Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Tenth-Grade Vocational High School Students in an Indonesian EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning strategies are essential for developing vocabulary knowledge, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where opportunities to use English outside the classroom are limited. However, limited research has explored how vocational high school students employ these strategies in Indonesian EFL classrooms. This study aimed to identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Karawang based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. A qualitative case study was conducted involving 35 students in classroom observation and six purposively selected students in semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and then categorized according to Schmitt's taxonomy. The findings revealed that students employed all five categories of vocabulary learning strategies. Determination strategies, particularly using dictionaries, Google Translate, and contextual guessing, were the most frequently employed, followed by social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Higher-performing students combined a wider range of strategies more purposefully, whereas moderate and lower-performing students relied more on direct translation and peer assistance. These findings highlight the need to explicitly teach diverse vocabulary learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies, support students in becoming more independent vocabulary learners in vocational EFL classrooms.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, Schmitt's taxonomy, vocational high school, EFL

ABSTRAK

Strategi pembelajaran kosakata berperan penting dalam membantu siswa mengembangkan penguasaan kosakata, terutama dalam konteks bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) yang memiliki keterbatasan penggunaan di luar kelas. Namun, penelitian mengenai penggunaan strategi tersebut oleh siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan di kelas EFL Indonesia masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi strategi pembelajaran kosakata yang digunakan oleh siswa kelas X sekolah menengah kejuruan di Karawang berdasarkan taksonomi Schmitt (1997). Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif yang melibatkan 35 siswa dalam observasi kelas serta enam siswa yang dipilih secara purposif untuk mengikuti wawancara semi-terstruktur. Data dianalisis secara induktif menggunakan analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke (2006), kemudian dikategorikan berdasarkan taksonomi Schmitt. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa menggunakan kelima kategori strategi pembelajaran kosakata. Strategi *determination*, khususnya penggunaan kamus, Google Translate, dan penebakan makna berdasarkan konteks, merupakan strategi yang paling sering digunakan, diikuti oleh strategi *social*, *memory*, *cognitive*, dan *metacognitive*. Siswa berprestasi

tinggi mengombinasikan strategi yang lebih beragam dan lebih terarah, sedangkan siswa berprestasi sedang dan rendah lebih banyak mengandalkan penerjemahan langsung dan bantuan teman sebaya. Temuan ini menunjukkan pentingnya pengajaran berbagai strategi pembelajaran kosakata secara eksplisit, terutama strategi metakognitif, untuk mendukung siswa menjadi pembelajar kosakata yang lebih mandiri di kelas EFL sekolah menengah kejuruan.

Kata kunci: strategi pembelajaran kosakata, taksonomi Schmitt, sekolah menengah kejuruan, EFL

A. Introduction

Vocabulary is a basic part of learning English. Without enough vocabulary, students face problems in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Schmitt, 2000). Vocabulary is not only a list of words. It is a system of meaning that helps people communicate with each other.

Based on the EF English Proficiency Index (2025), Indonesia is ranked 80th out of 123 countries, with a score of 471. This score is in the low category. This shows that English proficiency in Indonesia is still a problem, and vocabulary mastery is one of the main reasons behind this problem.

Vocational high school (SMK) students should not only memorize the meaning of words. According to Nation (2001), knowing a word means knowing its form, meaning, and use. To reach this goal, students need to use vocabulary learning strategies, such as determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. These strategies help students find, remember, and use new words correctly. This idea is also supported by the English curriculum for SMK in Indonesia in Phase E, which expects students to understand and communicate in daily, academic, and vocational contexts (BSKAP, 2025), and to become more independent learners.

However, the real situation in the classroom is different from this expectation. Based on a preliminary observation in September 2025 at a vocational high school in Karawang, most tenth-grade students had limited vocabulary mastery. They often used simple and repeated words, and they had problems understanding texts or making correct sentences. Most students only used direct translation from digital dictionaries. They rarely tried to remember, organize, or actively use new words.

Previous studies have looked at vocabulary learning strategies from different points of view. Thiendathong and Sukying (2021) studied the strategies used by Thai high school students, but this study was conducted in a different country and may not represent the situation of Indonesian vocational students, especially in an industrial area like Karawang. Adam and Magfirah (2022) also studied vocabulary learning strategies, but they used a quantitative method. This method could not explain in detail how students actually used these strategies in real learning situations. These two studies show that most research on vocabulary learning strategies still uses quantitative methods, so qualitative research on this topic is still limited.

This problem is important to study because vocabulary mastery has a strong effect on students' overall English ability. If vocational students keep using ineffective strategies, they will have difficulty understanding lessons, joining classroom activities, and preparing for future workplace communication. Teachers also need to understand how students learn vocabulary so that they can design the right kind of support.

Based on this background, this study aims to identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Karawang, based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. This taxonomy divides strategies into five categories: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. This study is expected to provide a clear picture of how vocational students learn vocabulary and to help teachers design better vocabulary instruction in vocational English classrooms.

B. Research Method

This study used a qualitative case study design to find out what vocabulary learning strategies were used by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Karawang. A qualitative approach was chosen because it can provide a deep understanding of students' real learning experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was used because this research focused on one bounded group of students in one school (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at a private vocational high school in Karawang, West Java. This location

was chosen because Karawang is an industrial area, so English is important for students' future jobs. However, English is rarely used outside the classroom, which makes vocabulary learning more challenging for the students.

The participants were 35 tenth-grade students from one class. All of them took part in the classroom observation. From this class, six students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. These six students represented three achievement levels: two higher-performing students, two moderate-performing students, and two lower-performing students. The students were chosen based on their classroom performance and the English teacher's recommendation. Pseudonyms were used to protect the students' identity.

Two instruments were used to collect the data: a semi-structured interview guide and a classroom observation checklist. Both instruments were developed based on Schmitt's (1997) Vocabulary Learning Strategy Taxonomy. The interview guide was adapted from Khatami and Ambarwati (2023) and focused on how students discovered, remembered, and used new vocabulary. The observation checklist was used to record students' vocabulary learning behavior during one English lesson, which lasted about 45 minutes.

Data were collected in two steps. First, classroom observation was conducted to see students' natural vocabulary learning behavior. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six selected students to obtain deeper information about the strategies they used. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes and was audio-recorded with the students' permission, then transcribed verbatim.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis. First, the researcher read the interview transcripts and observation notes carefully to become familiar with the data. Then, initial codes were generated inductively from the data. After that, the codes related to vocabulary learning strategies were mapped onto Schmitt's (1997) five categories: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. This process helped the researcher identify which strategies were used most often and how

students from different achievement levels used them differently.

Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Permission was obtained from the school, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without any consequence. All data were kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

C.Findings and Discussion

This section presents the vocabulary learning strategies used by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Karawang, based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. Six students took part in the interviews, representing three achievement levels: two higher-performing students (Sammy and Andy), two moderate-performing students (Noel and Galang), and two lower-performing students (Marcel and Vino). Classroom observation was also conducted in one English lesson involving 35 students. The findings show that students used all five categories of strategies: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive. However, students from different achievement levels used these strategies in different ways.

1. Determination Strategy

Determination strategy was the strategy that students used most often. This strategy means finding the meaning of a new word without help from other people, for example by using a dictionary, guessing from context, or checking word parts. Most students used dictionaries and translation tools, but higher-performing students used these tools in a deeper way. One higher-performing student said, "I usually use Google Translate so I can hear the pronunciation and learn how the word is used" (Sammy, H1). This shows that the student did not only look for the meaning, but also checked pronunciation and usage. In contrast, a lower-performing student said, "I have a dictionary on my phone" (Marcel, L1), which shows a more simple and direct use of the tool. Classroom observation supported this finding: because smartphones were not allowed in class, students used printed dictionaries and pictures to guess the meaning of new words.

2. Social Strategy

Social strategy means learning vocabulary by asking other people, such as teachers, classmates, or friends. All students used this strategy, but they chose different people to ask. Higher-performing students preferred to ask people they saw as more skilled in English. One student explained, "If I am studying with friends who understand English well, I usually ask them for help" (Sammy, H1). Moderate-performing students often asked people who were easy to reach, as shown in this response: "I usually ask my close friends for help" (Galang, M2). Lower-performing students depended more on classmates, but this was not always helpful. One student said the explanations from friends were "not clear" (Vino, L2), which shows that social strategy is only useful when the explanation is correct and easy to understand.

3. Memory Strategy

Memory strategy means using ways to remember vocabulary after learning its meaning, such as repetition, rereading, or making sentences. Higher-performing students often combined memorization with meaningful practice. For example, one student said, "I usually write the words down and memorize them at home. Once I remember them, I make sentences using the words" (Andy, H2). Moderate and lower-performing students relied more on simple repetition, such as "I often rewrite the words" (Galang, M2) or "I write the words down, memorize them, and read them repeatedly" (Marcel, L1). This shows that while all students used repetition, only some of them used it as a step toward using the words in real communication.

4. Cognitive Strategy

Cognitive strategy means actively practicing vocabulary through writing, making sentences, or using vocabulary in communication. This strategy was used less often than the first three strategies, and it was mostly reported by higher-performing students. One student explained that using vocabulary in speaking helped the most: "It is better to listen to videos or podcasts, or even use AI as a conversation partner" (Sammy, H1). Moderate-performing students mostly practiced through writing, such as rewriting new words, while lower-performing students gave little

evidence of this kind of active practice. This suggests that productive use of vocabulary develops later, after students already feel confident with a word's meaning.

5. Metacognitive Strategy

Metacognitive strategy means planning, monitoring, and managing one's own vocabulary learning, for example by choosing learning resources or reviewing words independently. This strategy was reported less often than the other four strategies. Higher-performing students showed the strongest self-management. One student said, "For me, I prefer learning through music, films, and games" (Sammy, H1), and added, "I usually review the vocabulary again whenever I have free time" (Sammy, H1). A moderate-performing student mentioned using a language-learning application: "I usually use Duolingo" (Noel, M1). Lower-performing students showed less independent learning, but some expressed a wish to improve, such as, "I want to try the target-setting strategy" (Marcel, L1).

Overall, the findings show that all five strategy categories proposed by Schmitt (1997) were used by the students, but achievement level influenced how deeply and how purposefully each strategy was applied. Determination strategy was the most common strategy, which matches earlier findings from Khatami and Ambarwati (2023) and Duy (2024), who also found that dictionaries and translation tools were widely used by EFL learners. However, this study adds a new detail: higher-performing students used these tools more strategically, for example to check pronunciation and context, while lower-performing students mainly used them for quick translation.

The findings on social strategy support Schmitt's (1997) idea that interaction with other people helps vocabulary learning. This is also in line with Artika and Fitriani (2024), who found that peer and teacher interaction supported vocabulary development. However, this study shows that social strategy is only effective when the explanation given is clear, which adds a practical detail that is not always discussed in previous research.

The findings on memory and cognitive strategies show that repetition is common, but not always

connected to real communication. This matches Chen (2025), who reported that productive vocabulary practice usually appears after learners already have some vocabulary knowledge. In this study, only higher-performing students clearly showed this connection between memorization and productive use, which suggests that teachers may need to guide mid- and lower-performing students to move from repetition toward actual vocabulary use.

Finally, the findings on metacognitive strategy support Oxford (1990) and Wenden (1998), who argue that successful learners take responsibility for their own learning process. Because metacognitive strategy was the least reported strategy, especially among lower-performing students, this finding suggests that vocational English teachers should give more attention to building students' independent learning habits, such as goal setting and self-review, so that all students, not only high achievers, can become more autonomous vocabulary learners.

D. Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the vocabulary learning strategies used by tenth-grade vocational high school students in Karawang, based on Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy. The findings show that students used all five categories of strategies: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Determination strategy was the most common strategy, mainly through the use of dictionaries, Google Translate, and contextual guessing. Social strategy was also widely used, especially by asking teachers and classmates. Memory strategy appeared through repetition, rewriting, and rereading vocabulary, while cognitive strategy appeared through sentence-making and communicative practice, although it was used less often. Metacognitive strategy, such as independent review and self-selected learning resources, was the strategy reported least by the students.

The findings also show that achievement level influenced how students used these strategies. Higher-performing students combined strategies more purposefully and showed stronger self-regulation, for

example by connecting memorization with real communication or using multiple resources to understand pronunciation and usage. Moderate- and lower-performing students relied more on strategies that gave quick and practical solutions, such as direct translation and asking classmates for help.

Based on these findings, English teachers in vocational high schools are encouraged to explicitly teach a wider range of vocabulary learning strategies, not only determination and social strategies, which students already use often, but also memory, cognitive, and especially metacognitive strategies. Teachers can support this by giving students opportunities to practice vocabulary in meaningful contexts, encouraging guided peer discussion, and helping students plan and monitor their own vocabulary learning through simple tools such as vocabulary journals or personal goal setting.

This study only covers one class in one vocational high school, so the findings may not represent all vocational students in Indonesia. Future research is recommended to explore vocabulary learning strategies in other vocational schools or majors, and to examine how these strategies relate to students' actual vocabulary achievement over time.

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