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A Comparison of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by High and Low Proficient Pre-University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study was conducted to identify the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) utilised by 36 Band 5 students as well as 31 Band 3 and below students. This study was vital to look into the similarities and differences in the VLS employed by high and low proficient students as well as to reveal the most useful strategies for vocabulary learning to boost students' level of proficiency. The VLS-Q (Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire; Schmitt, 1997) was utilised in this study. The results of this study showed that high proficient students used the *'English language media'* as the most frequent strategy employed. Nonetheless, low proficient students tend to employ the strategy of *'asking classmates for meaning'*. Strategies from the Memory and Determination categories were the most frequently employed by high and low proficient learners respectively. Implications of the results and suggestions were discussed which are noteworthy in improving vocabulary size and knowledge.

1. Introduction

In second language learning, vocabulary is an indispensable key to fluency and is the heart of language competence whereby learners require sufficient vocabulary size and knowledge to function in the language. Attaining sufficient vocabulary knowledge is a challenge for students during the course of acquiring a second language whether through formal or informal learning. Students attending school from primary up to tertiary level in Malaysia are consistently taught and exposed formally to the English language as it is the second language of this country which has been given primary importance after the Malay language. However, based on review of studies on the English language learning in Malaysian schools, it was revealed that the strong influence of the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) has outweighed the learning of English (Che Musa et al., 2012). Besides, looking into the prevailing pattern of education in the Malaysian schools, examinations particularly national examinations are given emphasis and importance in the education sector.

Children who go through the education system in Malaysia ought to be autonomous learners of the English language as clearly stated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Ministry of Education, 2013). Using English independently in most contexts is expected from students as they are required to speak with less hesitation, continue developing academic vocabulary, capable of using vocabulary which are newly acquired to retell, describe, explain, and make comparison as well as to be independent readers. Furthermore, students are urged to expand their vocabulary size to the highest extent based on their own initiative and effort. Therefore, this notion of encouraging students to widen their vocabulary size on their own effort indirectly leads to the idea of making sure that students are not only exposed to the variety of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) but to also choose the correct and most effective VLS to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. The aim of the Malaysian English language syllabus is for students to communicate effectively which means to have sufficient and adequate vocabulary to converse. However, the fact is vice versa as the students still face problems in conversing due to lack of vocabulary as they move on to the secondary and pre- university levels. This can be seen among learners at tertiary institutions in Malaysia who were identified to have limited size of vocabulary knowledge and poor at (Che Musa et al., 2012). Hence,

students who wish to pursue their first-degree studies at local public universities in Malaysia are required to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

MUET is designed to sustain its importance in checking candidates' English language proficiency. MUET has aimed to quantify pre-university students' proficiency level in the English language for entrance into tertiary level. The MUET band description indicates that Band 3 and below are modest and limited users (low proficiency) while band 5 are proficient users of the language. MUET results from previous years comprising four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing had indicated that Malaysian students still lack proficiency in the English Language. Many could not attain the required minimum level of Band 3 to apply for their preferred courses in the local university and the expected level of Band 4 and above to reflect good proficiency level upon graduation. Hence, necessary measures that can assist students in improving their level of proficiency particularly in expanding their vocabulary knowledge needs to be considered and taken seriously.

Although knowing the fact that Malaysian students possess inadequate vocabulary knowledge through a few researches that had been carried out, not much is known or studied about the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by high proficient students (Band 5) as well as low proficient students (Band 3 and below) in the Malaysian context. Only studies pertaining to Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by high proficient learners had been conducted such as the study done by Asgari and Mustapha (2012) on TESL undergraduates utilising the qualitative method. Besides, Nayan and Krishnasamy (2015) conducted a preliminary study on Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by Accountancy students in a public university in Malaysia but the proficiency level of the students was not made clear. Furthermore, VLS among low proficient learners particularly were seen to be given little emphasis in past studies. This is vital as to identify the differences in the strategies employed by both high and low proficient learners in order to best select the most useful and relevant strategies that can best cater for both group of learners for vocabulary building. Thus far, only a few studies utilising Schmitt (1997) taxonomy of VLS had been utilised to quantitatively study the use of the strategies among L2 high and low proficient learners. Although there have been studies utilising Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of VLS, not all of the 58 strategies have been studied. Therefore, it is fundamental in this study to

recognise and identify the most relevant and useful Vocabulary Learning Strategies among all the 58 strategies by Schmitt (1997) to be best utilised for more effective vocabulary learning for learners rather than just a broad view of the strategies.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) by Schmitt (1997)

Many studies have been carried out by utilising the Vocabulary Learning Strategies taxonomy. Schmitt (1997) stated that the frequency of occurrence of a word is relevant for long term retention and Nation (1994) suggested that teaching learners with the relevant strategies is very essential when it comes to dealing with low frequency words. Therefore, Schmitt (1997) divided his taxonomy into two major strategies; discovery of a new word's meaning and consolidating a word once it has been encountered which comprise all the five Vocabulary Learning Categories (VLC) and 58 individual Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) for vocabulary learning.

Based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy, determination strategies comprise of 9 individual strategies that can be employed by the learners using their own knowledge and thoughts. These strategies encompass approaches used by learners when they have found new words' meanings without getting any assistance from a person's expertise such as guessing words from context and using the dictionary to comprehend meaning of words. This annotates that students independently find the meaning of unknown or difficult words without assistance from others.

According to Schmitt (1997), Social strategies which comprise of 8 individual strategies can be employed by students in asking someone else to ascertain a new meaning and this approach promotes interaction with others to develop language learning, for instance, asking classmates for meaning of new or difficult words, asking teacher to paraphrase the new words and learn the meaning of words via group work. In this strategy, others especially the teachers play a vital role in this position to assist students in discovering the meaning of new words.

Besides, memory strategies which encompass 27 individual strategies are seen to involve deep processing of information and a recovery strategy is built up during the encoding and mental imagery for

both visual and verbal. For example, connecting the new word to its synonyms and antonyms, study the spelling and sound of a word, imagine the words' meaning and connect the new word to a personal experience. This means that students associate the words with previous information or experience using images. This enables the learners to learn faster and recap better.

However, cognitive strategies are strategies which comprise of 9 individual strategies regarding repetition and mechanical means in learning vocabulary. In these strategies, learners will write over again or repeatedly saying words, keep vocabulary notebooks and taking notes in class. This strategy basically involves repetition and learners repeatedly learn the words for vocabulary retention.

Lastly, metacognitive strategies can be used by learners to control and evaluate their learning by having an overview of the learning process. This category of 5 individual strategies is a method where learners must be aware of their aims and level of vocabulary knowledge in order to choose the appropriate strategy in learning vocabulary. The strategies that involve this category are using English language media such as songs and movies, continue to study the word overtime, test oneself with word test and use spaced word practice to evaluate their progress and as reinforcement in learning vocabulary. In this strategy category, the learners plan, evaluate and monitor their own learning.

Apart from that, previous studies on the types VLS categories as well the types and frequency of individual VLS by Schmitt (1997) utilised by high and low proficient learners can also be seen and are detailed in the following subsections.

2.2 Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Utilised by High and Low Proficient Learners

Several studies have been conducted within the framework of Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) in identifying the categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by both high and low proficient learners. These studies were conducted both in the Asian and international contexts.

From a global perspective, it can be seen that high proficient users utilised Vocabulary Learning Strategies from the Memory and Cognitive categories (Doczi, 2011; Zarrin & Khan, 2014). Another prominent

category of VLS utilised by high proficient users was the Social strategies (Zarrin & Khan, 2014). However, the study by Jafari and Kafipour (2013) found that advance learners employed strategies from the Metacognitive and Determination categories which is in line with Doczi (2011). Jafari and Kafipour (2013) also found that VLS from the Memory category had also been utilised by advance learners. From these studies, it can be seen that high proficient users uitlised VLS from all the five categories.

Besides, low proficient learners were found to employ VLS from the Social, Memory and Cognitive categories more frequently (Jafari & Kafipour, 2013). Determination category was also one of the primary categories employed by these learners (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010). Therefore, it can be noted that the only difference in the use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies among the high and low proficient users are the strategies in the Metacognitive category.

In the Malaysian ESL context, Safian et al. (2014) revealed that the highest use of strategies by the students was from the Metacognitive category of the Vocabulary Learning Strategies. These undergraduate students are considered as high proficient users of the language as they are undergoing training to teach English as a Second Language in Malaysian schools. However, nothing is known about the strategies by low proficient students in this study. However, their findings also discovered that strategies from the Cognitive category was also employed by these learners. Contrariwise, low proficient users were found to employ strategies from the Determination category (Mutalib et al., 2014).

Hence, looking into the studies by both the international and Malaysian context, it can be seen that high proficient users employ the VLS from mostly all the categories in which Metacognitive (MET) and Cognitive categories (COG) of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) being the dominant ones. In contrast, the prevailing category of VLS for low proficient learners were found to be strategies from the Determination category (DET).

2.3 Individual Vocabulary Learning Strategies by High and Low Proficient Learners

Looking specifically into the individual strategies of vocabulary learning, past studies had not only revealed the categories of VLS but had also identified the individual VLS utilised by high and low proficient

learners. High proficient learners were found to employ '*Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms'* (Hamzah et al., 2009; Rojananak & Vitayapirak, 2015). Hamzah et.al (2009) further found that *'use new words in sentences', 'study new words many times'* were also the most employed strategies by high proficient learners. However, Hamzah et.al (2009*)* and Doczi (2011) identified that *'taking notes or highlight new words'* were the most common VLS strategies utilised. Moreover, Hamzah et.al also discovered that *'study the sound of a word'* was in line with Huang's (2010) study on high proficient learners. Nonetheless, Huang (2010) and Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) found that '*use any pictures or gestures to guess the meaning'* were the most frequently used strategies by these learners.

Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) had also found that '*connect the word to a personal experience'* was the most frequently used strategy by high achievers. '*Using English language media', 'monolingual dictionary', 'learning the words of an idiom together'* were also the most frequently employed strategies (Aljdee, 2011; Dóczi, 2011). Based on Dóczi (2011) and Huang's (2010) studies, high proficient users utilised the strategies of *'contextual guessing', 'bilingual dictionary', 'written repetition'* and *'verbal repetition'*. Furthermore, Huang (2010) and Dóczi (2011) discovered that *'study the spelling of a word'* and *'saying the word aloud'* were the most employed strategies by high proficient learners along with '*identifying parts of speech' a*nd '*making list of words'* (Aljdee, 2011). Conversely, Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) identified that weak learners utilised '*ask classmates for meaning'* and '*keep a vocabulary notebook'* as strategies to improve their vocabulary which were not employed by high proficient learners.

In the Malaysian context, the use of '*monolingual dictionary'* and '*guessing meaning from context'* were found dominant among high proficient students (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011; Hamzah et al., 2009; Mutalib, Kadir, Robani & Majid, 2014). Asgari and Mustapha (2011) and Hamzah et al. (2009) also discovered that '*learning vocabulary through English language media'* were mostly employed by high proficient learners as well. Besides, Asgari and Mustapha (2011) found that '*practice new words among friends* and *interact with native speakers'* were significant strategies utilised by high proficient learners alongside '*use bilingual dictionary'* and '*asking teachers and friends'* (Mutalib et al., 2014). However, low proficient learners also employed strategies of '*asking*

teacher' and *'asking friends'* as the most frequently employed strategies in the study conducted by Mutalib et al. (2014).

Observing both good and weak learners, they were found to employ similar strategies such as '*using English language media', 'bilingual dictionary', 'monolingual dictionary', 'guessing meaning from context', 'interact with native speakers', 'connect the word to others with similar or opposite meaning', 'use new words in sentences', 'remember words in scales/ spend more time to remember'* and *'take notes or highlight new words in class'* (Mutalib et al., 2014; Rojananak & Vitayapirak, 2015).

In sum, it can be seen that the VLS employed by learners in past studies were based on high and low proficiency levels. The differences and similarities between the VLS employed by good and weak students could also be noted. Strategies utilised in previous studies maximising the use of Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies can be seen. Although many studies have shown differences in the strategies utilised among high and low proficient learners, not much is known about the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) utilised by high and low proficient pre-university students especially in the Malaysian context.

Therefore, in this study, the Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies was utilised to determine the VLS employed by Band 5 achievers of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) who are high proficient students and Band 3 and below MUET achievers who are considered as low proficient students. Essentially, the current study aims to identify the best VLS employed by the students concerned. Such knowledge can ultimately enable teachers to improve learners' vocabulary breadth and depth as well as producing independent learners.

2.4 Research Questions

This study was conducted to solely identify the Vocabulary Learning Strategies utilised by high proficient students of the English language (high achievers) and low proficient students (low achievers). Therefore, the current study attempts to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the vocabulary learning strategies employed by high proficient students?

2. What are the vocabulary learning strategies employed by low proficient students?

3. What are the similarities and differences between the vocabulary learning strategies employed by high proficient students in comparison to low proficient students and how do they differ?

3. Methodology

3.1 Instrument

The Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) questionnaire by Schmitt (1997) was utilised to identify the strategies employed in learning vocabulary by both Bands 5 and 3 and below achievers. The questionnaire consists of five categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies; Determination (DET), Social (SOC), Memory (MEM), Cognitive (COG) and Metacognitive (MET). All these 5 VLS categories comprise of 58 individual strategies in learning vocabulary to identify the frequency of the VLS utilised by these respondents; DET (9 strategies), SOC (8 strategies), MEM (27 strategies), COG (9 strategies) and MET (5 strategies). The VLS instrument by Schmitt (1997) was adapted for this study. The adaptation was only done on the Likert scale with a 3-point scale of 'Never= indicates that the behaviour is never true of you' (1), 'Sometimes= indicates that the behaviour is sometimes true of you' (2) and 'Always= indicates that the behaviour is always true of you' (3) were used. This instrument was administered to 30 students to obtain its validity and reliability based on the current students and had proven its validity and reliability which yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient report of .86. Schmitt (1997) VLS-Q was chosen due its comprehensiveness that covers the major aspects of vocabulary learning. This instrument has been widely adopted and adapted by past studies (Adibah Halilah et al., 2014; Nousin, 2015; Nur Hanisah et al., 2014; Rojananak & Vitayapirak, 2015) in identifying the types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by learners in various contexts.

3.2 Sampling

The respondents were selected based on purposive sampling for this study which were 36 Band 5 and 31 Band 3 and below pre-university

students from various backgrounds who are now currently pursuing their studies at local universities in the country. The respondents were selected based on their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) results which is considered as a high-stake national test and a pre-requisite examination for the students to enroll into public universities in the country.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher with the consent from the students and college director on a selected day after their tutorial hours. The objective of the study was briefly explained to the respondents before the distribution of the questionnaire. Instructions on the questionnaire and from the researcher were made clear before the respondents answer the questionnaire. They were to answer each of the questions based on the frequency of employing the listed 58 individual vocabulary learning strategies in their experience in learning vocabulary. Students were also allowed to ask questions if any of the strategies listed were not understood. Moreover, they were also requested to answer the questions as faithfully as possible and were given about 15 minutes to answer. The respondents' responses were computed using the SPSS version 20 using the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by High Proficient Students (Band 5)

The results from the descriptive statistics on the frequency of VLS utilised by Band 5 students revealed that the five most frequently used strategies by this group of learners were from the Metacognitive (MET), Determination (DET), Memory (MEM) and Cognitive (COG) categories. The most frequently used strategy was the item VLS54 *'Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscast, etc.)'* from the Metacognitive category (*M* = 2.86, *SD* = .424) compared to all the other individual strategies. These results concur with the findings by Jafari and Kafipour (2013) and Safian et al. (2014). This is a strategy where these learners learn vocabularies through their daily activity such as watching movies, listening to songs and newscast and using other authentic materials. This could most probably be

due to their interest in using various media as means to improve their vocabulary size and knowledge. With easier access to internet and the increase of use in new technological devices has helped learners to boost and change their learning habits (Sohrabi & Iraj, 2016).

The second highest strategy utilised was item VLS5 '*Guess from textual context*' from the Determination category (*M* = 2.64, *SD* = .487). This is a strategy where one makes guesses from the textual context in reading. The use of *'English language media'* and '*guessing from context'* strategies were found to be in line with the study conducted by Asgari and Mustapha (2011) among 10 Malaysia TESL undergraduate students. TESL students who were considered as proficient students utilised similar strategies such as '*learning vocabulary through English language media'* as well as '*guessing from textual context*'. This strategy is followed by VLS22 *'Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms'* from the Memory category (*M* = 2.42, *SD* = .649) as the third most employed strategy by these high proficient learners. In this strategy the new words can be linked to other words of similar or opposite meanings which the students have already known. Typically, this strategy engages students in relating familiar words to the new lexical items learned. This could be due to the use of thesaurus by these advance learners to identify other vocabularies of similar meaning. This result is coherent with the findings by Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) that advance learners connect words to others of similar or opposite meaning.

Band 5 students was also found to employ item VLS45 '*Verbal repetition*' from the cognitive category (*M* = 2.39, *SD* = .599) as the fourth most utilised strategy. Verbal repetition is where students utter a word repeatedly and is a frequent strategy used in several parts of the world. This strategy is so established that learners favour this strategy the most instead of attempting to employ others (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to Schmitt (1997), many learners have utilised this strategy as a way to attain higher proficiency levels. VLS7 '*Monolingual dictionary*' (*M* = 2.39, *SD* = .688)] was found to be the fifth most employed strategy from the Determination category. This strategy assists students to look up meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words using English to English dictionary. These advance students might have high reliance on technology which made them to install 'English to English' dictionary application on their smartphones which in turn produces students who take their own initiative to learn vocabularies by maximizing their mobile dictionary

wherever they go. According to Sohrabi and Iraj (2016), various proofs have shown that millennial students rely more on technology for multitasking and learning. This reported strategy concurs with Aljdee (2011) and Dóczi, (2011) studies on high school and university students from Budapest and Libya who employed '*Monolingual dictionary'* as a medium to improve their vocabulary. This finding was also in line with studies done in the Malaysian context (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011; Hamzah et.al, 2009; Mutalib et al., 2014).

From the findings, it can be noted that the most employed individual VLS was *'Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscast, etc.)'* from the Metacognitive category (MET). However, looking at the frequency of utilising the individual strategies from the VLS categories, strategies from the Memory category were the most frequently employed that differs from past studies which reported that the most frequently employed strategies were from the Metacognitive and Cognitive categories. This portrays that strategies such as '*connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms', 'study the spelling and sound of the word' 'use new word in sentences'* and '*image word's meaning'* were seen as the most useful strategies for proficient students in this study as these strategies had assisted them to expand their vocabulary knowledge. In other words, these strategies had been frequently employed by these proficient students compared to other strategies. Based on Schmitt (1997) taxonomy, this category of strategies is associated to deep processing of information and involves a recovery strategy both visual and verbal. This could mean that these high proficient learners have the ability to recap words and retain them for long term through remembering them visually and verbally. Table 1 shows the categories and individual VLS utilised by Band 5 students (high achievers) in their experience in learning vocabulary.

Table 1

Summary of Descriptive Statistics on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Employed by Band 5 Students

Item No	Items based on Schmitt Taxonomy of VLS (1997)	Category of VLS	Mean	Std. Deviation
VLS54	Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscast, etc.)	MET	2.86	.424
VLS5	Guess from textual context	DET	2.64	.487

VLS22	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	MEM	2.42	.649
VLS45	Verbal repetition	COG	2.39	.599
VLS7	Monolingual dictionary	DET	2.39	.688
VLS31	Study the spelling of a word	MEM	2.36	.833
VLS32	Study the sound of a word	MEM	2.33	.676
VLS29	Use new word in sentences	MEM	2.33	.535
VLS19	Image word's meaning	MEM	2.31	.668
VLS46	Written repetition	COG	2.25	.649
VLS4	Analyse any available pictures or gestures	DET	2.22	.797
VLS20	Connect word to a personal experience	MEM	2.19	.624
VLS33	Say new word aloud when studying	MEM	2.17	.737
VLS3	Check for L1 cognate	DET	2.17	.775
VLS40	Paraphrase the word's meaning	MEM	2.14	.543
VLS13	Ask classmates for meaning	SOC	2.14	.762
VLS1	Analyse part of speech	DET	2.11	.523
VLS49	Take notes in class	COG	2.08	.732
VLS34	Image word form	MEM	2.08	.604
VLS11	Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word	SOC	2.03	.654
VLS39	Part of speech	MEM	2.00	.535
VLS21	Associate the word with its coordinates	MEM	2.00	.586
VLS18	Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning	MEM	1.97	.774
VLS6	Bilingual dictionary	DET	1.97	.810
VLS47	Word lists	COG	1.92	.806
VLS58	Continue to study word overtime	MET	1.92	.649
VLS42	Learn the words of an idiom together	MEM	1.89	.667
VLS27	Group words together to study them	MEM	1.86	.798
VLS43	Use physical action when learning a word	MEM	1.86	.798
VLS41	Use cognates in study	MEM	1.86	.762
VLS14	Discover new meaning through group work activity.	SOC	1.86	.639
VLS25	Peg Method	MEM	1.83	.775
VLS8	Continue to study word overtime	MET	1.83	.737
VLS53	Keep a vocabulary notebook	COG	1.83	.811
VLS38	Affixes and roots	MEM	1.81	.624
VLS12	Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word	SOC	1.75	.732
VLS55	Testing oneself with word tests	MET	1.75	.770
VLS57	Skip or pass new word	MET	1.72	.615

VLS2	Put English labels on physical objects	COG	1.72	.615
VLS26	Loci Method	MEM	1.72	.815
VLS10	Ask teacher for an L1 translation	SOC	1.69	.710
VLS24	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives	MEM	1.67	.586
VLS17	Interact with native- speakers	SOC	1.67	.676
VLS50	Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	COG	1.67	.717
VLS30	Group words together within a storyline	MEM	1.61	.645
VLS28	Group words together spatially on a page	MEM	1.58	.649
VLS37	Use Keyword Method	MEM	1.58	.732
VLS15	Study and practise meaning in group	SOC	1.53	.560
VLS56	Use spaced word practice	MET	1.33	.478
VLS36	Configuration	MEM	1.33	.586
VLS52	Put English labels on physical objects	COG	1.25	.500
VLS51	Listen to tape of word lists	COG	1.25	.554
VLS44	Use semantic feature grids	MEM	1.22	.485
VLS35	Underline initial letter of the word	MEM	1.22	.485
VLS9	Flash cards	DET	1.19	.401
VLS23	Use semantic maps	MEM	1.14	.351
VLS48	Flash cards	COG	1.11	.319
VLS16	Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy	SOC	1.11	.319

4.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies Employed by Low Proficient Students (Band 3 and Below)

From the descriptive statistics on the Vocabulary Learning Strategies utilised by Band 3 and below students (low achievers), it could be seen that these students employed slightly different strategies compared to Band 5 students. The findings revealed that the most employed strategy was VLS13 *'Ask classmates for meaning'* (*M* = 2.74, *SD* = .445) from the Social category. This is in line with the studies done by Mutalib et.al (2014) and Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) that weak learners utilised this strategy to improve on their vocabulary. This could possibly mean that students who are weak in the language feel easier and more comfortable in asking their friends for meaning of words as they might be afraid to ask their teacher or inadequate knowledge in utilising other vocabulary learning strategies.

The second highest strategy employed was VLS54 '*Use English-language media such as songs, movies, newscast, etc.'* (*M* = 2.65, *SD* =

.551) from the Metacognitive category. This strategy is similar to the strategy employed by high proficient learners. These weak learners have utilised this strategy more frequently to learn new vocabularies as they might have been interested in watching English movies or news with the subtitles or listening to English songs as an entertainment and indirectly memorising the song lyrics. This finding is in line with Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) study that weak learners employ this strategy to learn vocabularies. Yet again, this could mean that these millennial students although being low proficient learners rely on various technological media for learning (Sohrabi and Iraj, 2016).

Besides, VLS6 *'Bilingual dictionary'* (*M*= 2.26, SD= .773) and VLS31 *'Study the spelling of a word'* (*M*= 2.16, *SD*= .638) were found to be the third and fourth most employed strategies from the Determination and Memory categories respectively. These strategies involve using dictionary which translates the new word to their first language (L1) and analysing the word through its spelling for vocabulary retention. This is in line with the studies conducted by Mutalib et al. (2014) and Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) that low proficient learners utilise the '*bilingual dictionary'* more often to expand their vocabulary. However, these findings contradict with the studies done by Huang (2010) and Dóczi (2011) which reported that advance learners use these strategies more frequently compared to weak learners. It is significant to note that both high and low proficient learners utilise these same strategies which leads to the understanding that the practices and habits of using those strategies effectively might differ among these two groups of learners.

Moreover, these Band 3 and below students were also found to employ VLS3 *'Check for L1 cognate' (*M=*2.13,* SD= *.562*) from the Determination category as the fifth most utilised strategy. This strategy involves relating the L2 word to the origin of another word in L1. This finding is consistent with Al-Khasawneh's (2012) study in which low proficient learners utilised this strategy as well. However, little studies have highlighted this strategy as the most frequently employed strategy by weak learners.

All in all, the most significant individual strategy was *'Ask classmates for meaning'* from the Social category (SOC) for low proficient learners. Nevertheless, observing the frequency of employing the individual strategies from the VLS categories, strategies from the

Determination category was the most frequently employed which concurs with past studies.

Table 2

Summary of Descriptive Statistics on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Employed by Band 3 and Below Students

Item No	Items based on Schmitt Taxonomy of VLS (1997)	Category of VLS	Mean	Std. Deviation
VLS13	Ask classmates for meaning	SOC	2.74	.445
VLS54	Use English-language media (songs, movies, newscast, etc.)	MET	2.65	.551
VLS6	Bilingual dictionary	DET	2.26	.773
VLS31	Study the spelling of a word	MEM	2.16	.638
VLS3	Check for L1 cognate	DET	2.13	.562
VLS32	Study the sound of a word	MEM	2.13	.718
VLS5	Guess from textual context	DET	2.10	.790
VLS20	Connect word to a personal experience	MEM	1.94	.574
VLS14	Discover new meaning through group work activity.	SOC	1.90	.746
VLS49	Take notes in class	COG	1.90	.539
VLS22	Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms	MEM	1.87	.718
VLS19	Image word's meaning	MEM	1.87	.619
VLS29	Use new word in sentences	MEM	1.87	.619
VLS1	Analyse part of speech	DET	1.84	.583
VLS11	Ask teacher for paraphrase or synonym of new word	SOC	1.84	.688
VLS10	Ask teacher for an L1 translation	SOC	1.81	.703
VLS50	Use the vocabulary section in your textbook	COG	1.77	.497
VLS33	Say new word aloud when studying	MEM	1.77	.717
VLS25	Peg Method	MEM	1.77	.617
VLS12	Ask teacher for a sentence including the new word	SOC	1.74	.575
VLS53	Keep a vocabulary notebook	COG	1.74	.575
VLS4	Analyse any available pictures or gestures	DET	1.71	.693
VLS21	Associate the word with its coordinates	MEM	1.71	.739
VLS7	Monolingual dictionary	DET	1.65	.755
VLS8	Continue to study word overtime	DET	1.65	.661
VLS42	Learn the words of an idiom together	MEM	1.58	.620

VLS15	Study and practise meaning in group	SOC	1.58	.672
VLS43	Use physical action when learning a word	MEM	1.58	.672
VLS47	Word lists	COG	1.58	.672
VLS27	Group words together to study them	MEM	1.58	.620
VLS2	Put English labels on physical objects	DET	1.58	.564
VLS57	Skip or pass new word	MET	1.58	.620
VLS36	Configuration	MEM	1.52	.724
VLS45	Verbal repetition	COG	1.52	.677
VLS34	Image word form	MEM	1.52	.769
VLS40	Paraphrase the word's meaning	MEM	1.48	.570
VLS46	Written repetition	COG	1.48	.626
VLS30	Group words together within a storyline	MEM	1.45	.506
VLS55	Testing oneself with word tests	MET	1.42	.564
VLS35	Underline initial letter of the word	MEM	1.42	.564
VLS58	Continue to study word overtime	MET	1.39	.558
VLS39	Part of speech	MEM	1.35	.551
VLS26	Loci Method	MEM	1.35	.608
VLS18	Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning	MEM	1.35	.486
VLS17	Interact with native- speakers	SOC	1.35	.486
VLS51	Listen to tape of word lists	COG	1.35	.551
VLS9	Flash cards	DET	1.29	.461
VLS56	Use spaced word practice	MET	1.26	.514
VLS37	Use Keyword Method	MEM	1.26	.575
VLS38	Affixes and roots	MEM	1.23	.425
VLS24	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives	MEM	1.23	.425
VLS52	Put English labels on physical objects	COG	1.19	.477
VLS41	Use cognates in study	MEM	1.19	.402
VLS48	Flash cards	COG	1.19	.402
VLS28	Group words together spatially on a page	MEM	1.16	.374
VLS23	Use semantic maps	MEM	1.13	.341
VLS16	Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy	SOC	1.13	.428
VLS44	Use semantic feature grids	MEM	1.06	.250

4.3 The similarities and differences between the vocabulary learning strategies employed by high proficient students compared to low proficient students and how do they differ.

For the similarities and differences among high and low proficient students, it was discovered that the low proficient students (Band 3 and below) employed different strategies compared to high proficient students (Band 5). Nevertheless, the findings also revealed that some of the strategies utilised by Band 5 students were also utilised by Band 3 and below students. In comparing the first five most frequently employed Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) by Band 5 and Band 3 and below achievers (refer Tables 1 and 2), it was evident that only one out of the first five individual strategies were found to be similarly employed between these students which was VLS54 '*Use English-language media such as songs, movies, newscast, etc.'* from the Metacognitive category. This finding coincides with the results reported in Mutalib et al. (2014) and Rojananak and Vitayapirak (2015) that high and low proficient learners utilises this similar strategy to improve their vocabulary level. This could possibly mean that all the students despite the difference in their proficiency levels tend to use various resources from their daily life which are related to their interest to improve their vocabulary level especially through movies and songs which has been highlighted in subsections 4.1 and 4.2.

The remaining four most employed individual strategies from each group of learners (advance and weak) were found to differ. The strategies that they differ in were VLS5 *'Guess from textual context'* (DET), VLS22 *'Connect the word to its synonyms and antonyms'* (MEM), VLS45 *'Verbal repetition'* (COG), VLS7 *'Monolingual dictionary'* (DET), VLS13 *'Ask classmates for meaning'* (SOC), VLS6 *'Bilingual dictionary'* (DET), VLS31 *'Study the spelling of a word'* (MEM) and VLS3 *'Check for L1 cognate'* (DET). It is prominent that the most obvious category of VLS that vary among both group of students in employing their strategies were from the Social and Cognitive categories. It is also interesting to note that the Determination category (DET) was identified as one of the most significant and frequently used category for this current study for high proficient learners but was reported to be the most significant and frequently employed category by low proficient learners in previous studies (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010; Mutalib et al., 2014).

Band 3 and below students had a mean of more than 2.0 only for seven VLS but band 5 students had 22 VLS with a mean of over 2.0. This could mean that Band 5 students who are high proficient learners in the language employed more and various strategies as compared to Band 3

and below students to improve their language and had instilled extra effort to boost their language proficiency. It can also be seen that Band 3 and below students utilised fewer strategies, possibly indicating their lack of interest, effort and initiative in improving their vocabulary knowledge and level of proficiency. According to Oxford (1989), good learners use more strategies and take every opportunity to practice the strategies as compared to poor learners. This means that the VLS which had been frequently used would have greatly aided the proficient students in expanding their vocabulary size and knowledge. This is also supported by Wei's (2007) study that high proficient learners use vocabulary learning strategies on a regular basis or repeatedly compared to less proficient learners.

Moreover, learners who are high achievers are able to make progress and take deliberate actions in second language vocabulary learning by employing various strategies nevertheless poor learners are not capable to handle those strategies well (Khair et al., 2018). The capability of the low proficient students to handle many strategies in learning vocabulary perhaps can be related to their attitude towards learning the language. Subon (2013) in his study on Form 6 (pre-university) students indicated that the less positive students were unsure of the need to place constructive determination in improving their learning of vocabulary. Moreover, it was indicated that students who were more positive used the strategies more frequently in comparison to students who had neutral attitude. This demonstrates that proficient learners have higher degree of autonomy and perseverance as they tend to practice self-direction and make an effort to attain their goal compared to less proficient learners. Therefore, the similarities and differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies among the Band 5 and Band 3 and below students have been demonstrated.

4. Implication of the study

The current study has revealed that students are indirectly aware that there are many vocabulary learning strategies in language learning. However, the very few similarities in the use of VLS by both the Bands 5 and 3 and below achievers indicate that their proficiency levels indeed differ significantly. The findings from both Bands 5 and 3 and below achievers implied that proficient learners employed strategies which had

been more effective in expanding their vocabulary knowledge compared to strategies employed by low proficient learners. Although not all of the strategies were frequently applied by the students, a few of the strategies were found to be popularly and frequently employed by the students particularly proficient students. It is also significant to note that while some of the strategies were seen to be employed similarly by both group of students, the strategies could have been utilised by proficient students more frequently in comparison to the low proficient students in which this had proven to differentiate their level of proficiency. Hence, it is obvious that VLS emerged to be a useful tool to enhance students' vocabulary size and knowledge which indirectly indicates the students' level of interest in learning the English Language through frequent use of various strategies of learning vocabulary especially the most evident ones. This study has also given an insight into the differences in the Vocabulary Learning Strategies employed by both low and high proficient students in order to best differentiate and identify the most useful strategies in learning vocabulary.

The pedagogical implication can be seen through this current study. Language teachers' awareness on the importance of vocabulary learning strategies especially in exposing and teaching significant VLS strategies in the second language learning can be imparted and increased as most teachers are not aware of the vocabulary learning strategies that exist. Oxford (2003) stated that "Vocabulary is not explicitly taught in most language classes". This confirms that language teachers are not aware of the vocabulary learning strategies and are not applying them in their teachings. Besides, many teachers are also not attentive towards the differences in the use of vocabulary learning strategies among the good and weak learners. If teachers are aware of the differences in the use of the vocabulary learning strategies, students can be taught to expand their vocabulary size and knowledge through those strategies accordingly especially strategies employed by proficient learners.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In essence, students should in fact be exposed to all the vocabulary learning strategies available since they are young. Formal exposure to all the vocabulary learning strategies in school especially the start of first grade should be taken into account and considered when designing the curriculum. Emphasis may also be given on learning vocabulary through

'Blended learning approach'. The teaching of vocabulary via Vocabulary Learning Strategies in classroom combined with various technological media can well create students' interest in learning vocabulary through technology as well. English Language teachers should plan interesting activities and create suitable in-class materials to expose students to the strategies for efficacious vocabulary learning. Therefore, classroom-based interventions utilising the Vocabulary Learning Strategies can be further studied centering around the findings revealed to assist students in expanding their knowledge of vocabulary and intensify their proficiency in the language. Activities outside classroom such as vocabulary programs can also be organised by teachers in schools to promote vocabulary learning among students via selected VLS which can cater to both good and weak learners of the language. Students need to be exposed to the necessary and relevant vocabulary learning strategies to assist them in their learning of new lexical knowledge which can aid them to continuously progress in the English language. Moreover, through this study, the awareness among educators, curriculum setters and educational material designers can be raised regarding the significance of VLS exposure.

It is noteworthy that the strategies from the Memory category that were found to be significant among proficient students in this study which differed from previous studies can be further explored. This is to understand the use of the individual strategies from this category not only among proficient students but also among low proficient students which can be considered as vital. Moreover, the use of the strategies from this category can also be studied in a different context. It would also be interesting to find out the use of the strategies from this category in a different perspective to explore the perception of students in this aspect. Future studies pertaining to this topic can also be carried out using the qualitative or mix method approaches as this study only utilised the quantitative approach. Interviews and also observation can be conducted to further confirm the findings. Hence, using the other approaches might reveal greater and more in-depth results. Intervention using these strategies from the memory category can also be conducted and exposed to low proficient students as to look into the effectiveness of these strategies for vocabulary building and expansion.

It is truly hoped that this study will open a broader view in the study of vocabulary learning and subsequently contribute to the growing body of research that vocabulary learning strategies are not only vital in the

western context but also in the Asian context. More research in this field should be done as it will be helpful in developing the field of vocabulary as it is the heart of language learning.

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