

## CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING IN ESL: ADDRESSING THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF ELEMENTARY LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition is crucial for elementary-level ESL learners, impacting both memory and comprehension skills. This study explores the vocabulary learning strategies employed by young ESL learners, grounded in cognitive and social constructivist theories. Information Processing Theory and Cognitive Load Theory emphasize strategies like repetition and mnemonics to manage cognitive load, while Dual Coding Theory supports using visual aids for better retention. Sociocultural Theory and Social Learning Theory highlight the benefits of social interaction and imitation, and Krashen's Input Hypothesis stresses the need for comprehensible input. A mixed-methods research design was used, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 students and 10 teachers, analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software. Quantitative data were gathered from surveys administered to 50 elementary ESL students and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS software. Purposive sampling was used for qualitative data to gain deep insights, while stratified random sampling ensured the quantitative sample's representativeness. The study found that the total sum of squares for the regression model is 12.500, indicating the overall variance in the dependent variable that the model attempts to explain. The F-value for the regression model is .315, with a significance level (Sig.) of .972. It indicates that Elementary ESL learners use a variety of strategies, including memorization, repetition, inferencing, mnemonics, and contextual associations. Teacher support, classroom environment, and socio-cultural factors significantly influence these strategies' effectiveness and preferences. The findings offer valuable insights into the vocabulary acquisition processes of young ESL learners, highlighting the interplay between cognitive and social factors. These insights are crucial for educationists and policymakers to develop individualized teaching methodologies that enhance language education and support the comprehensive development of elementary ESL students.

**Keywords:** ESL learners, elementary level, language acquisition, Vocabulary learning strategies.

### INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is very important for students of English as a second language (ESL) at all levels, particularly in improving memory and essential components such as learning style. Students use a variety of procedures and activities known as strategies to develop their lexical knowledge

(Nation, 2016). Vocabulary learning and instruction may help students' language skills overall by helping them to learn new words as well as other abilities like comprehension (Schmitt, 2008). Moreover, when it comes to the language learning trajectory of elementary students, having an awareness and using these techniques can have considerable implications for their approaches to communicating with English (Nation, 2013). Consequently, any research on the types of vocabulary learning strategies adopted by ESL learners at the elementary age is essential for educationists and policymakers in formulating particularized teaching methodologies according to individual needs (Hacking & Tschirner, 2017). Elementary ESL learners use many vocabulary learning strategies to improve their language skills. There are a few types of these strategies, such as explicit learning, memorization, and repetition, which are about explicitly learning new words by repeating them repeatedly (Schmitt, 2010). In addition, they extensively use influencing strategies that involve deriving the meaning of unfamiliar words within a given context or from related information (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997). Another type of vocabulary strategy that children in the primary grades find useful is mnemonics; they can visualize this and match it to beginning stored knowledge, as Godwin-Jones (2005) advises. Second, using meaningful language in activities such as storytelling and class discussion promotes vocabulary learning (e.g., game) acquisition and revision (Nation & Newton, 2020). Combining these strategies helps elementary ESL students build an extensive vocabulary repertoire for meaningful communication and comprehension (Hacking & Tschirner, 2017).

The study emphasizes the shortcomings of traditional methods like rote memorization and confronts the most important problem of vocabulary acquisition among ESL learners. It also focuses on the importance of investigating cognitive, social, and environmental factors that affect vocabulary acquisition procedures in order to create tailored teaching methods that improve the academic performance and language competency of ESL students. Special education provides instructors who are committed to equity for all ELLs, including those who are facing problems in school, with a thorough alternative (Hamayan et al., 2013). Furthermore, how contextual variables that impinge upon the

strategies of second-language learners are given insufficient attention; for example, we do not know enough about the impact of teacher support or sociocultural influence.

#### **Literature review:**

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review on vocabulary learning strategies among ESL learners at the elementary school level. The insights from this review will equip readers with a deeper understanding and the ability to discern among various concepts, theories, and results as they delve into the following studies.

In recent years, the study of strategies for ESL learners to learn vocabulary has received increasing attention, reflecting greater awareness of the vital role vocabulary plays in learning a language and acquiring proficiency in it. Research indicates that effective vocabulary acquisition is essential for learners to develop strong language skills and achieve academic success. Such understanding has resulted, in turn, in a surge of studies that explore various strategies that might make the task of acquiring vocabulary easier for ESL learners. Cognitive strategies like memorization, repetition, the application of mnemonic devices, etc. are widely studied and are effective in helping students to retain and retrieve vocabulary. For example, Abrami (2015) draws attention to the idea that repetition is vitally essential for bedding down word knowledge; she suggests that exposure to new vocabulary in different contexts increases one's retention rate year-on-year. Similarly, mnemonic devices that introduce verbal association between new words and some familiar concepts have been shown to promote both short-term and long-term memory of vocabulary items (Schmitt, 1997).

Effective vocabulary learning extends beyond cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies, which involve the learner's awareness and control over his learning processes, play a pivotal role. As Tseng and Schmitt (2008) pointed out, these strategies motivate learners to be more self-directed and autonomous in their language learning journey. The ability to self-monitor and adjust learning tactics according to one's progress and difficulties is essential for ESL learners.

Furthermore, social strategies that emphasize interaction and cooperation with peers have been recognized for their part in creating an effective learning environment where people are

encouraged to keep going even if motivation slackens (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Smiciklas (2012) found that collaborative learning activities such as peer teaching and group discussions foster a sense of community in the classroom, leading to deeper understanding and vocabulary retention. This includes students experiencing new words in meaningful contexts where they can utilize them. Theoretical frameworks impact our understanding of the process underlying vocabulary learning procedures. These frameworks provide a lens for investigating how people understand new words, learn them, and retain this information in memory, the format that they come in, and mechanisms for restructuring these lists. One of the most well-known cognitive theories, Information Processing Theory, compares the human mind to a computer that receives information, stores it, and retrieves it when required. This heavily emphasizes cognitive skills such as attention, perception, and memory to master new words. According to this perspective, working memory is essential because it retains new vocabulary items for a short period of time before processing and storing them in long-term memory. Thus, strategies like repetition, chunking, and the use of mnemonics all come from this cognitive framework, as they help manage cognitive load and aid memory. Imagine a model of cognitive theory that works from the learner's perspective. By reducing cognitive load, Cognitive Load Theory presents the idea that instructive materials can be best designed to minimize unwanted cognitive load. This means more effective learning is needed. In the context of vocabulary learning, Cognitive Load Theory can mean breaking complex information into chunks that are easier to digest and using visual aids to assist understanding.

Furthermore, research in the 21st century has significantly focused on the language learning strategy and effect of technological advances. Online resources and tools have revolutionized language learning; students are now accessing vast volumes of language input and engaging learning possibilities that provide authenticity. Gaming platforms, software programs, and other gamified learning domains can greatly accelerate vocabulary acquisition and enhance the learning process, according to research by Reinders & Benson (2017).

These technologies provide immediate feedback and opportunities for self-tutoring and cater to all different learning styles and preferences. On the other hand, the classroom environment itself contributes to language learning. An environment that encourages shared pleasure, arousal, and active involvement can significantly improve the learner's motivation, as Hubbard said in his meeting notes (2009). In summary, the present literature suggests that vocabulary learning strategies are multi-faceted, so a multi-faceted approach is needed for carrying out any research study on ESL language learning strategies.

Theories from a social constructivist paradigm, such as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, underscore that people learn best in their social environment and according to their own culture. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the term the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to describe the gap between what students can do alone and what they can achieve with some assistance. This would imply that group projects, teacher interaction, student engagement, and group debates are all preferable to working alone when learning vocabulary. Social strategies, like group discussions, cooperative learning, and language games, conform to this theory, which sees meaningful communication as an accomplishment shared among all learning community members.

Teacher support for vocabulary learning is mainly provided through explicit instruction. This involves presenting new words clearly and explicitly, giving examples of how to use them in sentences or paragraphs, and explaining their relationships with other words. Like this, through clarifying the meaning of a word as it is being introduced, students are just getting started on learning English as a foreign language. With this method, students may establish a strong foundation in vocabulary, which is important for reading comprehension and language proficiency (Beck et al., 2013). Breaking complex vocabulary into simpler pieces encourages students to think more deeply about the meaning of new words and leads to retention.

The classroom environment can significantly influence vocabulary study. A comfortable, relaxed atmosphere is conducive to full participation in activities, adventure with new vocabulary, and experimenting with the use of words. Research conducted on mutual care and

respect has confirmed that students learning in such a classroom environment tend to laugh more often and solve problems quickly (Dörnyei, 2001). Students who feel safe and respected are likelier to participate fully in vocabulary activities. There are other ways in which the physical characteristics of the classroom space also impact learning vocabulary. Easy access to resources plus a well-organized classroom makes it possible for students to take in what they learn more readily and saves them time in searching: teachers with extensive dictionaries at their elbow will find that this simple action results in teaching gains (Williams, 2008).

While much research has been done into vocabulary learning strategy and its effectiveness, strategy is still flexible and subtle. It can be adjusted to suit different types of students. Much existing research focuses on general strategies suitable for all contexts in which education occurs. This can overlook the unique needs of particular groups, such as non-native speakers, learners with disabilities, and students from different cultural backgrounds (August et al., 2005). Moreover, plenty of research has been done on how explicit instruction and teacher assistance are beneficial, but there has been little inquiry into how these strategies might be customized to fit individual learners styles and preferences (Kistner et al., 2010). This gap highlights the need for more detailed studies that examine the effectiveness of customized vocabulary learning interventions tailored to particular learner characteristics and contexts.

Lastly, there is still much to learn about how new technology can influence language acquisition. Although considerable research has been conducted on the effect of digital tools and multimedia content on vocabulary learning, their advantages have been little investigated in conjunction with traditional teaching methods (Parmaxi & Dementriou, 2020).

#### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the predominant ESL learning strategies employed by elementary students in language acquisition?
2. How effective are these identified ESL learning strategies in promoting language proficiency and overall language development in elementary ESL learners?

3. To what extent do contextual factors influence the selection and application of ESL learning strategies by elementary students?

#### **Methodology:**

##### **Data Collection Procedure:**

One of the most important stages of the research process was data collection, which involved systematically obtaining information to answer the study objectives. This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the strategies used for learning English as a second language (ESL). Ethical considerations were foremost throughout this stage, ensuring that the participant's rights and well-being were protected. Qualitative data was collected from interviews with elementary school ESL students and their teachers. This method was chosen for its flexibility and depth, allowing an in-depth examination of participant's experiences and perceptions. The procedures for qualitative data collection had several steps. First, interview schedules were arranged with participants, ensuring that the timing and location were convenient for all parties involved. During the interviews, subjects were encouraged to talk about their experiences and thoughts in their own words, while the interviewer used probing questions to go deeper. The interviews were recorded on audio tape with the participant's permission (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Quantitative data were collected using a survey distributed to a larger sample of elementary school students. The instrument included Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice items, and open-ended questions to gather data (Fowler, 2014). The development of the survey instrument was subjected to stringent tests of proper explanation and readability, including a pilot test with a small number of students to smooth out the wording and ensure that clarity would result (Fowler, 2014).

##### **Data Analysis procedure:**

Data analysis was a vital part of the research process. It consisted of systematically examining and interpreting data to answer research questions. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods to ensure all aspects of the research problem were covered. Thematic analysis was used with qualitative data. The method involved recognizing, analyzing, and reporting

patterns or styles (themes) within the information (Patton, 2015). The process started with verbatim transcription of sound-recorded interviews, followed by familiarity with the data through frequent reading. Coding was then carried out to label significant pieces of information, which were subsequently grouped into themes. The themes were reviewed and brought up to date so that it ensured that they corresponded with the information gathered in questionnaires. Software such as NVivo was used to facilitate the coding and thematic analysis; tools were provided, thus helping to manage data effectively (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the

data, including measures of central tendency (mean tendency, mode). These statistics helped to summarize the frequency and types of ESL learning strategies employed by the students (Hair et al., 2010). Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis, were used to find the relationships among different sets of variables and ultimately yielded insights into the effectiveness of various strategies.

Statistical software like SPSS was used to analyze data, ensuring accuracy and efficiency in managing big data sets (Pallant, 2020). It provided data entry, cleaning, and analysis tools so that the researcher could produce detailed reports and visualizations.

### Findings and Discussion:

**Table 4.33 Correlation**

Correlations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
I feel more confident in my English communication skills due to the vocabulary learning strategies I employ.									
I believe that using specific vocabulary learning strategies has enhanced my academic performance.	-.027								
I have noticed a positive impact on my language development as a result of employing vocabulary learning strategies.	-.094	-.302							
I feel more motivated to learn English because of the effectiveness of the vocabulary learning strategies I use.	.229	-.358	.035						
I believe that my vocabulary learning strategies have contributed to my language fluency.	.085	.178	-.455	-.110					
I perceive an improvement in my vocabulary retention and usage through the strategies I employ.	.003	.050	-.230	-.461	-.290				
I find that the vocabulary learning strategies I use have increased my understanding of English texts and materials.	-.161	.174	-.018	-.306	.305	-.087			
I feel more engaged in language learning activities because of the strategies I apply.	-.154	.321	-.551	.056	.157	.063	-.098		
I believe that the identified ESL learning strategies have positively	-.109	.192	.066	-.112	.008	.181	-.101	-.043	
	-.081	.188	.011	.189	.269	-.443	.067	-.193	.147

influenced my language proficiency and overall development.

Table 4.33 presents the correlation matrix for various statements related to the impact of vocabulary learning strategies on different aspects of English language proficiency and engagement. The correlations range from weak negative to moderate positive values, indicating varying degrees of relationship between the variables. Notably, the correlation between the belief that specific vocabulary learning strategies enhance academic performance and feeling more confident in English communication skills is weak and negative (-.094), suggesting little to no linear relationship. Conversely, a moderate negative correlation (-.358) exists between noticing a positive impact on language development and believing that specific strategies have enhanced academic performance, indicating that as one

perception increases, the other tends to decrease. Similarly, a moderately negative correlation (-.455) is observed between feeling motivated to learn English due to the effectiveness of vocabulary strategies and noticing a positive impact on language development. Positive correlations, though generally weak, such as .321 between finding vocabulary strategies increase understanding of English texts and believing strategies enhance academic performance, suggest some level of co-variation. These correlations collectively highlight the complex and multifaceted relationships between different aspects of vocabulary learning strategies and their perceived benefits on language proficiency and engagement.

**Table 4. 37 Student Responses to Interview Questions**

Question	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Teacher Support Influence</b>	Explicit instruction and strategy modeling	10	50%
	Feedback and progress understanding	4	20%
	Encouragement and supportive environment	4	20%
	Personalized support (one-on-one, tailored materials)	2	10%
<b>Classroom Environment Impact</b>	Collaborative activities (group discussions, peer learning)	11	55%
	Visual aids and multimedia resources	6	30%
	Positive and inclusive atmosphere	3	15%

Table 4.37 illuminates the paramount importance of teacher guidance and an encouraging class setting for improving English language acquisition and vocabulary learning among ESL students. This table concisely outlines the important issues and repetition of student responses, providing a clear synthesis of the factors that learners experience are most influential in their linguistic progress. Some felt that individualized attention from their instructor and a comfortable

atmosphere where mistakes were accepted as natural aided their progress most. Others highlighted that collaborative activities, allowing practice with peers in a supportive environment where they did not feel self-conscious, assisted their development. The study emphasizes the importance of teacher encouragement and community involvement in promoting second language acquisition.

**Table 4. 38 Teacher Responses to Interview Questions**

Question	Theme	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Teacher Support Influence</b>	Explicit instruction and strategy modeling	4	40%
	Feedback and progress understanding	3	30%
	Encouragement and supportive environment	2	20%
	Personalized support (one-on-one, tailored materials)	1	10%
<b>Classroom Environment Impact</b>	Collaborative activities (group discussions, peer learning)	5	50%
	Visual aids and multimedia resources	3	30%

	Positive and inclusive atmosphere	2	20%
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Table 4.38 lists the ten teacher responses; it is clear that teacher support has a major impact on students' approaches to ESL learning and vocabulary methods. Explicit instruction and modeling: The teachers stated that students benefit from seeing exactly how they should apply a vocabulary strategy to help strengthen their understanding of when it is best to use them. Four teachers (40%) emphasized the importance of explicit instruction, believing that demonstrating these techniques helps students understand and apply them independently. Three teachers (30%) identified that the function of feedback must be to keep students informed about their progress and areas in which they need improvement. Also, two teachers (20%) pointed out encouragement and worked on providing a supportive classroom atmosphere so that students, among other things, would be more confident when facing new vocabulary. One teacher (10%) reported that personalized support including tailored learning materials and one-on-one sessions, is especially useful for students with diverse needs. They also discussed examples of how the classroom setting improved student engagement in ESL learning strategies and vocabulary retention. Collaborative activities, including group discussions and peer learning, were mentioned by five teachers (50%) as being very successful in increasing students' engagement and enjoyment with vocabulary learning. Three teachers (30%) made references to visual aids and multimedia resources as important tools in supporting vocabulary learning so students could see what they wanted them to learn the first day, which helped create meaningful words. Furthermore, two teachers (20%) pointed out an inclusive classroom environment where students are willing to take risks and make mistakes in their vocabulary learning, leading again to high levels of participation in oral production.

**Discussion:**

The results of this study will contribute to our understanding of how elementary ESL learners master vocabulary learning strategies and which factors considerably impact their effectiveness. Furthermore, the study emphasizes different techniques, pedagogical assistance, positive classroom atmosphere and socio-culture compliance to enrich vocabulary learning. These

findings suggest that ESL instruction in general, particularly vocabulary preparation, should use a comprehensive but adaptable teaching style. This study provided preliminary insights that are not definitive but suggest various aspects of change that should be investigated further through longitudinal research comparing the effectiveness and implementation of targeted strategies over time in different contexts, including possible interactions with social and cultural factors.

**Conclusion:**

This study used a mixed methods approach, including questionnaires, and interviews, to analyze vocabulary learning strategies used by elementary ESL learners. It also looked at how classroom environment, teacher support, and socio-cultural factors influence these strategies. The findings helped us in better understanding the ways that learners use when learning vocabulary, emphasized the need for an educationally supportive environment, and revealed contrasting aspects about social-cultural backgrounds.

ESL students usually use a combination of strategies to memorize new words, including rote learning, repeating the target word several times during their pronunciation, guessing through context clues (such as pictures or sentence structure), memory tricks, and forming associations. Teacher support is crucial for effectively implementing vocabulary learning methodologies. Students felt more prepared to apply a range of strategies based on explicit instruction and teacher feedback. This further points out that the educators should direct students on their learning process and build a positive and interactive learning atmosphere.

There was a sociocultural factor that had a significant impact on vocabulary learning practices in this research. The findings revealed that identity, cultural background, and community values influenced students' attitudes toward learning, highlighting the need for culturally responsive teaching techniques. The present study has potential implications for ESL education, particularly concerning the complexity of teaching vocabulary in multiple ways. Such diverse approaches to vocabulary learning, together with teacher and socio-cultural support, highlight how difficult it is for learners to acquire

a new lexicon. This study provides a comprehensive picture of the vocabulary learning strategies employed by ESL learners, as well as the contextual factors that can help or hinder them. The findings support the importance of comprehensive curricula that incorporate a variety of instructional methods and acknowledge students' socio-cultural backgrounds. Further study should include longitudinal studies of the long-term effects of various evidence-based practices, as well as a more in-depth examination of the interaction between various sociocultural components in diverse educational environments. The findings can be used to develop more equal and efficient ESL programs for elementary-grade students.

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