

## A Preliminary Study on Learners' Perception on Out of Class Autonomous Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

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The current study tries to explore learners' perception of out of class autonomous vocabulary learning strategies. The respondents were from one tertiary institution in Malaysia from the Diploma in Plantation and Industrial Management program. Questionnaires were distributed via the google classroom platform to 30 students because of the covid 19 pandemic where classes were conducted online. Data gathered were analysed using descriptive analysis based on percentages. Online distance learning (ODL) has taken place during this pandemic. Findings show the three most preferred ways to find meanings of the unknown words outside of class time are checking the meanings of the words, reviewing the new learnt words and encouraging themselves to speak in English using the words. On the other hand, the least preferred strategy is going to the access center or library or consulting online sources. As the findings show, it is vital for learners to be autonomous since some courses will still be conducted on-line even when the cases of covid 19 reduce later. By being autonomous learners will not depend a lot on lecturers and activities conducted in the classroom as time spent in the classroom is limited.

**Contribution/Originality:** By undertaking the current studies, academicians will be better informed or aware on learning strategies that learners prefer and from this they will be equipped with practical knowledge to better assist their learners in becoming autonomous vocabulary learners.

### 1. Introduction

In the acquisition of a second language, vocabulary learning strategies might be regarded a subset of general learning strategies. Learning strategies, according to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), are the specific thoughts or behaviours that learners employ to help them grasp, absorb, or retain new knowledge. Exploring English language students' vocabulary learning processes can show individual variances in vocabulary learning and assist EFL

teachers and curriculum developers to provide resources and activities that will help students improve their vocabulary learning. Based on the researcher's experience of teaching English as a proficiency course in her tertiary institution for more than 25 years, it was discovered that majority of the learners, have problems conveying their messages either verbally or in writing because of lack of vocabulary. These learners have been exposed to English for more than 11 years (six years in the primary school and five years in the secondary school).

Vocabulary is critical in the acquisition of English, especially for college students. When it comes to improving learners' English skills, it is critical to understand not only the meaning of a word, but also all of its components. [Thornbury \(2006\)](#) stated that learners must have a broad understanding of vocabularies in order to learn vocabulary. Understanding the meanings, their spoken and written forms, grammatical behaviour, word derivation, collocations, the register of the words (both spoken and written), connotations or associations, and the frequency of the words are among these skills.

Vocabulary refers to the understanding of words and their meanings. More specifically, we use the term vocabulary to describe the kind of words that people must be familiar with in order to read more difficult texts with comprehension ([Kamil & Hiebert, 2005](#)). It's something that grows and develops with time. In studying a foreign language, vocabulary is defined as a language element that connects the four language abilities of hearing, speaking, reading, and writing ([Huyen & Nga, 2003](#)). The foundation of learning a second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL) is vocabulary. Communication in a second language becomes difficult without knowing vocabulary ([Rohmatillah, 2014](#)).

In order to comprehend any materials read by learners, they should be able to understand words (vocabulary) used. Failure to understand the meaning of words (vocabulary) will affect learning especially when it comes to reading comprehension ([Lynch, 2020](#)). This will cause difficulties for them to get the information needed from the sources that they refer to when they do their assignments. This will indirectly cause them to feel demotivated, as they find it hard to digest the information presented in English.

In the classroom, teachers usually use the same method to teach vocabulary. Some learners can acquire knowledge on vocabulary successfully. However, some face difficulties. Why this thing happens? One of the reasons is maybe due to learners' vocabulary learning strategies. Some strategies work for some learners, but may not work for others. Aside from instructional approaches, several research demonstrate that learner strategies are another important component that influences L1 or FL language acquisition. They can assist learners in becoming more self-sufficient and improving the effectiveness of the learning process. Therefore, since time spent in classroom is limited, tertiary level learners should make conscious effort and sometimes need to force themselves to become autonomous to learn vocabulary outside of the classroom as the exposure to L2 is limited ([Haddad, 2016](#)). The current study is one of the few studies that is done on low achievers of Malaysians tertiary learners on vocabulary learning strategies outside of class time.

## 2. Literature Review

Vocabulary is the foundation for learning a second language and is an essential component of any language. According to [Rohmatillah \(2017\)](#), communicating in the second language becomes more difficult without vocabulary, as it is essential for

communicative competency. Low vocabulary knowledge causes serious challenges for learners, obstructing their study of the English language (Alqahtani, 2015). According to Schmitt (2000), vocabulary plays a critical role in the teaching and learning of a second language since lexical knowledge is essential for efficient communication. Human language is determined by the vocabulary acquired or used. As a result, having lack of vocabulary or lacking of drive to use the language will influence learners' motivation to use the language.

One of the most important theoretical ideas in language learning is learner autonomy (LA). In English language instruction, the importance of learner autonomy is also generally recognised. The majority of academicians believe that LA has a favourable impact on EFL or L2 students learning English. Learner autonomy is defined by some academics as learners' desire to be active, take control over, and supervise their own learning, as well as to take risks. They also define learner autonomy as the ability of students to create goals, act autonomously, and make judgments regarding resources, techniques, and activities. Autonomous learners frequently have a greater ability to make learning decisions and take charge of their own learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014; Oates, 2019). LA is very important in the employment of VLS since it offers learners numerous privileges including enhancing their motivation and thus realizing vocabulary acquisition (Tilfarlioglu & Sherwani, 2018).

To summarize, learning autonomy focuses on learners in taking greater responsibility for what they learn, how they learn and when they learn.

Numerous studies were done on different learners on how they learn vocabulary. For instance, the findings of the study by Ali (2020) on EFL Saudi students demonstrated that, regardless of their accuracy in identifying word meanings, participants depended on online dictionaries and translation tools in addition to Microsoft Word Thesaurus services as their second option for looking up word meanings. The ability to use the dictionary either the printed or on-line dictionary and the use of thesaurus will help learners in learning vocabulary even when they are not assisted in class. In addition, learning proficiency could also be improved when learners were encouraged to become more autonomous by developing effective strategies.

To foster students' autonomy, Smith (2003) recommended a 'strong' and 'weak' strategy. A 'weak' top-down approach recommends that for a learner who lacks autonomy, effective training in appropriate learning styles should be provided. Encouraging students to work independently both in and out of the classroom is one of the most essential aims of education (Moir & Nation, 2002).

One of Nation's (2001, 2011) guiding ideas for teaching vocabulary is that teachers should encourage students to take responsibility for their own vocabulary development. Therefore, one of the most crucial tasks of the language teacher is autonomy. Learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning is critical since their lexical expansion success or failure entirely depends on them. Learners are also responsible for their own vocabulary acquisition and development, as well as creating opportunities for vocabulary learning to occur (Hartshorne et al., 2018). It is critical for students to become autonomous language learners as they can contribute to their own learning progress without relying too heavily on the teacher's input and they can continue their study outside of the classroom (Almusharraf, 2018).

### 3. Method

The study tries to explore learners' strategies in learning vocabulary after class. It focuses on what learners do (strategies employed) after class to learn vocabulary without their teacher's supervision and guidance. Convenient sampling was chosen as this is a preliminary study. The researcher used her students who enrolled in her class as the respondents. 30 low achievers were involved in the study. Convenient sampling was used in the study. The questionnaire was adopted from [Feng \(2015\)](#). The questionnaires were sent through google classroom. Data were analysed descriptively using percentages.

### 4. Result

[Table 1](#) indicates that the respondents have high level of awareness on out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning. From the findings, 87.5% (strongly agree and agree) of the respondents checked the meanings of the unknown words they encountered. 79.16% of the respondents asked for help when they do not know the meaning of any words. Reviewing the new learnt words and set my own learning goals shared the same percentage that is 75%. 74.99% always encourage themselves to use the English words when they communicate. Trying to find their own way of learning new words and monitoring their own learning progress have the same percentage (66.67%). 62.5% of the respondents try to read many reading materials to enlarge their vocabulary size. 58.33% of them have a plan of accumulating words and they will strictly follow their plan. The lowest percentage 33.33% is on visiting the self-access centre or library to study or consult the online sources.

Findings show that learners are aware of the different strategies that they can employ outside of class time to learn vocabulary. This study findings are not in line with findings from [Feng \(2015\)](#) and [Nguyen \(2009\)](#). [Feng \(2015\)](#) findings revealed that low proficiency students are more unlikely to use autonomous strategies as compared to advanced learners. [Nguyen \(2009\)](#) claims that the respondents of the study were more receptive in terms of doing activities than being productive and they tended to avoid social interactions outside the classroom.

The current study was conducted during the covid 19 pandemic, and this may contribute to the different findings as [Feng \(2015\)](#) and [Nguyen \(2009\)](#). During the covid 19 pandemic, learners had their classes online. There is no face-to-face interaction with the lecturers and there is also no real interaction with learners' classmates as well. Classes are conducted online via google meet, WhatsApp and google classroom.

During the pandemic, learners had to find ways to ensure that they are connected with their online classes as they were at their hometown. Some faced internet problems and they had to search for a place that has good internet coverage. This indirectly allows learners to be independent and this may contribute to the outcome of the current study. Learners are aware of ways that they need to employ to help them learn the unknown words (findings for items 1 to 8 and number 10 from the questionnaire). However, 62.5% of the respondents responded 'neutral' for item number 9 from the questionnaire which is "going to the self-centre to study or consult the online sources". Even though the percentage is high for "neutral", overall score shows that learners are aware of the strategy (33.33%).

Table 1: Strategies employed to learn vocabulary outside class time

|                                                                                 | 1=strongly agree(%) | 2=agree (%) | 3=neutral (%) | 4=disagree (%) | 5=strongly disagree (%) | Total=24 (%) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Try to find my own way of learning new words.                                   | 16.67               | 50          | 25            | 8.33           | 0                       | 100          |
| Try to read many reading materials to enlarge my vocabulary size.               | 16.67               | 45.83       | 29.17         | 8.33           | 0                       | 100          |
| Review the newly-learnt words.                                                  | 12.5                | 62.5        | 25            | 0              | 0                       | 100          |
| Check the meaning of any new words that I encounter.                            | 29.17               | 58.33       | 8.33          | 0              | 4.17                    | 100          |
| Ask for help when I don't know the meaning of a word.                           | 37.5                | 41.66       | 16.67         | 4.17           | 0                       | 100          |
| Set my own learning goals.                                                      | 16.67               | 58.33       | 20.83         | 4.17           | 0                       | 100          |
| Have a plan of accumulating words and I will strictly follow my plan.           | 8.33                | 50          | 37.5          | 4.17           | 0                       | 100          |
| Monitor my own learning progress.                                               | 12.5                | 54.16       | 29.17         | 4.17           | 0                       | 100          |
| Go to the self-access centre or library to study or consult the online sources. | 4.17                | 29.16       | 62.5          | 4.17           | 0                       | 100          |
| Always encourage myself to speak English with new words.                        | 33.33               | 41.66       | 16.67         | 4.17           | 4.17                    | 100          |

However, a study conducted by [Tri Mulyati \(2022\)](#) during the covid-19 pandemic shows a contrast result from the current study. [Tri Mulyati \(2022\)](#) on her study on "How is the learners' perception of learner autonomy in terms of planning, monitoring and organizing, and evaluation ability?" claims that during the Covid-19 epidemic, respondents had a negative sense of their learning autonomy. When they are required to learn in an online environment, the findings demonstrate that they lack learning autonomy. They lack planning, monitoring, and organising skills, as well as evaluating skills. This occurred because they had a heavy reliance on the lecturers' role in offline learning prior to the Covid-19 pandemic strike. She concluded her study by suggesting that lecturers should create self-directed learning in a way that encourages students to take charge of their own learning. The researcher then suggested that the learners need to apply the research findings for self- reflection to develop their learning autonomy.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study tries to address the question of how the students perceived their autonomous vocabulary learning. Questionnaires were sent online through google classroom for the respondents to answer. The findings reveal that learners have a high level of awareness and involvement in out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning. As learners' study resources are mainly in English, it is deemed important that they are able to employ different ways of autonomous vocabulary learning outside of class time. When

they know the different strategies that they can employ to learn vocabulary outside of class time, they will not depend a lot on their lecturer. This will further enhance their learning as they are able to manage their own learning time.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this study.

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