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Learner's Perceptions on Vocabulary Learning Strategies: A Qualitative Single-Case Study

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Abstract

This qualitative single-case study investigates an Indonesian EFL learner's perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies, an important but often overlooked aspect of language learning. Despite vocabulary being the core of mastering a foreign language, learners' perceptions remain underexplored, particularly in qualitative research. This study aims to address that gap by examining a single participant's use of and perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies. Data were collected through a 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy and semi-structured interviews guided by the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (CAC) perception model by Schiffman & Kanuk (2004). The findings revealed a contradictory perception: although the participant acknowledged the effectiveness and practicality of vocabulary learning strategies, she also expressed a belief that exposure to language is more critical than strategic vocabulary learning. The participant showed a clear preference for social strategies and incidental learning, which she found more enjoyable and versatile than memory strategies. Her cognitive, affective, and conative responses suggest that motivation in vocabulary learning are deeply influenced by strategy flexibility and learner autonomy. The study concludes that EFL learners should be introduced to various vocabulary learning strategies early in their education, and educators should design instruction that respects learners' preferences. This research highlights the importance of the learner's perspective as an input to the growing literature in the EFL learning context and recommends broader, multi-participant qualitative studies in the future.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, learner perceptions, EFL, qualitative case study, language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary learning is one of the most fundamental and essential processes when acquiring a foreign language, as vocabulary is the building block of language (Endarto & Subekti, 2020). Vocabulary essentially underpins all other language skills as it serves as a stepping stone to higher levels of language usage, and assists students in achieving fluency more quickly (Egamova & Sharofova, 2022). Suryanto et al. (2021) also stated that mastery of vocabulary, as a part of the mastery of language, is crucial because it will be easier for others to understand our ideas if we express them with the right choice of words. Despite its importance, vocabulary is often viewed as the most prominent issue when learning a new language (Meara, 1980) and has been neglected for a long time (Egamova & Sharofova, 2022).

The process of vocabulary learning itself is a multi-faceted one; acquiring many English words is not easy (Komari et al., 2022), particularly when learning English as a foreign language, where mastering the language–that is, identifying English words, comprehending their meanings, and using them in an appropriate context–is both inevitable yet difficult (Lestari & Hardiyanti, 2020). Unlike grammar, which is a limited number system, vocabulary is an open set of many thousand items, further highlighting the difficulty of mastering it (Hadi & Guo, 2020). Additionally, vocabulary learning does not solely retain their referential meaning but also the syntactic, pragmatic, and even emotional information from their context (Ma & Li, 2021), making the process possibly more challenging for language learners, especially foreign ones. The dynamic and complex nature of learning foreign languages calls for strategic steps to support learners' learning process (Ghalebi et al., 2020). It is believed by Nation (2001) that with the help of language learning strategies, learners can acquire a vast amount of language aspects. Vocabulary learning strategies are a subset of learning language strategies; learners use them to obtain new words and phrases in the target language (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021). Vocabulary learning strategies involve actions, techniques, methods, or ideas

used by language learners that assist in acquiring, retaining, retrieving, and applying a language (Rabadi, 2016). Vocabulary learning strategies are important as they help learners improve their vocabulary knowledge, creating chances to learn the new language easily and interact with others despite lacking grammatical competence (Mohammadi & Ebrahimian, 2022).

There are many classifications of vocabulary learning strategies, proposed by different scholars, that demonstrate a wide range of strategies to acquire vocabulary (Oxford, 1990; Stoffer, 1995; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001). Among all, the taxonomy proposed by Schmitt (1997) is the most comprehensive and widely adopted taxonomy. Schmitt expanded Oxford's classification of LLS whereas he added the social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies that Oxford (1990) had established, as well as creating a new category called determination strategies. There are two main domains of Schmitt's taxonomy, namely discovery (social and determination strategies) and consolidation (metacognitive, cognitive, and memory strategies). The discovery domain takes place when learners discover and explore learning of new words, while consolidation happens when a word is reinforced after it has been encountered (Chiew & Ismail, 2021).

Over the past decade, vocabulary studies have dominated the subject of L2 because of its importance for foreign language learners (Laufer & Sim, 2016). Research on vocabulary learning strategies often focuses on how learners use various strategies in different contexts and which would improve their learning outcomes (Ma & Li, 2021). However, vocabulary learning strategies are multidimensional in nature (Chou, 2024). Factors such as learners' individual preferences and perceptions, which include their liking particular aspects of English, their perception of difficulty and importance of certain English aspects, can highly influence their choice of vocabulary learning strategies (Knez, 2018) along with many other factors as well (Boonkongsaen, 2012). Even so, studies on students' perceptions toward vocabulary learning showed are somewhat overlooked in current vocabulary learning and teaching practices and curriculum design (Asyiah, 2017), indicating the need to broaden the already existing literature on vocabulary learning strategies.

Human's ability to hear, see, smell, touch, and taste helps them to sense the outside and be aware of what is happening around them, which is further completed by their perception, in which their sensory organ allows them to recognize and identify any stimuli that exist and then evaluate and give meanings to them (Qiong, 2017). Perception, in common terminology, is defined by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as: a) the way you think about something and your idea of what it is like, b) the way that you notice things with your senses, and c) the natural ability to understand or notice things quickly. Based on these definitions, the shape of perception towards an object is highly affected by the stimuli and situations encountered by the perceivers. In relation to this, Schiffman & Kanuk (2004) mentioned the Cognitive-Affective-Conative (CAC) model: three major components influencing the perception. These aspects have an important role for people because they relate to peoples' knowledge, and feelings, and influence their tendency action toward the object (Yeni & Syahrul, 2021). Based on the CAC Model, perceptions are constructed around three components: (1) a cognitive component (beliefs), (2) an affective component (feelings), and (3) a conative component (behavior).

Several studies have explored students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context (Almosa, 2024; Asyiah, 2017; Mirioglu, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2021). Both Almosa (2024) and Asyiah's (2017) studies showed that students have relatively positive perspectives toward vocabulary learning strategies. However, since both studies utilized the quantitative research design, the findings lack an in-depth description and qualitative data on the perspective. Research by (Mohamad et al., 2021) also explored students' perceptions through a quantitative approach. This study specifically examined students' perception of using memory strategies training for vocabulary development. This study assessed the perception of memory strategy training on students' vocabulary growth. The results showed that students perceived memory strategies positively as a tool to improve their vocabulary development. The positive perception indicated how helpful vocabulary learning strategies are for students, as it may help to motivate them to improve their English skills. (Mirioglu, 2020), on the other hand, investigated Turkish EFL learner perception through mixed-method sequential explanatory design. The study inferred that Turkish EFL students greatly emphasize vocabulary learning strategies in their language learning process. They viewed vocabulary learning strategies as a means to expand their vocabulary knowledge as it is essential for communication, success in English exams, better job opportunities, and overall improvement in language skills. The findings suggested that students' perceptions are important as they heavily influence the implementation of vocabulary learning strategies, indicating the need to explore students' perceptions in depth further.

Based on the reviewed literature, there is an emergent need to investigate student's perceptions in-depth as an EFL learner. Thus, the present research aimed to fill this gap and broaden the area of research to EFL in educational settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study to investigate the research problem. Case studies create a chance for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem, and may aid in describing, understanding, and explaining a research problem or situation (Baxter & Jack, 2015). Moreover, a case study design often aims to address the "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2003). Thus, this approach is the most fitting approach to achieve the aim of this study, which is to explore the participant's perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies.

The participant in this study is Fira (the pseudonym used to protect her privacy), a 22-year-old EFL learner in Indonesia. She has been learning English for more than ten years since elementary school. The sampling of this specific participant was based on the fact that she is currently enrolled in the English Education study program at one of the state universities in Central Java, indicating the depth of her experience in learning English as a foreign language. This exposed an opportunity for the researcher to explore more about her perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies as an EFL learner, as intended from the beginning.

The researcher used two instruments to collect the data: (1) close-ended questionnaire as the instrument to investigate vocabulary learning strategies used by the participant, and (2) semi-structured interviews as the instrument to explore the participant's perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies. The questionnaire was a Likert scale based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies modified by Al-Bidawi (2018). It was adapted to map various vocabulary learning strategies that the participant had used. These strategies were categorized under five primary categories in Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy: Memory Strategies, Determination Strategies, Social Strategies, Cognitive Strategies, and Metacognitive Strategies. The questionnaire was a 32-item Likert scale with a five-rating scale: never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. The second instrument, semi-structured interview, contains both close-ended and open-ended questions. The open-endedness allowed the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desired and the researcher to ask follow-up questions (Turner, 2010). The questions revolved around the participant's perception of vocabulary learning strategies as a whole or part of their learning strategies based on the CAC model of perception which includes: (1) a cognitive component (beliefs), (2) an affective component (feelings), and (3) a conative component (behavior).

The data from the questionnaire was collected through an online platform, Google Forms. Meanwhile, the interview data was collected through two face-to-face interviews. Both interviews were recorded on the researcher's mobile phone, which was later transcribed and double-checked by the researcher. Almost all (around 80%) excerpts in this study were in English as the interviews were conducted in English.

In the stage of data analysis, the researcher repeatedly went over the transcriptions, as well as the recordings. The raw data from the transcription was then unpacked with interpretive intent by the researcher. It is related to how verbal data are qualitatively analyzed and interpreted. Interpretative intent facilitated the researcher in reconstructing verbal data in relevant depth and breadth (Widodo, 2014). It is also important to note that the analysis of qualitative data should be made into "sense" by categorizing them into sections, themes, or codes. However, since the instrument was designated based on the CAC model, the themes were already presented, namely; cognitive, affective, and conative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire revealed Fira's usage of vocabulary learning strategies and the interviews explored her general perceptions along with the cognitive, affective, and conative aspects of her perceptions as an EFL learner towards vocabulary learning strategies.

In the interview, she stated that vocabulary is important in learning English. However, when asked about vocabulary learning strategies, she admitted she is quite unfamiliar with its concept. This is in line with (Hidayad & Purwanto, 2022; Zuhairi & Mistar, 2023) who stated that EFL learners often do not understand learning strategies and lack awareness of how to apply those strategies. As (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010) stated, the unawareness among language learners highlights the need for promoted language learning programs across all language levels. However, she added that even if she is unfamiliar with the concept, she realized she had actually employed certain strategies in her experiences as they were useful and effective.

At some point in the interview, she stated she has her own way to learn new vocabulary (see Excerpt 1) and she asked the researcher what category it is.

Excerpt 1
"There are more strategies. How do you say about when I get vocabulary from videos or films, what strategy is that? … Like, you know, when I stumble upon video of native speakers

speaking about their days, speaking about the bread that they made in the video. I often, kayak, mereka ngomong terus aku kayak merespons gitu lho, jadi kayak 'So today I am making bread,' and then 'Oh! What? That bread looks so delicious!' You know?"

This sign of curiosity indicates that if given the chance or information, she would like to understand more about vocabulary learning strategy. This unawareness might be driven by the lack of exposure or vocabulary learning strategies instruction, further indicating the importance of teachers' agentive roles in the process of language development of their students (Almusharraf, 2020).

As seen from the questionnaire, she had already used certain and various strategies to support her learning process (see Table 1).

Table 1. Vocabulary learning strategies used

Vocabulary learning strategy	Category	Frequency
I use internet facilities and applications to acquire meaning easily.	Social	Always
I cooperate with friends to find out the meaning of words.	Social	Often
I ask the teacher to clarify the meaning	Social	Sometimes
I highlight the difficult words and discuss the meaning with my peers.	Social	Sometimes
I listen and watch films, songs, and T.V. programs to list the new words.	Social	Sometimes
I practice the use of vocabulary with native speakers.	Social	Rarely
I ask the teacher to compose a sentence using the new word.	Social	Never
I use the context clues to find out the meaning of the new words.	Determination	Often
I illustrate pictures in the textbook to find the meaning of words.	Determination	Often
I use an English-Indonesian dictionary to find out the meaning of new vocabulary.	Determination	Sometimes
I check if the same word is used in Bahasa Indonesia.	Determination	Rarely
I use grammatical structure to guess the meaning.	Determination	Rarely
I analyze vocabulary prefixes, roots and suffixes.	Determination	Never
I guess the use of words according to the context.	Metacognitive	Always
I monitor vocabulary comprehension when communicating with others.	Metacognitive	Sometimes
I am conscious of the use of various vocabulary strategies.	Metacognitive	Rarely
I search for new words to improve the writing of my e-mails, articles, or short stories.	Metacognitive	Rarely
I self-evaluate the words I use.	Metacognitive	Rarely
I practice the new words when playing online games.	Metacognitive	Rarely
I use words through writing repeatedly.	Cognitive	Always

I guess the meaning of words from available information in context.	Cognitive	Often
I keep a notebook filled with new words.	Cognitive	Sometimes
I make lists of words with meaning and examples.	Cognitive	Rarely
I repeat the word along with its meaning.	Cognitive	Rarely
I link word items with images and pictures in mind.	Cognitive	Rarely
I connect the new words with life situations and experiences.	Memory	Always
I make repetition to learn words.	Memory	Often
I repeat new words loudly to memorize them.	Memory	Sometimes
I use rhymes to remember new words.	Memory	Sometimes
I draw an image of the word in my head.	Memory	Sometimes
I classify new words according to their synonyms and antonyms.	Memory	Never
I classify new vocabulary according to similar pronunciation and spelling.	Memory	Never

It was revealed that Fira mostly uses the social strategy when it comes to learning new vocabulary. However, she also rely on other strategies from various categories, indicating her own preference in her learning style which is much more versatile which allows her to explore a lot of things instead of having the same learning routine (see Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2

"Karena menurutku pribadi orang tuh beda-beda gitu lho. Ada orang yang rajin dan butuh schedule untuk segala hal. ... For me, I think it is still important tapi depends ke orangnya masing-masing karena mereka punya cara belajarnya mereka sendiri gitu lho. Nah, for me sendiri kan, pribadiku ini kan orangnya kurang rajin. So, I think social is for me."

This finding supports the idea that every learner employs specific strategies and styles to have a successful learning process (Rido & Wahyudin, 2020) which is probably because of their characteristics (age, interests, level of proficiency, period of learning, and the learning facilities) might affect what kind of methods or strategies they will employ (Kurbanova, 2020).

Cognitive Aspect

Fira displayed a relatively contradictive opinion towards vocabulary learning strategies. The aforementioned findings indicate that she viewed vocabulary learning strategies positively; great, useful, and effective. However, she also repeatedly stated that vocabulary learning strategies are not necessarily needed when it comes to acquiring new words. Instead, it is the exposure that is needed by the learners (see Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3

"I think it is a really great thing, I don't know, I just don't think that it is really important to have strategies in learning vocabulary, like, if you want to learn vocabulary then you just, get it somewhere? ... Me personally does not think that learning strategy is actually needed, like, when you want to learn English, you just need to expose yourself to English language as much as possible."

Her personal view suggests that she puts great importance on the chance to acquire new words through as much exposure as possible. However, most of the time, EFL learners do not have the privilege to learn or interact with native speakers or English-speaking people outside of formal education (Wahyuni, 2022),

which is why they always try to benefit from any chance given as much as possible. Moreover, foreign language learners often have to learn English as a single subject along with many others, giving little or no time to practice it (Ali, 2022). The inability to study and learn all vocabulary in language classes drives learners to seek other valuable ways to help them acquire vocabulary in the best way (Tran, 2020) and in Fira's case, she often relies on social strategies and incidental learning instead of purposely learn and acquire new vocabulary.

Similar findings were found in (Pei, 2023) where learners in target language environments, such as in the US, have plenty of opportunities to hear native speakers talk, unlike EFL learners who have much fewer opportunities to hear native speakers talk and this difference drives EFL learners to rely more on "regularly seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers" strategy as their language learning strategies, while learners in target language environment commonly use "imitating the way native speakers talk" strategy

The aforementioned table showed that Fira always uses the "I guess the use of words according to the context" strategy from the metacognitive category. She mentioned that she often acquires and learns new vocabulary through TikTok and any other sources. Just as (Albalawi, 2024) stated, out-of-class language exposure can also occur in many activities including playing video games, extensive reading, listening to songs, extensive viewing, and visiting social media. Moreover, Fira stated that learning vocabulary through these platforms has helped her greatly to guess the use and meaning of new vocabulary just from the context.

Another reason why she relied on that vocabulary learning strategy is because she thought searching for the word's meaning was somewhat inefficient since it took more time for her to do so. This view indicates an evaluative judgment from her perspective, showcasing her cognitive aspect of perception which relate to one's thoughts and attitude (Yeni & Syahrul, 2021). In relation to the use of dictionaries, studies by (Citrayasa et al., 2022) and (Rahmani, 2023) yielded different results whereas EFL learners often rely on dictionaries because it was deemed as accessible anytime and anywhere. This difference further supports the idea that students use strategies that they think is the most effective and efficient to aid their learning process (Astika et al., 2020).

Affective Aspect

When asked about her feelings, Fira explained that she relatively feels positive toward the vocabulary learning strategy. Among all, she likes the social strategies because it generally helps not only with acquiring new vocabulary but also with her speaking skill (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4

"Because when you get to learn new vocabulary from other people or discussion, we can get to practice the new words immediately and know how to use it at the same time. You know, practicing on how to guess the words—the meaning of the words—from its context and immediately practice it, it is kind of helpful for me."

The result above revealed a new insight whereas she does not solely learn new vocabulary but she also tries to retain it through speaking practice, further cultivating her higher English skills in the process. Similar findings are found in research by (Nurmala Sari & Aminatun, 2021) where it is believed that by understanding the context and how to use it appropriately, vocabulary learning acquisition can be a stepping stone for learners' speaking skills.

Fira showed a degree of dislike towards the memory strategy from the interview (see Excerpt 5). It is more driven by her personal preferences instead of issues or struggles.

Excerpt 5

"Kayak, aku tuh kalau pakai kata-kata tuh sudden gitu lho. Nggak terlalu dipikirkan. Kalau menghafal tuh ya, kata itu… nggak… kayak aku nggak pernah classify the words based on certain terms or like that. Kalau aku hafalin, ya hafalin aja. There is no specific way of memorize."

She stated that she likes to learn casually instead of taking actual strategic steps to aid in her learning process. As Richards (2015) stated, flexible language learning allows learners to decide their own pace, mode, and place tailored to their own needs and interests.

Conative Aspect

From the interview, Fira displayed an interesting behavioral tendency toward vocabulary learning strategies (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6

"Kayaknya social strategy juga sih. .... I feel like to have as much as chance as possible to speak with other people using English so that I can get new vocabulary but at the same time I don't feel like—you know, I am an introvert person. ... But I think I am most likely to use the social strategy, like, if I get the chance to but we live in Indonesia, so… there is no many chances."

She mentioned that she tends to rely more on the social strategies but at the same time, she is an introverted person in nature, which is rather contradictory. On top of that, learning English in Indonesia where it is considered as a foreign language is further slimming out her chance to be able to interact and actually speak English freely. This notion supports the idea that the use of language learning strategies is influenced by contextual factors (Saud, 2019) and it can heavily affect learners in the learning process.

Despite the existing struggle, Fira thinks the social strategy is quite efficient. If given the actual opportunity to do so, she thoughts it will be the best vocabulary learning strategy for EFL learners. This finding is in line with research by (Al-Bidawi, 2018) which stated that social strategies created as much opportunities for learners to interact with their peers.

When asked about the feeling of being motivated or unmotivated while using vocabulary learning strategies, Fira stated it highly depends on the kind of strategy she employed. She feels motivated when the strategy allows her to be flexible while learning, creating as much space for her to explore a lot of things. On the other hand, she feels unmotivated if the strategy she uses is strict and demanding, such as doing repetitive things over and over again or having the same routine. In her experience, she used to learn new vocabulary by writing down the new words and practicing how to speak and memorize them with her friends. But she admitted she got bored after a week or so because it felt repetitive. This finding brings new insight for teachers or practitioners in which while teaching vocabulary, it is important to keep students engaged because students' engagement in English learning can improve their motivation and learning outcomes (Hasdina et al., 2023). As shown in Saripah & Syukri (2017) and Davidovitch & Dorot's (2023) studies, students with high motivation tend to encourage themselves to learn to the fullest and when they are motivated enough to succeed, they will be more likely to persevere in any learning conditions.

CONCLUSION

The findings and discussion revealed that Fira, as an EFL learner, has a contradictory perspective towards vocabulary learning strategies. She viewed it as effective, and efficient yet at the same time stated that she does not necessarily view vocabulary learning strategies as something important due to her unawareness of its concept. This suggest that English learners, especially EFL ones, needs to be introduced to vocabulary learning strategies in the early stage of their learning process so that they can utilize it to the fullest. Despite the contradicting view, the participant has a relatively positive perspective towards vocabulary learning strategies. This suggests that vocabulary learning strategies are indeed helpful in aiding and assisting EFL learners in acquiring new vocabulary. Teachers, practitioners, or any other facilitators should take these findings into consideration as vocabulary learning strategies are regarded as helpful. Future research can broaden this growing literature by expanding the sample, employing different approaches, and exploring different aspects that has not yet been covered in this study.

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