Reflecting on Morphological & Syntactical Awareness through Vocabulary Games

Nur Salina Ismail

Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300, Kuala Nerus, Terengganu Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: nursalina@unisza.edu.my

Abstract
This study examines the diminishing skill in English among Malaysian learners, concentrating on vocabulary growth, a crucial component of language mastery. Traditional vocabulary teaching methods have proven to be less entertaining and successful, prompting this study to look at innovative approaches. The study aims to explore ESL undergraduates' reflections on their vocabulary development through student-designed vocabulary games that emphasize morphology and syntax. Conducted at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), the research involved 89 ESL students enrolled in the Introduction to Language and Linguistics course. In collaboration with researchers, students designed their own vocabulary games under the guidance of researchers. After the devising of the vocabulary games, a semi-structured interview adopting Kolb's experiential learning style was carried out with students' representatives to assess the effectiveness of using vocabulary games in learning morphology and syntax. The effectiveness of these games was evaluated through a semi-structured interview using Kolb's experiential learning theory. Results indicated that vocabulary games significantly improved students' performance and achievement in learning morphology and syntax. The study concludes that vocabulary games are an effective tool for enhancing vocabulary mastery. To its contribution, this study highlights the effectiveness of implementing vocabulary games in enhancing mastery in vocabulary. There is a need for further research to examine the applicability of this approach across different educational levels using various instruments to gain a more in-depth understanding of its applicability to English language classrooms.
Keywords: Vocabulary, Vocabulary Games, Morphological Awareness, ESL Undergraduate

Introduction
The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2012) emphasizes the importance of English language instruction in schools and introduces a number of innovative teaching and learning strategies to help students improve their proficiency in English. The importance of mastering a second language has been well acknowledged by most people, especially students, in the past few years. In Malaysia, the

Ministry of Education has taken various measures to introduce the English language as early as kindergarten till varsity (Ministry of Education, 2015; Lin. C, 2013). Besides, English has been designated as a compulsory subject to pass at all levels of education, which highlights the importance of mastering the language.

Vocabulary is one of the most essential parts of learning any language, along with phonetics/pronunciation and grammar (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008; Pan & Zu, 2011). According to Brooks et al. (2021), vocabulary size is strongly correlated with language proficiency, particularly in reading comprehension. A larger vocabulary enables learners to better understand and interpret spoken and written texts, allowing for more nuanced communication and understanding. Additionally, Viera (2018) argues that vocabulary knowledge contributes significantly to comprehension, as it helps learners grasp the meaning of words within various contexts, whether in reading or listening scenarios. Moreover, recent discussions on vocabulary acquisition highlight that extensive vocabulary allows individuals to comprehend complex and nuanced language in both spoken and written forms, facilitating greater accuracy and deeper engagement with texts (EnglishMatic, 2023). Lexical knowledge is an essential component of successful second language learning. Possessing an adequate range of vocabulary helps students progress in other second language skills. Without sufficient vocabulary repertoire, (Zakaria & Hashim, 2019), assert that vocabulary imposes a challenge for individuals to express themselves effectively. Many instructional strategies (Zweirs, 2008; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008) were devised and utilized by L2 language teachers to develop the general and academic vocabulary of students. Some of the suggested strategies for teaching vocabulary are teaching word origins and structural analysis; using semantic mapping/webbing; showing students how to understand analogies; reading aloud; dramatizing; showing students how to use the dictionary; using cloze sentences; and using computer programs.

These strategies are consciously or unconsciously learned by students to process information and enhance comprehension, learning, and retention (O'Malley, 1990). One of these strategies is employing morphological awareness (MA) to learn new lexical items. Vocabulary construction is of paramount importance to students because it is a tool that enables them to communicate, function in society, acquire knowledge, and display what they have learned. Yet, many ESL and EFL learners struggle to acquire this important skill. Students frequently face difficulties in understanding meanings, pronunciation, and spelling of words, which complicates vocabulary acquisition (Machfudi & Afidah, 2022; Hasan, 2024). Therefore, the declining proficiency of English language ability among Malaysian pupils and the weak grasp of English vocabulary have been a matter of concern to Malaysian linguists, educationists, and policymakers. A study by Wang and Fridah (2019), highlights a finding in which Malaysian primary students have low English vocabulary levels, specifically in three vocabulary groups: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. At the tertiary level, many undergraduates possess insufficient vocabulary repertoire and fail to achieve the minimum word level (2000 words) out of the five-word level (Lateh and Raof, 2018). Ashrafzadeh and Nimehchisalem (2015) claim that the undergraduates' lack of mastery in English writing skills is affected by their vocabulary deficiency mastery and limited ability to use vocabulary effectively for communication purposes. The traditional teaching methods of vocabulary that are currently employed in most schools are less interesting, ineffective, as well as less motivating (Mohamad & Sazali, 2018) and often require pupils to memorize unfamiliar words with paired

translations (Nejati and Jahangiri, 2018). Several studies (Takashi, 2010; Yudinsteva, 2015, Chapman & Rich, 2018; Gao & Pan, 2023) discovered that ESL learners found learning vocabulary to be easier while playing games. Thus, vocabulary learning strategies are fundamental to guiding students toward becoming independent learners. While developing self-confidence in decision-making, students will also reflect on their abilities to acquire ESL vocabulary, as purported by Yudinsteva (2015).

Elucidating the challenges of learning vocabulary and the need to enhance students' vocabulary learning, the researchers are interested in focusing on enhancing pedagogical teaching and learning morphology and syntax through the development of vocabulary games among ESL undergraduates majoring in English. The main objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of using vocabulary games focusing on morphology and syntax among undergraduate students.

Vocabulary Learning

The issue of improving English proficiency has always been a focus among Malaysian teachers, academics, and Ministry of Education officials (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Pandian, 2018; David et al., 2020). However, the challenges in learning vocabulary arise when the enormous number of lexical items for students to master is compounded by additional phrasal lexical items (Schmitt, 2008). Generally, students who are learning a second language, particularly in the tertiary setting, where their performance in both academic studies and second language learning is dependent upon their ability to communicate effectively in the target language, find vocabulary learning rather discouraging (Hulstijn, 2001). Learning a language is certainly influenced by vocabulary. While vocabulary learning can take place both in the classroom and outside the classroom, it is essential for learners to be equipped with vocabulary learning strategies in order to enable them to function more autonomously. The students are also able to maximize their vocabulary learning rather than rely solely on exposure to language tasks in class, which is relatively inadequate for students. There is concern that a lot of Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) students are not proficient enough in the English language. According to some scholars (Nejati & Jahangiri, 2018), vocabulary can be viewed as the building blocks of a language. A limited number of them inevitably disrupt pupils' development in other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. ESL learners majoring in English rely heavily on their vocabulary knowledge rather than their knowledge in other language areas (Alqahtani, 2015), like grammar. Hence, many practitioners and researchers agree that vocabulary acquisition is a challenging task, particularly for English language learners (ESL).

The Study of Morphology

It dates to the early (Bailey et al., 1974), well-known studies on morpheme order acquisition in the development of second languages (L2). Generative studies (Sorace & Filiaci, 2011; Slabakova, 2013) have considered the role of functional features and morphology because this component of the grammar is one of the areas where language variation is accounted for with abstract syntactic features such as tense, aspect, number agreement, and grammatical gender.

Morphological awareness (MA)

It is through language and literacy experiences that morphological awareness (MA) is developed over time. By the time children reach elementary school, they have mastered inflectional morphology (grammatical aspects of language), and they are learning derivational morphology by adding affixes to words that expressly alter the syntactic class of a word (Nagy and Anderson, 1984). According to a study by Carlisle et al. (2015), as grade level progresses, students encounter morphologically complex words with greater frequency. Research has shown that when students are taught explicitly about morphemes and how to use that awareness for reading and spelling, they are able to perform the task efficiently (Carlisle et al., 2015; Levesque et al., 2017). Incorporating morphological awareness instruction into assessment and instruction practices can benefit both educators and specialists. In order to remediate reading and spelling skills, educators and specialists should be knowledgeable about morphological awareness. Thus, inflectional morphology has been recognized as challenging in second language learning, especially for ESL undergraduates majoring in English language studies. In contrast, in pedagogically oriented literature, derivations relating to lemmas, lexemes, and word families have always been very important. Several studies have already shown that bilingual children's L2 morphological awareness is influenced by the morphological characteristics of their L1 (Ramirez et al. (2013). The role of L2 morphological awareness in advanced adult learners from different morphological types of languages, especially those with complex morphologies, has, however, received less attention. Additionally, Park et al. (2020) suggests that the predictive contributions of students' language skills, cognitive variables, and initial response to MA instruction should be explored more at the tertiary level of education. Research was conducted by Meaux, Diehm and Collins (2020) to explore school-based collaborations with the use of MA intervention by examining grade-level morphological expectations at three critical points for literacy development in elementary school (i.e., kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade). Another study (Lee et al., 2022) suggested the central importance of morphological awareness in language and literacy development and a need for a nuanced and precise understanding of the role of morphological awareness in language and literacy skills.

Vocabulary Games

It has become increasingly popular to learn vocabulary through games due to the multitude of benefits that they offer: a time-filling activity, fun-learning, relaxation, and motivation (Jaiswal, 2024; Palandi et al., 2024; Nordin et al., 2024). According to Richards et al. (1992), a game is an organized activity that usually has the following properties: a particular task or objective, a set of rules, competition between players, and communication between players by spoken or written language. Game as defined by Hadfield (1990) as "an activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun. It has been found that engaging in learning through games is strongly correlated with meaningful learning (Kolb, 1984), as it is a dynamic method of engaging learners. Additionally, it enables the student-centered approach to be empowered and should be applied from an early age, as children are naturally curious and self-reliant when investigating their surroundings. As a means of learning and retaining new words, learners should engage in a variety of task-based activities within their classrooms. These activities include vocabulary games, which emphasize developing and using words in different contexts by making the lessons enjoyable for learners. Thus, it is essential to investigate whether students are effectively learning vocabulary through games and how they are learning it. Many experts of language teaching methodology (Rubin, 1987; Ellis, 1997)

agree that playing games is a good way to learn vocabulary, especially in communicative language teaching classes. The use of games as a learning tool is more effective to catch student's attention compared to using traditional media such as textbooks (Wood, 2001).

Methodologists (Nation, 2010; Schmitt, 2013; Gao & Pan, 2023) agree that games can help students review vocabulary effectively. Memory plays a key role in vocabulary learning, and the benefits of revision and repetition have been clearly demonstrated in studies of vocabulary learning (O'Dell, 1997). Besides, the same view is shared that repetition is a strategy for consolidating vocabulary, as such a situation allows learners to recall material in a pleasant and entertaining way [36]. In fact, most vocabulary games make learners use the language instead of thinking about learning the correct forms (Lee Sukim, 2010). Language games thus allow the use of meaningful and useful language that is used in real contexts (Ersoz, 2000) and can provide a chance for learners to use language that they have learnt. In order to promote the acquisition process, it is thought that using games to teach vocabulary may be viewed as a new method to enhance students' abilities in English (Nasyifa, 2024; Chowdhury, 2024). Therefore, games have their potential as an educational tool for literary training and can motivate and engage learners, especially the quiet and the passive ones, in the whole learning process. Vocabulary is believed to be best acquired in a stress-free, motivating, and enthusiastic setting (Ashraf, Motlagh, and Salami, 2014) where learners are exposed to the new lexicon in an authentic atmosphere, and games are one such factor.

Methodology

The design for this study employed a qualitative approach and a semi structured interviews design was applied to collect and analyse data. After the researcher, together with the students, developed a vocabulary game that focuses on learning difficulties in learning morphology and syntax as a comprehensible input in learning vocabulary, then the participants were interviewed. In the qualitative stage, they evaluate the effectiveness of this vocabulary game in assisting their understanding of learning morphology and syntax. Their evaluation of the effectiveness of the design of vocabulary games is based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

The participants in this study were 89 Bachelor of English with Communication (ISM BEN) students of Semester 2 enrolling in BIK10103 Introduction to Languages and Linguistics. Fifteen of them are male students while 74 of them are female students. Table 1.0 represents the profile of the students:

Table 1.0
Profile of the Students

Level of Education	No of Participants
STPM	17
Matric/Asasi	49
Diploma	23

For this study, an interview protocol was opted as to gain feedback on effectiveness using vocabulary games focusing on morphology and syntax among students. Semi-structured interview questions were devised based on Kolb's experiential learning style theory, which is

typically represented by a four-stage learning cycle in which the learners experience themselves. The constructions were created based on active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualisation. The participants were grouped between five and six students in a group. A total of fourteen (14) groups were grouped. At this stage, participants were assigned to brainstorm vocabulary games based on topics in morphology and syntax. Researchers provided a proper vocabulary game template for the students to refer to as a framework before devising a vocabulary game. A series of meetings and discussions were carried out among researchers and individual groups to ensure the students were clear with the overall idea of vocabulary games. During the second phase, fourteen (14) students from each group were randomly selected for an interview to gain feedback on the effectiveness of using vocabulary games focusing on morphology and syntax.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in the qualitative phase of the present study. In the course of interviews, general open-ended questions were asked to allow participants to clarify and explain their views based on their reflections and learning vocabulary through games. An analysis of the data collected from the semi structured interview was conducted using a thematic approach. The interview was intended to explore the effectiveness of using vocabulary games focusing on morphology and syntax among students. A set of themes was developed based on extracts from the reflections made by the selected respondents as part of the analysis of the qualitative information. A central conception for data collection was generated by the integration of those identifiably coded themes. The themes derive from Kolb's experiential learning style theory of Kolb's (1984), which is typically represented by a four-stage learning cycle in which the learners experienced by themselves when developing the vocabulary games, which can be seen in Figure 1.0.
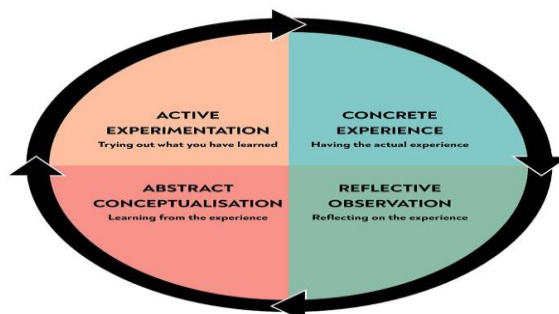

Figure 1.0: Kolb's Learning Cycle

The Effectiveness of the Application on Morphology and Syntax through Devising Vocabulary Games

The interview questions were devised based on Kolb's experiential learning style theory that is typically represented by a four-stage learning cycle in which the learners experience themselves. The constructions were created based on active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualisation. For the analysis, the researchers formulate the themes based on students' reflection on the effectiveness of the application on morphology and syntax through devising vocabulary games on concrete experience and reflective observation as learner participation that assist in understanding the lesson. Meanwhile the analysis on abstract conceptualization and active experimentation are related to students' feeling and practice throughout the application of Morphology and Syntax in their learning process.

Students were asked to describe their experiences on the idea of understanding morphological and syntactical knowledge through the devising of own vocabulary games

Concrete Experience: Learner Participation/Ownership

Based on the data gathered on participation during the development of the vocabulary games, majority of the respondents expressed their full commitment and participation in the development. In most of the responses gathered from Table 4.1, phrases like *"I put a lot of effort," "I am in charged of my own learning," "I am 100% involved," "my full commitment," "as a team fully involved,"* and *"I feel like wanting to do more"* indicate that they portray full participation in doing the vocabulary games. Meanwhile, phrases such as *"able to do our own", "Affix is our product," "we felt like we want to do more,"* and *"vocabulary games of ours are out of the world"* implying that they show the sense of ownership in doing the vocabulary games in team.

Table 1.1
Learner Participation/Ownership

P1	I put a lot of effort in designing the vocabulary game after I understand the concept
P2	Genuinely, this project enables me to design vocabulary game based on my learning difficulties in grammar
P3	We understood the idea of affixation and able to do our own 'so called research' when we design the game
P4	I never had the experience designing game, but I get the idea of designing it to help my other younger siblings to love learning grammar
P5	I feel proud that I have accomplished the learning mode that I want which is to have my own room of creativity
P6	I was lost in theory, now I feel I am in charged of my own learning
P7	I am 100% involved with the whole process, brainstorming, designing and up until implement it with my friends
P8	Happy and proud with my full commitment in this project
P9	We as a team fully involved in doing this vocabulary games with the aim to find sort of solution to grammar/vocab learning
P10	After designing the game, we felt like we want to do more designing games to help ourselves in learning
P11	I am wholeheartedly thrilled with the process of learning because we enjoyed the designing process
P12	Previously I was lost, just observe my friends. Later when I got the track, I gave a lot of ideas. Affix It is our product
P13	I have seen a lot of games, but this vocabulary games of ours are out of the world
P14	Even after we have presented our games in class, I feel like wanting to do more

Reflective Observation: How students find games while learning vocabulary

In the aspect of reflection on feeling when learning vocabulary using games, the majority of the respondents communicate their feeling positively. Most of them express their positive feelings, such as *'feel so happy', 'proud of my group', 'can't wait to do more',*

'enjoyable to learn', 'fun', 'feel in charge and happy', felt over the moon', 'I wanted to jump in excitement', and *'but enjoyable, learn better'.* This can be extracted from Table 1.2.

Table 1.2
Reflection on feeling

P1	I feel anxious on the first place because I don't know what to expect, but once I see our own games, I feel so happy
P2	Proud of my group, we are able to create one vocabulary game based on our learning problem in learning grammar
P3	So nervous as I never have experience design own vocabulary games. But when we have Affix It, can't wait to do more.
P4	It is enjoyable to learn through such activity, like doing own games as we go through a lot of processes while doing it
P5	Never thought that learning words can be fun especially creating our own games and win in competition
P6	I was lost in theory, now I feel I am in charged and happy
P7	I m more confident in learning grammar, which I used to avoid learning.
P8	Tough at the beginning as I don't have any expectations. When we did it…produce the game and participated in competition, I become more confident.
P9	I think now I am more in control of my learning morphology and syntax compared to when I learned lang ling during diploma
P10	Learning grammar is hard and dry in theory, but when I do it hands on through games & through activity, I feel more enjoyable
P11	I feel thrilled when we were able to devise our own vocabulary games and be part of the competition
P12	I felt over the moon when we presented in unisza competition. Learning becomes easy and less stressful
P13	Nervous before explaining to other colleagues in class, but when they understand, I wanted to jump in excitement
P14	The process of designing is challenging at first, but enjoyable, learn better

Abstract Conceptualization: Do you think that through vocabulary games you can learn vocabulary more effectively than you did through other methods?

Another question is assessing their opinion whether learning through vocabulary games is more effective compared to other methods. All of them provide consensus agreement that learning through vocabulary games is more effective compared to other methods, as can be seen in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3
Learning Vocabulary is More Effective Than Other Method

P1	Of course
P2	Indeed
P3	Yes
P4	Sure
P5	Yes
P6	Without doubt, yes
P7	Definitely
P8	Yes
P9	Mostly yes
P10	Partly yeah
P11	Generally yes
P12	Obviously, yes
P13	Love this method
P14	Yes

Active Experimentation: Helps in understanding morphological awareness (MA) and syntactical awareness (SA)

Respondents were also asked about the effectiveness of vocabulary games in assisting their understanding of morphology and syntax during their Introduction to Languages and Linguistics class. All respondents concur with the idea that vocabulary games help their understanding of vocabulary. All positive answers can be extracted from Table 1.4; *"able to recognize the function of affixes, especially in different contexts,", "comprehension in morphemes"," understanding in affixes and phrases now no more," "More confident in phrases," "Now doing our own vocabulary games, I am clearer," "make connection theory and practice when making sentences",* and *"becomes easy and fun. Of course, it helps".* It can be concluded that through their own designing vocabulary games, subconsciously the process can enhance their morphological awareness and syntactical awareness. They claimed that while preparing the vocabulary games, they comprehended more on the syntactical part, understanding the phrases P2 *"The book has lengthy explanation. Doing own games, I understand more especially in syntax", "confident in learning sentence structure, the NP, VP,".* language skills by making the learning process engaging and interactive. These games often challenge players to think critically and recall words quickly, reinforcing their understanding and retention of new vocabulary.

Table 1.4
Understanding Morphological Awareness (MA) and Syntactical Awareness (SA)

P1	Now I'm able to recognize the function of affixes especially in different context
P2	The book has lengthy explanation. Doing own games, I understand more especially in syntax
P3	I am more confident in learning sentence structure, the NP, VP
P4	More comprehension in morphemes
P5	Absolutely, I have better understanding in affixes and phrases
P6	I used to have confusion when to use affixes, like ity, ion, ize, now no more
P7	More confident in phrases such as adverb phrase
P8	Enhances my grammar knowledge
P9	I have learnt morphology during my diploma, still I don't understand. Now doing our own vocabulary games, I am clearer
P10	Better grasp when to use affixation, the 'un', 'dis', 'ize'
P11	I can make connection theory and practice when making sentences
P12	Before this, I read textbook on affixes and I gave up because I don't understand, so many theories. After doing the games, I have better understanding
P13	I know when to use affixes in different context
P14	Learning grammar, especially, becomes easy and fun. Of course, it helps

Conclusion

The study discusses how vocabulary teaching and learning of morphology and syntax can be utilized to help students learn vocabulary. Learning can be a collaborative process where students devise their own vocabulary games and activities based on their desired learning pace. By playing the games, students can practice their vocabulary and grammar in a hands-on way, which helps them to remember the material better. The games are also an effective way to help students become more familiar with affixes and how and when they should be used in different contexts. Additionally, the collaborative nature of the games encourages students to work together and help each other learn. In general, the respondents expressed a positive opinion of the vocabulary games. With respect to the development of the game formats and features, they seemed to enjoy and benefit significantly from the games, such as the quality of teamwork, interaction and competition, curiosity, cooperation, recognition, and control, all of which were shown to be effective in gathering learner attention and helping them stay focused (Takashashi, 2010; Alnatour & Hijazi, 2018, Huyen& Nga, 2003; Viera, 2018; EnglishMatic, 2023).

In the case of participation and ownership, the students managed to take charge of their learning as they were advised to prepare their own vocabulary games under the guidance of their instructors. The game formats allowed the students to practice their learning in a creative and interactive way, which gave them a sense of ownership and control over their learning. This enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of the material and become more engaged and motivated to learn. Both students and instructors have successfully performed meaningful learning, and the instructors were advised to revise their game content based on more frequent student feedback. In some cases, when games include explicit, rather than implicit, teaching, students become more motivated (Chapman & Rich, 2018) believing that they will contribute more not only to their exam preparation but also to

their overall vocabulary enhancement. Finally, as to the game delivery options, which varied between synchronously in class and asynchronously outside the class, students preferred learning vocabulary in class with their classmates due to reasons such as the interaction and sense of community created in class as well as the competition and exchange of ideas.

On the descriptive part, highlighting the effectiveness of implementing vocabulary games in students' learning of morphology and syntax, it can be concluded that when students are taught explicitly about morphemes by giving them autonomy in their learning, they are able to perform the task efficiently (Meaux, Diehm and Collins; 2020, Lee et al., 2022). It has been found that students who have been exposed to vocabulary games have demonstrated high levels of understanding of vocabulary. Thus, vocabulary games have been implemented in the classroom in order to raise morphological awareness and become a vocabulary-building strategy for students to increase their vocabulary repertoire. Overall, the present study reported several benefits of games in enhancing students' vocabulary, including the ability to provide a real context in which language can be naturally used by students and to motivate them to learn new words.

This study focuses on the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through vocabulary games among ESL undergraduates in one local university. To assist students in achieving the English language proficiency, particularly in vocabulary enhancement, it is recommended that further studies investigate the possible cause-and-effect relationship between vocabulary learning difficulties and their own vocabulary learning strategies. A thorough investigation of the relationship between listening and reading materials is also recommended. In addition to helping EFL students enhance their vocabulary learning, it can also help them retain what they have learned. Moreover, it may investigate the application of vocabulary learning strategies related to autonomy, such as developing own vocabulary games based on their own struggles and difficulties. A further study could be conducted with a larger sample size among other ESL undergraduates studying morphology and syntax or related vocabulary, allowing for more information to be obtained. Additionally, longitudinal studies can be conducted at different levels of education, utilizing a variety of instruments.

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