

## STUDENTS' LEARNING STRATEGIES IN MASTERING ENGLISH VOCABULARY AT INSAN CENDEKIA SYEKH YUSUF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explores the vocabulary learning strategies used by senior high school students at Insan Cendekia Syekh Yusuf and the challenges they encounter in mastering English vocabulary. Six students participated in semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Findings show that students employ a variety of strategies, including repetition, use of digital applications, flashcards, contextualization, and self-evaluation practices. While learners demonstrated strong motivation, they still faced obstacles in retention and time management. The study highlights the importance of supportive teaching practices, meaningful learning contexts, and access to diverse resources in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Recommendations for students, teachers, and schools are also discussed.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is one of the important aspects in language learning, especially foreign languages such as English. At the senior high school level, students' ability to master vocabulary greatly affects their ability to speak, write, listen and read. Therefore, understanding effective learning strategies to improve vocabulary acquisition is crucial in the educational process. Vocabulary mastery is a critical component of language learning, especially for students in senior high school (Santillan & Daenos, 2020).

Vocabulary is the foundation of language skills. Without adequate vocabulary mastery, students will have difficulty in understanding texts, communicating orally and in writing, as well as in following other lessons that use language as the main medium. Good vocabulary mastery will increase students' confidence and enable them to participate more actively in the

learning process. Discuss challenges that high school students may face in vocabulary acquisition, such as limited background knowledge, decoding issues, or insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Graham & Bellert, 2005). Vocabulary mastery is a crucial aspect in learning English at the high school level. By applying effective and interesting learning strategies, it is expected that students can more easily master vocabulary and improve their language skills. This research is expected to make a positive contribution to the development of English teaching methods in high school.

Vocabulary mastery is a crucial aspect in learning English at the high school level. By applying effective and interesting learning strategies, it is expected that students can more easily master vocabulary and improve their language skills. This research is expected to make a positive contribution to the development of English teaching methods in high school. However, In fact there are always many students who cannot speak English well and fluently. This is still a fact that occurs every year in the world of education, especially among Insan Cendekia students. One of the indicators is the inability to speak the target language fluently and accurately. In speaking class, students are still quiet, shy, and afraid to express their thoughts freely during class. Many students complain that they can't speak English. When you speak English, you face obstacles in communicating your thoughts because you haven't mastered the vocabulary. Students often stop searching or choosing words to express the ideas they want to convey. This interferes with the transmission of ideas and disrupts the audio flow. Therefore, they cannot speak fluently. Students prefer to be silent and listen to their teachers rather than communicate in the language they are learning. The process of learning to speak is stalled because students are afraid to communicate their thoughts. Hasan (2000) says that many learners of English as a foreign language struggle because they don't understand how English is pronounced when spoken at normal speed through listening materials.

Vocabulary plays a very important role in learning a foreign language, especially English. Without the right vocabulary, students will not only struggle to communicate, but may not be able to communicate at all. Even if you don't understand English grammar at all, you can still communicate if you have a good vocabulary. There are three key parts of language that help support English language skills: pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. To reach the best level in English, it's important to have professional language teachers who can help students learn well. Also, the material needs to be taught and practiced in a good balance. But making the perfect language class isn't simple. Besides knowing the subject well, a language teacher should also understand each student's language ability level. If all the conditions are the same, it might be hard to reach the goals of learning. This is because every student is different in many ways, like how they learn and how much they take in, which is explained by the idea of multiple intelligences (Stanford, 2003).

The process of learning English vocabulary determines how much and to what extent foreign language vocabulary is acquired. Learning strategies are necessary to carry out the learning process effectively. If you do not choose effective learning strategies, you will not be able to achieve maximum learning outcomes in your studies. Learning strategies are defined as the steps that learners take to achieve the learning content. According to Rukmini (2011), in communication, writing skills are also important to master. The benefits can be seen when the written language is shared and read by many people. So, it's important to always work on improving the quality of writing. In the context of English vocabulary learning, the choice of vocabulary learning strategies that students use to acquire and practice the learned vocabulary largely determines their success in learning English vocabulary and ultimately their vocabulary skills and has a great impact on improving communication skills.

Several studies related to vocabulary learning strategies, including the following. The first study conducted by Kurniawan, Roza, and Juhana (2021) entitled Investigating English Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies aims to examine in depth the English vocabulary

learning strategies used by students of the English Education Study Program at the Open University of Lampung, Indonesia. This study was motivated by the importance of vocabulary mastery as a fundamental component in English language learning, because vocabulary plays a major role in supporting other language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In this study, the researchers classified vocabulary learning strategies into four main categories, namely metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, memory strategies, and activation strategies. The results showed that all respondents used all four types of strategies, but with varying degrees of frequency. The main finding revealed that metacognitive strategies were the most dominant strategies used by students, which included planning the vocabulary learning process, monitoring their understanding of new words, and evaluating the success of their learning independently. This shows that students tend to have a fairly high awareness of their own learning process.

Conversely, memory strategies, such as direct memorization and repetition of words without context, were the least frequently used strategies by students. This study also found variations in strategy use based on student characteristics, with female students applying metacognitive strategies more often than male students, although metacognitive strategies remained the most widely used strategy among all respondents. In addition, when faced with difficulties in understanding vocabulary, students utilized various methods such as using dictionaries, searching for information on the internet, studying grammatical structures, and asking friends or lecturers. Based on these findings, Kurniawan, Roza, and Juhana (2021) concluded that the use of planned, conscious, and process-oriented vocabulary learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies, plays an important role in improving English vocabulary mastery. This study implies that English teachers need to encourage and train students to use vocabulary learning strategies more effectively and independently, so that the learning process does not only focus on quantitative word mastery but also on the development of long-term learning skills.

The second research conducted by Purwanto and Hidayad (2022) entitled English Learning Strategies for Vocabulary Mastery aims to examine in depth the learning strategies used by students in mastering English vocabulary. This research was conducted at SMK Telenika Palembang, with the research subjects being 11th grade students majoring in Hospitality in the 2021 academic year. This study was based on the view that vocabulary mastery is one of the most fundamental aspects of English language learning, especially for vocational high school students who are required to be able to use English in academic and work contexts. In analyzing vocabulary learning strategies, Purwanto and Hidayad (2022) used the language learning strategy theoretical framework proposed by Rebecca L. Oxford, which groups learning strategies into several main categories, such as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and social strategies. The results showed that students used a combination of various vocabulary learning strategies, rather than relying on just one type of strategy. Cognitive strategies are one of the most frequently used strategies, for example, through reading English texts, understanding the meaning of words based on the context of the sentence, and using new vocabulary in writing and speaking exercises. In addition, memory strategies such as word repetition, recording new vocabulary, and routine practice are also used to help students remember vocabulary in the short and long term. This study also found that metacognitive strategies play an important role in helping students plan, monitor, and evaluate their own vocabulary learning process, for example, by determining the target number of vocabulary words they want to master or assessing the extent of their understanding of the material being studied. In addition, social strategies also support vocabulary acquisition, especially through interaction with teachers and peers, group discussions, and the practice of using English in communicative situations.

Based on these findings, Purwanto and Hidayad (2022) concluded that the use of diverse, conscious, and planned vocabulary learning strategies can help significantly improve students' vocabulary acquisition. This study has important implications for English language teaching, especially in vocational high schools, that teachers need to encourage students to recognize and apply various vocabulary learning strategies effectively so that English language learning becomes more meaningful, contextual, and oriented towards the real needs of students.

The third study conducted by Monafisa Rizqi (2016) entitled *The Vocabulary Learning Strategies of English Department Students of Faculty of Letters Academic Year of 2013/2014*. This study was conducted in the English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Letters, University of Jember, Indonesia, with the aim of identifying the types of vocabulary learning strategies used by students in learning English as a foreign language. This study used a quantitative descriptive approach involving students majoring in English Literature in the 2013/2014 academic year as respondents. Research data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, which were compiled based on the classification of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Schmitt (1997). Within this theoretical framework, vocabulary learning strategies are classified into five main categories, namely determination strategies, social strategies, memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and metacognitive strategies. The results showed that students most frequently used determination strategies, particularly in the form of using dictionaries, both printed and digital, as well as analyzing word structures to find the meanings of new vocabulary. This strategy was chosen because it was considered the most practical and directly helped students understand the meanings of unfamiliar words. In addition, students also utilize cognitive and memory strategies, such as noting down new vocabulary and repeating it periodically, although the frequency of use is lower than that of determination strategies.

This study reveals that students who consciously use more than one vocabulary learning strategy tend to have better vocabulary mastery than students who rely on only one strategy. The findings of this study confirm that awareness of the use of vocabulary learning strategies is an important factor in improving English vocabulary mastery. Therefore, Rizqi's (2016) study provides pedagogical implications that English teachers need to introduce and train various vocabulary learning strategies to students so that they can become more independent and effective learners in developing their English language skills.

Based on the results of a review of three previous studies conducted by Rizqi (2016), Kurniawan, Roza, and Juhana (2021), and Purwanto and Hidayad (2022), it can be concluded that English vocabulary mastery is greatly influenced by the use of appropriate, varied, and conscious learning strategies by learners. Rizqi (2016) found that students tend to use determination strategies, such as using dictionaries and analyzing word structures, as the main strategies in understanding new vocabulary, which shows the importance of students' ability to find the meaning of words independently. Furthermore, Kurniawan et al. (2021) emphasized that metacognitive strategies are the most dominant strategies used by students, especially in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the vocabulary learning process, thereby encouraging greater independence and learning awareness. Meanwhile, Purwanto and Hidayad (2022) conclude that a combination of various learning strategies, such as cognitive, memory, metacognitive, and social strategies, plays an important role in improving the vocabulary mastery of secondary school students, especially in the context of English learning in vocational schools. Overall, the three studies show that there is no single strategy that is most effective for all learners. Rather, the use of diverse, planned vocabulary learning strategies that are tailored to students' needs and learning contexts is the key to optimally improving English vocabulary mastery.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

### **2.1. Research Design**

A qualitative research with a case study design was employed to understand students' actual experiences with vocabulary learning strategies in their natural classroom context.

This approach allows in-depth insight into personal learning processes, perceptions, and contextual influences without experimental manipulation. Six purposely selected students from Insan Cendekia Syekh Yusuf Senior High School participated in this study. Participants were chosen based on their willingness, communicative ability, and ability to provide detailed responses during interviews.

Data were collected through:

1. Classroom Observations  
To document learning behaviors, strategy implementation, and vocabulary interaction during English lessons.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews  
To capture learners' reflections on their strategies, preferences, and challenges.

### **2.2. Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed according to Miles & Huberman's model (2014):

1. Data Reduction. Organizing and categorizing raw data from transcripts and fieldnotes.
2. Data Display. Presenting data in narrative form to highlight key patterns and themes.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification. Interpreting patterns to develop grounded conclusions.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. Result**

#### **3.1.1. General Learning Strategies**

Students reported using multiple strategies to learn vocabulary:

1. Repetition and contextual usage: Repeating words aloud, writing in sentences, and practicing in conversations.
2. Multi-modal discovery: Extracting new vocabulary from reading articles, watching English content, and social media.
3. Personalized preferences: Listening (for pronunciation & context) and reading (for sentence comprehension) were commonly preferred.

#### **3.1.2. Specific Techniques**

Students described using specific techniques, such as:

1. Digital applications (e.g., Duolingo, Quizlet, Memrise, Anki) for systematic vocabulary practice.
2. Flashcards for active recall and spaced repetition.
3. Vocabulary journals to organize new words with meanings and example sentences.

### **3.1.3 Contextual Use of Vocabulary**

Participants actively used new vocabulary in classroom discussions, peer interactions, and writing assignments. Constructing sentences with new words helped reinforce their contextual understanding. Some learners also applied mnemonic association techniques to aid memorization.

### **3.1.4. Evaluation and Review Practices**

Vocabulary retention was reinforced through:

1. Self-testing for correct usage
2. Weekly or exam-focused reviews
3. Flashcards and interactive language-learning quizzes

### **3.1.5. Learning Resources and Support**

Students used a range of resources:

1. Books and online media (novels, articles, educational videos)
2. English media (movies, songs)
3. Peer interaction and teacher guidance were viewed as integral supports.

### **3.1.6. Motivation and Challenges**

Motivational drivers included academic goals, future educational opportunities, and cultural engagement. However, students noted challenges mainly in:

1. Retaining difficult or low-frequency words
2. Balancing vocabulary practice with academic workload

## **3.2. Discussion**

### **1. Learning Strategies and Influences in Vocabulary Acquisition**

In the context of vocabulary acquisition, the findings from the interviews with students reveal a multifaceted approach to learning strategies that aligns with existing literature. The reliance on technology, particularly applications like Duolingo, Quizlet, and Memrise, reflects a broader trend in language learning where digital tools are increasingly integrated into educational practices. Research has shown that mobile applications can facilitate both intentional and incidental vocabulary acquisition, enhancing engagement and accessibility for learners (Zubenko & Shwedel, 2019; , Zubenko et al., 2022). The interactive nature of these platforms supports the notion that technology can play a significant role in vocabulary learning, as it allows for repeated exposure and practice in a user-friendly environment (Khan, 2022).

Flashcards, as a favored method among students, are supported by literature that emphasizes the effectiveness of spaced repetition and active recall in vocabulary retention (Dreyer & Brits, 2013; , Hung, 2015). The use of flashcards aligns with findings that suggest deliberate learning techniques, such as those involving memory strategies, significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition (Alemi & Tayebi, 2011). Moreover, the emphasis on using new vocabulary in context, whether through conversations or writing assignments, is consistent with research indicating that contextualized learning aids retention and fosters a deeper understanding of word usage (Binder et al., 2016; , Nakata & Elgort, 2020). This approach is further supported by studies that highlight the importance of integrating vocabulary learning into meaningful communication and real-life interactions, which can enhance both vocabulary depth and breadth (Reynaert, 2024; , Sun, 2023).

Motivation, identified as a crucial factor in the students' learning journey, is well-documented in the literature as a significant driver of language acquisition. Research indicates that personal goals, such as achieving fluency for academic or career purposes, can enhance learners' engagement and persistence in vocabulary learning (Ismael, 2023; , Almosa, 2023).

However, challenges in remembering difficult or less common words are also noted, which aligns with findings that suggest learners often struggle with low-frequency vocabulary despite employing various strategies (Noprianto & Purnawarman, 2019; , Al-khresheh & Al-Ruwaili, 2020). The importance of regular review and practice in real-life situations is echoed in studies that advocate for the use of metacognitive strategies to support vocabulary retention and application (Dehghan & Khatib, 2015; , Wu, 2019).

Finally, the role of social interaction and support from teachers and peers is underscored in both the interviews and existing literature. Collaborative learning environments, where educators introduce new vocabulary and provide opportunities for practice, are shown to enhance vocabulary acquisition (Boese, 2023; , Wilson et al., 2010). The social aspect of language learning, including encouragement from peers to use new vocabulary in conversation, is critical for reinforcing learning and building confidence in language use (Fraidan, 2024; , Atsari, 2018). Overall, the findings from the interviews resonate with established research, highlighting the importance of varied strategies, contextual learning, and social interaction in effective vocabulary acquisition.

## **2. Obstacles in Vocabulary Learning**

The exploration of obstacles faced by students at Insan Cendekia Syekh Yusuf in adopting vocabulary learning strategies reveals a complex interplay of various factors that hinder effective vocabulary acquisition. Cognitive challenges, particularly issues related to memory retention and the overwhelming nature of extensive vocabulary lists, are well-documented in the literature. Research indicates that vocabulary acquisition can be significantly impeded by the cognitive load associated with memorizing large amounts of information, which can lead to ineffective learning strategies (Kassem, 2018; , Göçen, 2020). Furthermore, the use of mnemonic devices has been shown to enhance memory retention, suggesting that without such strategies, students may struggle with vocabulary recall (Anuyahong & Pengnate, 2023).

Motivational factors also play a critical role in vocabulary acquisition. A lack of intrinsic motivation, compounded by unclear personal or academic goals, can diminish students' engagement with vocabulary strategies. Studies have shown that motivation is a substantial predictor of vocabulary knowledge, with controlled motivation negatively impacting vocabulary acquisition (Alamer, 2021; , Alqahtani, 2015). Additionally, the labeling method has been found to enhance motivation and vocabulary achievement, indicating that effective teaching methods can foster greater engagement (Kainta & Rombot, 2020). This aligns with the notion that when students perceive their learning as relevant and meaningful, their motivation to learn increases, thereby improving their vocabulary acquisition outcomes (Ningtyas & Suganda, 2020).

Resource-related challenges, such as inadequate access to quality learning materials and technological tools, further exacerbate the difficulties faced by students. Research highlights that many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students consider vocabulary acquisition to be one of the most problematic areas of language learning due to limited resources (Kassem, 2018; , Muryani, 2024). The lack of access to interactive digital formats can hinder students' engagement and motivation, as these tools have been shown to effectively support vocabulary learning (Muryani, 2024). Moreover, the social dynamics within the classroom, including peer influence and teacher support, are pivotal in shaping students' vocabulary learning experiences. Insufficient encouragement from educators can lead to feelings of insecurity among students when using new vocabulary in conversations (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020).

Temporal constraints due to competing academic responsibilities can also hinder students' ability to prioritize vocabulary learning. Research indicates that students often

struggle to allocate sufficient time for vocabulary practice amidst their other academic commitments, which can detract from their overall language proficiency (Rahmawati et al., 2022). Cultural factors, such as the predominance of the native language in everyday interactions, may further restrict students' exposure to and practice of new vocabulary, limiting their opportunities for meaningful engagement with the target language (TÖMEN, 2023; , Atsari, 2018).

In summary, the obstacles faced by students at Insan Cendekia Syekh Yusuf in adopting vocabulary learning strategies are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, motivational, resource-related, social, temporal, and cultural factors. Addressing these challenges through targeted interventions, such as enhancing teacher support, improving resource accessibility, and fostering intrinsic motivation, is essential for facilitating more effective vocabulary learning experiences and improving language proficiency among students.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that students at Insan Cendekia Syekh Yusuf Senior High School employ a variety of effective vocabulary learning strategies, including repetition, digital applications, flashcards, contextual usage, and self-evaluation practices, which collectively support their vocabulary development. The findings indicate that while students demonstrate strong motivation and actively utilize diverse learning resources, they still face significant challenges, particularly in retaining complex vocabulary and managing time effectively. The study highlights that successful vocabulary mastery is influenced by the integration of learner autonomy, meaningful contextual practice, consistent review strategies, and supportive learning environments. Therefore, it is essential for teachers and schools to provide structured guidance, varied learning media, and continuous support to help students optimize their vocabulary acquisition and overcome existing challenges.

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