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Vocabulary Teaching in Malaysian Primary Schools: A Study on Teacher Strategies and Practices

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Abstract

Vocabulary instruction plays a crucial role in English language learning, yet there is limited research on how Malaysian ESL primary school teachers approach vocabulary teaching. This study examines the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) used by Malaysian teachers, focusing on survey-based quantitative data. A total of 134 ESL primary school teachers participated in a structured survey assessing the frequency of different VLS based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. Findings indicate that social and memory strategies are the most commonly used, while metacognitive strategies are the least adopted. The results highlight the need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with diverse, effective vocabulary instruction methods.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Instruction, Malaysian ESL Primary School, Vocabulary Approach*

Introduction

Researchers have been looking Vocabulary is a fundamental component of second language acquisition, playing a pivotal role in communication and comprehension. For ESL learners, a strong vocabulary foundation facilitates reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, ultimately contributing to academic and professional success. In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language, and vocabulary instruction is an essential aspect of language learning. However, many studies had highlighted that it has been underemphasized in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms. It is found that teachers often prioritize grammar, reading, writing and other language skills while direct vocabulary teaching is frequently overlooked (Lim et al.,2023, Seyapalan et. al., 2023). Lim et al. (2023) observed that teachers in rural primary school in East Malaysia prioritized communicative elements over explicit vocabulary instruction due to time constraints and lack of resources. Similarly, Seyapalan et. al. (2023) found that vocabulary is often treated incidentally rather than through deliberate methods.

The issue however lies in the fact that limited or incidental approach currently being practiced in many Malaysian primary ESL classrooms is insufficient for effective vocabulary acquisition. Schmitt (1997) argues that successful vocabulary instruction requires a combination of both explicit and incidental learning

approaches whereby each one serves a unique role in helping learners acquire, retain and use new words meaningfully. While explicit instruction helps with establishing initial word knowledge, incidental exposure helps to reinforce and deepen that knowledge over time or vice versa (Schmitt, 1997).

Schmitt defines explicit vocabulary instruction as the approach of direct teaching of word meanings, forms and usage through targeted activities such as word lists, definitions and sentence creation. It is an effective method in introducing high-frequency words and helping learners form strong initial connections between word form and meaning. In contrast, incidental learning is described as the process in which learners encounter new vocabulary naturally during language use such as through reading stories and listening to spoken English. However, Schmitt emphasizes that incidental must be paired as it often requires multiple exposures for it to be effective as a stand-alone strategy.

While there are many studies that examined vocabulary strategies that learners use to acquire new words such as memory techniques or contextual guessing (Chiew & Ismail, 2021), fewer have explored how teachers facilitate vocabulary growth in the classroom. This gap is evident especially when it comes to primary level in Malaysia where vocabulary teaching is under explored. As highlighted by Schmitt (1997), effective vocabulary teaching requires a balance of incidental exposure and explicit instruction hence, a study that focuses on understanding the approaches that teachers in Malaysian ESL primary classrooms take when it comes to vocabulary instruction is crucial.

Thus, this present study serves as an investigation that focuses on identifying teachers' classroom practices when it comes to teaching vocabulary to see whether teachers tend to favor incidental vocabulary exposure or explicit vocabulary instruction. By documenting how vocabulary is currently being taught, this study aims to highlight areas of strength and potential improvements in language teaching. In that regard, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the most commonly used Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) among Malaysian primary school ESL teachers?
2. What are the least used VLS among Malaysian primary school ESL teachers?

Literature Review

Vocabulary is widely regarded as a fundamental component in language acquisition as stated by Wilkins (1972), "without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed". Studies have repeatedly shown that there is a positive correlation between learner's vocabulary size and their overall language proficiency (Vu & Michel, 2021). However, acquiring vocabulary is a complex process as it is not just memorising a word meaning. It involves knowing the word form, pronunciation, its meaning and its association with other words (Ghalebi et al., 2020).

In second language acquisition research, Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) have been widely explored. Griffiths (2008) defines VLS as actions that learners deliberately select in order to manage their own language learning. Although vocabulary can be acquired incidentally through exposure, certain words require explicit instruction (Nation, 2001). Research suggests that effective vocabulary acquisition involves a combination of incidental and deliberate teaching (Schmitt, 2008; Nation, 2013). Repetition and frequent engagement with vocabulary have also been shown to enhance long-term retention. For example, Webb (2007) found that repeated interactions with new words significantly improved learners' ability to recall and use vocabulary proficiently. Nation (2013) similarly emphasized that auditory and repetitive exposure reinforces vocabulary learning, contributing to durable memory of lexical items. However, as classroom instruction alone cannot possibly cover the large number of words required for language proficiency, learners are expected to take responsibility for expanding their vocabulary independently (Nation, 2001).

Recent research has also demonstrated that Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) contribute significantly to various aspects of language learning including vocabulary size, reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Alahmadi and Foltz (2020) found that learners with larger vocabulary sizes tend to employ VLS more frequently, particularly for students with smaller vocabulary sizes. Similarly, Ghalebi et al. (2021) emphasized the role of metacognitive and memory strategies in promoting vocabulary retention while Teng and Zhang (2021) further reported that effective use of VLS improves vocabulary learning as well as enhances learner's self-efficacy and motivation. In addition, Schmitt (2019) asserts that contextual learning deepens understanding and enhances learners' ability to use words appropriately across situations. Chamidah (2021) supports this view, noting that multimedia input such as songs and movies offers authentic contexts where vocabulary is reinforced naturally, promoting acquisition without reliance on structured instructional techniques. This highlights the importance of incorporating VLS into language instruction to support vocabulary acquisition.

This study focuses on Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) as categorised in Schmitt's Taxonomy of VLS (1997). Notably, Schmitt's Taxonomy was developed from the broader framework of language learning strategies introduced by Oxford in 1990. Oxford's taxonomy of language learning strategies, introduced in 1990, is widely recognized as a comprehensive framework for understanding the techniques learners use to acquire a second or foreign language. Oxford (1990) defined language learning strategies as the specific actions learners take to facilitate successful language acquisition.

Oxford's (1990) Taxonomy of Language Learning Strategies classifies strategies into two primary categories: Direct Strategies and Indirect Strategies. Each category comprises specific subcategories that address various aspects of language learning. According to Oxford, Direct Strategies are those that involve active engagement with the target language, enabling learners to interact directly with vocabulary, grammar, and other language components to improve their comprehension and communication skills. Oxford's Indi-

rect Strategies include memory strategies, cognitive strategies and compensation strategies like the use of gestures.

On the other hand, Oxford defined Indirect Strategies as strategies that support the language learning process by creating a favorable environment and helping learners organize, manage, and enhance their learning experience. This category includes metacognitive strategies, affective strategies like self-reward and social strategies that focus on learning through interaction.

Building on Oxford's classification, Schmitt (1997) developed a more detailed taxonomy specifically for Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Schmitt divided Vocabulary Learning Strategies into two main types: Discovery Strategies and Consolidation Strategies. Discovery strategies are techniques learners use to uncover the meaning of a new word, such as determination and social strategies. For instance, learners may analyse word parts or context to deduce meaning independently or seek assistance from teachers or peers. Once learners encounter a word, consolidation strategies help them reinforce and retain its meaning through repetition, association, and use in different contexts. These include social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Figure 2.1 shows the overview of Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies.

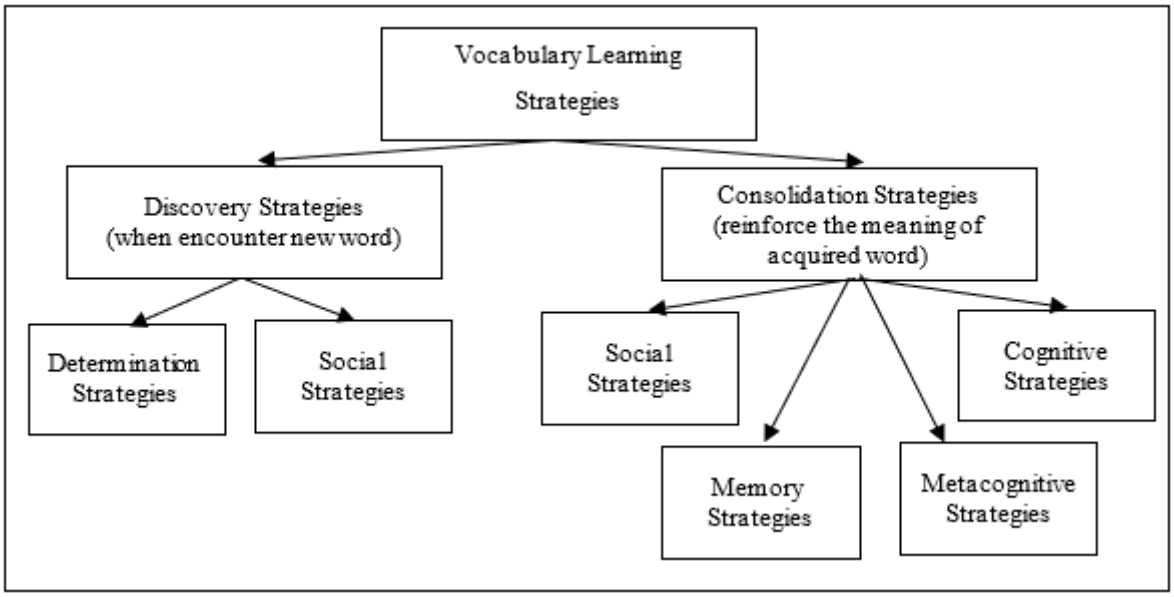

Figure 1: Overview of Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Schmitt (1997) outlined two strategies that he classified as discovery strategies which are Determination and Social Strategies. Determination Strategies are when learners figure out the meaning of a word without asking help from others. These include the use of dictionary, guessing through context as well as analysis of word parts. Social Strategies, on the other hand, involve the help from others when learners want to find the meaning for a certain word. These strategies include asking teachers or friends for L1 translation,

asking for a synonym or for a definition of a word through paraphrasing as well as how to use the new word in a sentence (Schmitt, 1997). Table 1 shows the sub-strategies that fall under Schmitt's Discovery Strategies.

Table 1: Schmitt's Discovery Strategies

Strategy	Description
Determination (DET)	Analyse part of speech
Determination (DET)	Analyse affixes and roots
Determination (DET)	Check L1 cognate
Determination (DET)	Analyse pictures / gestures
Determination (DET)	Guessing from context
Determination (DET)	Bilingual dictionary
Determination (DET)	Monolingual dictionary
Determination (DET)	Word list
Determination (DET)	Flashcard
Social (SOC)	Ask teacher for L1 translation
Social (SOC)	Ask teacher to paraphrase or provide synonym of new word
Social (SOC)	Ask teacher for sentence containing new word
Social (SOC)	Ask classmates for meaning
Social (SOC)	Discover meaning through group work activity

On the other hand, Schmitt divided Consolidation Strategies into four sub-categories which are Social, Memory, Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies. Social Strategies involve practicing vocabulary in group work or through interaction with other people. Memory Strategies is the use of mnemonics in retaining vocabulary. It can be relating the words with previously learned knowledge through imagery or grouping. Cognitive Strategies involve the use of mechanical means such as keeping vocabulary notebooks or learning vocabulary through repetition while Metacognitive Strategies refers to the learners making decision in planning and monitoring their own vocabulary learning including evaluating the best way to learn as well as testing themselves. Table 2 shows the sub-strategies that fall under Schmitt's Consolidation Strategies.

Table 2: Schmitt's Consolidation Strategies

Strategy	Description
Social (SOC)	Study and practice meaning in a group

Social (SOC)	Teacher checks students' flash cards or word lists for accuracy
Social (SOC)	Interact with native speakers
Memory (MEM)	Use keyword method
Memory (MEM)	Remember affixes and suffixes
Memory (MEM)	Remember part of speech
Memory (MEM)	Study word with a pictorial representation of its meaning
Memory (MEM)	Associate word meaning with picture
Memory (MEM)	Connect word to personal experience
Memory (MEM)	Associate the word to its coordinate
Memory (MEM)	Connect the word to its synonym or antonym
Memory (MEM)	Use semantic maps
Memory (MEM)	Use 'scales' for gradable adjectives
Memory (MEM)	Peg method
Memory (MEM)	Loci method
Memory (MEM)	Group words together to study them
Memory (MEM)	Group words together spatially on a page
Memory (MEM)	Use new word in sentence
Memory (MEM)	Group words together within a storyline
Memory (MEM)	Study the spelling of a word
Memory (MEM)	Study the sound of a word
Memory (MEM)	Say new word aloud when studying
Memory (MEM)	Image word form
Memory (MEM)	Underline initial letter of the word
Memory (MEM)	Configuration
Memory (MEM)	Paraphrase the word's meaning
Memory (MEM)	Use cognates in study
Memory (MEM)	Learn the words of an idiom together
Memory (MEM)	Use physical action when learning a word
Memory (MEM)	Use semantic feature grids
Cognitive (COG)	Verbal repetition
Cognitive (COG)	Written repetition
Cognitive (COG)	Word lists

Cognitive (COG)	Flash cards
Cognitive (COG)	Take notes in class
Cognitive (COG)	Use the vocabulary section in textbook
Cognitive (COG)	Listen to tape of word lists
Cognitive (COG)	Put English labels on physical objects
Cognitive (COG)	Keep a vocabulary notebook
Metacognitive (MET)	Use English language media
Metacognitive (MET)	Test oneself with word tests
Metacognitive (MET)	Use spaced word practice
Metacognitive (MET)	Skip or pass new word
Metacognitive (MET)	Continue to study word over time

Schmitt's taxonomy has been widely adopted and validated in various studies, demonstrating its relevance and utility within vocabulary learning. Numerous studies have applied Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy to investigate how learners use VLS across different contexts. Findings show that memory and cognitive strategies are among the most frequently used while metacognitive and social strategies are less commonly applied. For example, Asyiah (2017) found that Indonesian university students relied on repetition and word lists but rarely used metacognitive strategies such as regular vocabulary review. Alahmadi and Foltz (2020) also reported that their findings showed a strong preference for determination strategies such as the use of bilingual dictionaries while social strategies like asking peers or teachers were less favoured.

Research also suggests that metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and evaluating own vocabulary learning are time consuming and demanding which may discourage teachers and learners from adopting them (Li & Yun, 2022). This is in line with Tang, Noordin and Ismail (2024) that found although metacognitive strategies significantly improved reading comprehension, its implementation demanded considerable effort and time. Similarly, Huang (2020) and Yusri et al. (2023) noted that the extensive demands of these strategies limit their practical application in everyday teaching contexts. As more deliberate strategies such as metacognitive strategies often require explicit modeling by the teachers, it can be said that without adequate instruction, learners may lack the awareness to employ these strategies independently. As a result, they tend to rely on simpler strategies such as rote memorisation (Asyiah, 2017).

In the Malaysian ESL context, vocabulary instruction is often delivered incidentally, where new words are introduced through reading texts, listening activities or classroom discussions without direct focus or strategic training (Meganathan et al., 2019). While incidental learning contributes to vocabulary development through repeated exposure in meaningful contexts (Nation, 2001), Schmitt (2000) emphasized that

combination of incidental and explicit vocabulary instruction is essential for effective vocabulary acquisition. He argued that while learners certainly can acquire vocabulary incidentally, explicit instruction is necessary for retaining complex or less frequent words.

Although learners play a central role in vocabulary development, it is important to acknowledge that teachers serve as the primary facilitators of vocabulary learning in the classroom. In Malaysia, research pertaining how teachers apply or promote VLS in their instructional practices are limited as majority of existing studies tend to focus on learner's strategy use and preferences (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021). However, without explicit modeling by teachers, learners may struggle to adopt more effective strategies independently (Ueno & Takeuchi, 2023). Therefore, it is essential that we understand which strategies teachers prefer and actually employ in the Malaysian ESL primary school context to provide insight into the extent to which a strategy is used in vocabulary instruction and whether it aligns with practices that support vocabulary retention and learner autonomy.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) commonly and least frequently used by Malaysian ESL primary school teachers. Quantitative research enables systematic data collection and analysis through structured instruments, allowing for generalisable findings across a broader population (Carliner, 2011). By utilising a questionnaire-based survey, this study aimed to provide statistical insights into the prevalence of various VLS among Malaysian ESL primary school teachers.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants who met predefined criteria relevant to the study objectives. As noted by Etikan et al. (2016), purposive sampling is especially useful when the aim is to obtain detailed insights from individuals who possess particular knowledge or experience pertinent to the study. In this research, the participants were English optionist teachers in Malaysian primary schools who had at least two years of teaching experience. These criteria were established to ensure that the selected participants had sufficient expertise to contribute meaningful perspectives on vocabulary teaching strategies.

Despite the suitability of purposive sampling, its limitation must be acknowledged. As a non-random method, the findings are not generalisable to all Malaysian primary school teachers. However, the selection of participants based on their relevance to study is hoped to provide rich data collection that is valuable in understanding vocabulary teaching practices among Malaysian ESL teachers.

Study Participants

The study targeted English teachers serving in public primary schools across Malaysia. Malaysia's primary education system comprises Sekolah Kebangsaan (SK) and Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (SJK), which include SJK(C) (Mandarin-medium schools) and SJK(T) (Tamil-medium schools). Both school types follow the national curriculum, with English being a core subject.

To recruit participants, they had to meet two inclusion criteria in which they must be English option teachers and must possess at least two years of teaching experience. Despite this approach, recruiting participants proved challenging. Thus, Telegram discussion platforms such as Teacherfiera.com and Ash the Teacher both of which have around 30,000 members were utilized. However, these groups consisted of educators from diverse backgrounds making it difficult to identify who were specifically English option teachers in primary schools. Considerable time and effort were required to filter potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Nevertheless, these platforms remained a useful source to reach participants.

The sample size for this study was determined using a formula for estimating population proportions (Triola, 2022), given that the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) Annual Report 2022 reported 18,876 English teachers at C1 level proficiency and above. The sample size calculation was as follows:

Given:

E = 0.05 (5% margin of error)

Z = 1.96 (for a 95% confidence level)

P = 0.5 (for maximum variability)

N = 18,876 (population size)

Using the formula:

$E=Z\times nP(1-P)$

$N=P(1-P)\times Z2\times(N-1)/(E2xN+P(1-P)xZ2)$

n = (0.25 x 3.8416 x 18,875) / (0.0025 x 18,876 + 0.9604)

n = 18294.6 / 48.1504

n = 380

While the ideal sample size was calculated to be around 380 based on the overall number of English teachers who obtained C1 CEFR level, the number included both primary and secondary teachers. Due to the difficulty in identifying eligible respondents, the final sample comprised of 134 English option teachers who met all the inclusion criteria.

Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument. It was developed based on Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) and consisted of two sections:

- Section A: Collected demographic data, including age range, school type, English-option status, teaching experience, and the grade levels taught.
- Section B: Contained 45 items related to VLS, categorised under Schmitt's taxonomy: Discovery (Determination and Social) and Consolidation (Social, Memory, Cognitive, and Metacognitive). The statements were adapted to reflect strategies used by teachers rather than learners. A five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always) was used to gauge the frequency of each strategy's use.

The breakdown of VLS categories and the number of items in each category are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of items based on VLS categories

Strategy Category	Label	Number of Items
Discovery (Determination)	DIS-DET	5
Discovery (Social)	DIS-SOC	5
Consolidation (Social)	CON-SOC	2
Consolidation (Memory)	CON-MEM	17
Consolidation (Cognitive)	CON-COG	9
Consolidation (Metacognitive)	CON-MET	7

Pilot Study

Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 57 respondents to assess the questionnaire's clarity and reliability. Using SPSS version 26, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for Section B, which measured the consistency of responses related to VLS. The reliability analysis yielded a high Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.92, indicating strong internal consistency. The pilot study confirmed that the questionnaire items were well-understood, allowing the study to proceed with broader data collection.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and distributed through Telegram channels. Responses were automatically recorded and filtered based on Section A's demographic criteria to ensure alignment with the study's inclusion criteria. After filtering, 134 valid responses were retained for analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data collected from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS version 26. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted. These included the use of frequency distributions to examine the prevalence of individual VLS as well as the calculation of mean and standard deviation values to assess the central tendency and variability in strategy use among respondents.

In addition, the strategies were categorised according to Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy, allowing for comparative analysis across different strategy types. Through this, a broader understanding of the patterns of VLS usage among Malaysian ESL primary school teachers was obtained.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to find out the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) most and least used by ESL primary school teachers in Malaysia through a quantitative approach. This study utilized Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy which categorised VLS into two main categories; Discovery and Consolidation.

RQ1: What are the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) least adopted by Malaysian primary school teachers?

Based on the data, the most used category of vocabulary teaching strategies is determined using Oxford's (1990), as cited in Mustapha & Hatta (2018) scoring system:

1.00-2.49 = Low strategy use
2.50-3.49 = Medium strategy use
3.50-5.00 = High strategy use

Table 4: Most Used Category of Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Category	Strategy	Mean
Discovery	Determination	3.64
Discovery	**Social**	**3.81**
Consolidation	Social	3.40
Consolidation	**Memory**	**3.81**
Consolidation	Cognitive	3.75
Consolidation	Metacognitive	3.34

Two strategies appeared to be used at a high level which are the Social Strategies (Determination) and Memory Strategies (Consolidation) with both mean value of 3.81 as shown in Table 4.

Social strategies within the Discovery category include teachers translating the meaning of the word in their first language, providing synonym of the word, providing students a sentence containing the word, letting students asking their classmates for meaning and putting students in groups to discover meaning through groupwork. The Social strategies favoured by the teachers are further looked at in Table 5.

Table 5: Discovery-Social Vocabulary Learning Strategies Preferred by Teachers

Strategy	Statement	Mean
DIS-SOC	I translate the meaning of the word in L1	3.63
DIS-SOC	I provide a synonym of the word	3.88
DIS-SOC	I provide my students a sentence containing the new word.	4.09
DIS-SOC	I let my students ask their classmates for meaning	3.80
DIS-SOC	I put my students in groups and let them discover meaning through group work activity	3.66

All five strategies fall within the high strategy use range, with mean scores above 3.50. The highest mean score was "*I provide my students a sentence containing the new word" indicating a strong preference for contextual learning* (mean=4.09). Following closely is the strategy of providing a synonym (mean=3.88), which suggests that teachers tend to offer alternative expressions to help with understanding. Other strategies, such as letting students ask classmates for meaning (mean=3.80) and group work activities (mean=3.66), are also highly favoured, reflecting a collaborative approach to vocabulary learning. Translating the meaning of the word in L1 (mean=3.63) also shows significant use, indicating that teachers see value in using the students' first language to aid understanding.

It is found that Discovery was not the only popular category employed by the teachers. Memory strategies within Consolidation category reported to have the same mean score as Social strategies under Discovery category (mean=3.81). Thus, the sub-strategies under the Consolidation-Memory strategies are also further analysed in Table 6 to find out which specific Memory strategies teachers prefer to employ in their vocabulary teaching. Teachers were asked to rate their use of 17 different Vocabulary Learning Strategies under the Consolidation-Memory category.

Out of the 17 strategies, 12 strategies received mean score of greater than 3.50 which indicated high use of memory strategies in the classroom. The strategies with the highest mean scores, such as asking students to read a word out loud (mean=4.62), focusing on pronunciation (mean=4.45), and asking students to memorise the spelling (mean=4.31), indicate teachers' preference for auditory and repetitive methods in vocabulary acquisition.

Table 6: Consolidation-Memory Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Employed by Teachers

Strategy	Statement	Mean
CON-MEM	I ask my students to match the word with picture representing the word	4.10
CON-MEM	I ask my students to picture the word's meaning. For example, when learning the word kitchen, they picture their mom cooking	3.71
CON-MEM	I ask my students to relate a word to their personal experience. Example; when learning the word celebration, they think of their birthday party / festivals	4.17
CON-MEM	I ask my students to link the word to its related word. Example; banana, think of other fruits, apple	4.13
CON-MEM	I ask my students to pay attention to the word's synonyms or antonyms (Example: pretty / ugly)	3.96
CON-MEM	I ask my students to classify the words in category (Example: Categorize things into furniture)	3.82
CON-MEM	I ask my students to use the new word in a sentence.	3.90
CON-MEM	I ask my students to combine all the words to form a story.	3.15
CON-MEM	I ask my students to memorize the spelling of the word.	4.31
CON-MEM	I focus on teaching my students pronunciation of the new word.	4.45
CON-MEM	I ask my students to read out loud (say the new word aloud when studying)	4.62
CON-MEM	I ask my students to underline the initial letter of the word.	3.07
CON-MEM	I ask my students to remember the roots, prefixes and suffixes of the words.	3.15
CON-MEM	I ask my students to remember the part of speech of the words.	3.32
CON-MEM	I paraphrase the word to my students. Example; housekeeper - a person who looks after the house	3.92
CON-MEM	I teach my students the word in the form of idiom (Spill the bean - teach them the word spill & bean together)	2.90
CON-MEM	I use body movement when teaching my students a word and ask them to repeat the movement.	4.11

Other than that, strategies like linking words to related words (mean=4.13), using body movements (mean=4.11), matching words with pictures (mean=4.10), use new words in sentence (mean=3.90), using synonyms and antonyms (mean=3.96) and classifying words into categories (mean=3.82) may reflect teachers' comprehensive approach in teaching vocabulary in the classroom.

In contrast, strategies with lower mean scores, such as teaching words in idiomatic form (mean=2.90), asking students to underline the initial letter of the word (mean=3.07), and combining all words to form a story (mean=3.15), may be perceived as less direct or more complex.

RQ2: What are the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) least adopted by Malaysian primary school teachers?

AAAAa. The data from the survey revealed the category of vocabulary teaching strategies least preferred by the respondents as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Least Used Category of Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Category	Strategy	Mean
Discovery	Determination	3.64
Discovery	Social	3.81
Consolidation	Social	3.40
Consolidation	Memory	3.81
Consolidation	Cognitive	3.75
Consolidation	**Metacognitive**	**3.34**

The strategy least favoured by the teachers is the Metacognitive strategy, categorised under Consolidation (Consolidation-Metacognitive), with a mean score of 3.34. Metacognitive strategies involve planning activities such as setting specific goals for learning new vocabulary, identifying resources, and scheduling study time. The sub-strategies within the Metacognitive category assessed in the study are listed in Table 8.

Table 8: Consolidation-Metacognitive Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Employed by Teachers

Strategy	Statement	Mean
CON-MET	**I ask my students to listen to English songs in my classroom or at home.**	**4.21**
CON-MET	**I ask my students to watch English movies at home.**	**4.07**
CON-MET	I provide my students English story books / magazines to learn vocabulary.	3.6
CON-MET	I give my students tasks to read English novels, short stories at their own time.	3.3
CON-MET	I assign my students to read English newspapers in my classrooms / at home.	3.02
CON-MET	I have scheduled vocabulary tests online using application such as Quizizz and Word Wall to see if my students remember the new words learned.	2.88

CON-MET	I give online task for my students to review the vocabularies they learned using Google Form, Wordwall or any other online application.	2.77

Among the seven Metacognitive strategies rated by the respondents, only two received mean scores above 4.0. Despite the overall lower preference for the Consolidation-Metacognitive category compared to other categories like Discovery-Social and Consolidation-Memory, some strategies such as listening to English songs (mean=4.21) and watching English movies (mean=4.07) are highly favoured. This reflects teachers' preference for immersive and engaging activities that incorporate multimedia.

In contrast, strategies with lower mean scores, particularly those involving online applications like Quizizz (mean=2.88) and Google Forms (mean=2.77), may indicate teachers' reluctance to adopt digital tools in vocabulary teaching. Similarly, assigning students to read English newspapers (mean=3.02) and novels (mean=3.3) shows a moderate to low level of adoption, potentially due to the challenges in ensuring student compliance and the time-consuming nature of these tasks.

Discussion

The quantitative analysis of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by teachers in vocabulary instruction revealed three key patterns: a strong reliance on social and memory strategies, a preference for contextual and repetitive learning techniques, and a lower adoption of metacognitive strategies.

Teachers demonstrated a clear preference for social strategies within the Discovery category and memory strategies within the Consolidation category, reflecting a strong inclination toward interactive and associative learning approaches.

Among the social strategies, incorporating new words into example sentences was the most frequently utilized(mean=4.09). The relatively high scores for other social strategies, such as allowing students to seek word meanings from peers (mean=3.80), suggest that collaborative learning is a fundamental part of vocabulary instruction.

Additionally, memory-based techniques also ranked highly, particularly strategies such as reading words aloud (mean=4.62) and focusing on pronunciation (mean=4.45). These findings highlight the role of auditory and repetitive exposure in vocabulary retention, aligning with research indicating that repeated engagement with new vocabulary enhances long-term recall (Nation, 2013).

Findings further indicate a strong tendency toward contextual and repetitive learning. Teachers placed significant emphasis on presenting new vocabulary within meaningful contexts, as seen in the high rating for using example sentences (mean=4.09). This aligns with Schmitt (2019), who asserts that learning words in context strengthens understanding and facilitates appropriate usage in different scenarios.

Similarly, the preference for repetition-based memory strategies such as requiring students to read words aloud and memorise spellings highlight teachers' belief in reinforcement as a means to solidify vocabulary knowledge. Webb (2007) supports this approach, emphasising that frequent exposure to vocabulary significantly enhances recall and long-term retention. His study found that repeated interactions with new words improve learners' ability to use them proficiently.

Unlike social and memory strategies, metacognitive strategies were employed less frequently (mean=3.34) for the Consolidation-Metacognitive category. These strategies, which involve structured learning processes such as planning, organising, and self-monitoring, are often considered time-intensive and complex to implement (Li & Yuan, 2022). Research indicates that while metacognitive strategies promote self-regulated learning, their extensive instructional demands may explain why they are not as widely adopted in vocabulary instruction (Tang, Noordin & Ismail, 2024; Huang, 2020; Yusri et al., 2023).

Teachers showed particularly low engagement with metacognitive tools such as Quizizz (mean=2.88) and Google Forms (mean=2.77), suggesting limited integration of digital platforms for vocabulary learning. This hesitancy may stem from the additional time required to familiarise students with these tools and incorporate them effectively into lesson plans. Tang, Noordin and Ismail (2024 found that although metacognitive strategies significantly enhanced reading comprehension, their implementation required considerable effort and instructional time.

However, not all metacognitive strategies were underutilized. Two strategies which are listening to English songs (mean= 4.21) and watching English movies (mean= 4.07) were highly favored. This preference likely stems from their contextual nature, making them more accessible and engaging for students. Chamidah (2021) notes that songs and movies expose learners to authentic language use, reinforcing vocabulary through real-life contexts rather than structured instructional activities.

Overall, the findings from this study suggest that teachers in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms tend to prefer strategies that are less time-consuming and more traditional in nature such as reading words aloud and incorporating vocabulary into example sentences. These practices which fall under Schmitt's (1997) Discovery Strategies are typically employed when learners first encounter new words. They reflect an emphasis on incidental learning where vocabulary is acquired through contextual exposure rather than through structured instructional processes.

In contrast, strategies categorised under Schmitt's (1997) Consolidation Strategies particularly metacognitive strategies were less frequently used. These include techniques such as planning, self-monitoring and evaluating learning which are actions that support vocabulary retention by encouraging learners to take ownership of their progress. While these strategies are known to promote long-term retention and learner autonomy, their implementation is often perceived as demanding in terms of time and instructional effort (Li &

Yuan, 2022; Tang, Noordin & Ismail, 2024)). This perception may explain why teachers tend to avoid integrating them into their classroom instruction.

Schmitt (2008) emphasized that a combination of incidental and explicit instruction is essential for effective vocabulary acquisition. In his framework, Discovery Strategies correspond more closely to incidental learning whereas Consolidation Strategies align with explicit instruction aimed at reinforcing vocabulary through deliberate practice. However, the findings from this study show a stronger teacher preference for incidental approaches with limited integration of explicit strategies. This imbalance highlights a potential shortcoming in current classroom practices, particularly in equipping learners with the tools for long-term vocabulary development.

Conclusion

This study which set out to explore the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) employed by Malaysian ESL primary school teachers revealed a predominant reliance on social and memory strategies that involved repetition and peer interaction. These strategies, classified under Schmitt's Discovery category indicate a strong inclination towards incidental learning approaches where vocabulary is introduced through contextual exposure and repeated practice. However, strategies that involve deliberate instruction and learner autonomy namely metacognitive strategies grouped under Schmitt's Consolidation category were notably underutilized despite their recognized benefits for vocabulary retention and long-term mastery.

Schmitt (2008) emphasized the need for a balance between incidental learning and explicit instruction. While teachers in this study clearly favor the former, the findings suggest an insufficient emphasis on explicit instruction. This imbalance may hinder students' ability to retain and independently manage new vocabulary which is crucial for achieving language proficiency over time.

It also raises a question whether the minimal use of Consolidation Strategies reflect teachers' lack of adequacy and preparedness to teach and model these more demanding strategies. If yes, then this points to a clear need for targeted professional development. By equipping teachers with knowledge and tools to implement explicit strategies such as metacognitive strategies, vocabulary instruction can evolve beyond surface-level exposure. Only then can learners be supported in developing autonomy over their vocabulary learning. In light of these findings, it is recommended that teacher training and professional development initiatives incorporate modules that focus on strategy-based vocabulary instruction.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, S. N. B. M. T. and N. F. M. R.; methodology, S. N. B. M. T.; writing—original draft preparation, S. N. B. M. T.; writing—review and editing, N. F. M. R and M. R. M.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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