interactive approach to learning. In terms of educational implications, the prominence of social strategies highlights the importance of designing language learning environments that emphasize collaboration and peer interaction. Educators should consider integrating more group-based activities into the curriculum to support these strategies. Additionally, while social strategies are predominant, the balanced use of cognitive strategies in Year 4 suggests that a multimodal approach to teaching vocabulary, which caters to different learning preferences, might be most effective.

Hence, this study sheds light on the prevalent use of social strategies among ESL pupils in Sabah, especially in the higher grades, underscoring the need for educational practices that promote interactive learning. By fostering an environment that supports these strategies, educators can enhance the efficacy of vocabulary learning and accommodate diverse learning needs in the classroom. Further research into gender-specific preferences could augment these insights, providing a more granular understanding of effective educational strategies.

## Conclusion

This study has provided significant insights into the vocabulary acquisition strategies employed by ESL primary pupils in a rural school in Sabah, Malaysia. The research identified social strategies as the most utilized approach by students, with a particular emphasis on age



differences in strategy preference. These findings contribute valuable knowledge to the limited research on primary education in rural Malaysian settings, specifically regarding effective strategies for English vocabulary learning. The predominance of social strategies, evidenced by the highest mean score among the strategies evaluated, underscores the inherent social nature of language learning. This aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the critical role of social interaction in cognitive development. Students in Sabah benefit from an educational environment that encourages interaction, suggesting that learning is enhanced when it is collaborative and embedded within a social context. This is particularly relevant in multicultural classrooms where diverse linguistic backgrounds can enrich the learning experience if appropriately leveraged.

Additionally, the findings highlighted a notable difference in strategy usage between age groups, with younger students showing a broader use of various strategies, especially social ones. This suggests that age-specific approaches might be beneficial in optimizing learning outcomes. Such approaches would not only cater to the distinct preferences of different age groups but also help in addressing the unique challenges each group faces in vocabulary acquisition. The study's emphasis on metacognitive strategies revealed their significance in fostering self-regulated learning and providing students with the tools to independently manage their learning processes. This is crucial in building learners' autonomy and enhancing their ability to adapt and apply different strategies to overcome learning obstacles. The ability to reflect on and regulate their learning strategies empowers students, making them more adept at navigating the complexities of language acquisition.

It is essential for teachers to understand the learning strategies that foster student autonomy. This understanding enables educators to tailor their instructional methods to support self-directed learning and adaptability among students. The implications of these findings are manifold. Firstly, educators should consider incorporating a more diverse array of interactive and reflective activities into the curriculum to cater to the varied learning preferences revealed by the study. Secondly, the educational strategies employed should be sensitive to the cultural and gender dynamics of the classroom, ensuring that they are inclusive and effective for all students. Future research should explore the impact of these strategies on actual language proficiency to better correlate specific strategies with successful language acquisition. Additionally, investigating the long-term effects of these strategies on students' overall educational trajectories could provide deeper insights into the strategic development necessary for sustained language learning success.

In conclusion, this study not only fills a significant gap in the existing literature regarding primary-level language learning strategies in rural Malaysia but also provides a practical framework for educators to enhance ESL teaching methodologies. By acknowledging and incorporating the diverse needs and preferences of their students, educators can significantly improve the effectiveness of language instruction and help cultivate a generation of more proficient and confident English speakers.

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