

Vocabulary Learning Strategies of a Fluent EFL Learner: A Case Study

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Abstract: Vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in EFL learning; however, limited qualitative research has explored how fluent learners apply vocabulary learning strategies in authentic contexts. This study aims to investigate the strategies used by a fluent EFL learner and examine how these strategies reflect cognitive and metacognitive processes based on Schmitt's taxonomy. A qualitative single-case study design was employed, involving one fluent English learner selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview and analyzed using systematic qualitative procedures. The findings reveal that the participant employed all five categories of vocabulary learning strategies in a flexible and context-dependent manner. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies were more prominent, as reflected in active engagement, contextual learning, and self-regulated learning practices. Vocabulary development was primarily supported by meaningful exposure and communicative use rather than mechanical memorization. These findings highlight the importance of examining fluent learners as information-rich cases to better understand effective vocabulary learning processes. The findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should emphasize authentic language use, strategic flexibility, and learner autonomy in higher education contexts.

Keywords: cognitive and metacognitive strategies, fluent EFL learner, qualitative case study, Schmitt taxonomy, vocabulary learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, as it enables learners to comprehend texts, express ideas, and participate effectively in academic communication (Hasanah et al., 2025). In higher education, vocabulary mastery is

essential for engaging with academic texts, producing written work, and participating in academic discourse.

However, vocabulary learning remains a challenging aspect of EFL acquisition. Learners often struggle not only to acquire new words but also to retain and use them appropriately in meaningful contexts (Wahyudin et al., 2021). These challenges highlight the importance of vocabulary learning strategies as deliberate actions that support learners in discovering, storing, and applying lexical knowledge (Amalia & Sulistyani, 2025). Vocabulary learning can also be supported through the integration of technology-based tools, which provide contextualized and interactive exposure to language input, helping learners understand meaning more effectively (Fakhrurriana & Nasrullah, 2023).

Schmitt's Taxonomy (1995) provides a widely recognized framework for analyzing vocabulary learning strategies, categorizing them into determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Importantly, these strategies reflect underlying cognitive and metacognitive processes, including how learners process information, regulate their learning, and adapt strategies based on their needs. This perspective allows vocabulary learning to be understood not only as a strategy used but also as a reflection of deeper learning processes. In addition, the use of visual and interactive media has been shown to improve students' vocabulary mastery by increasing engagement and facilitating better retention (Nurhayati & Togatorop, 2024).

Previous studies on vocabulary learning strategies have predominantly employed quantitative approaches, focusing on the frequency and correlation of the strategy (Cui & Kaur, 2024; Wahyudin et al., 2021). While these studies provide generalizable findings, they offer limited insight into how strategies are applied in authentic learning contexts. Furthermore, most studies focus on general EFL learners without considering differences in proficiency levels (Oktaviani & Wahyudin, 2022). Furthermore, the implementation of interactive teaching methods such as Total Physical Response (TPR) has been found to support vocabulary acquisition by linking language with physical activity and meaningful context (Afrianti & Rustipa, 2023).

Recent research indicates that strategy use is influenced by individual factors such as proficiency level, learning experience, and learner autonomy (Utami & Daulay, 2024). However, there remains a lack of qualitative research that explores how fluent or advanced EFL learners utilize and regulate vocabulary learning strategies in real learning situations, particularly within Indonesian higher education contexts. This gap is significant because proficient learners are more likely to demonstrate complex cognitive and metacognitive strategy use that cannot be captured through quantitative approaches alone.

In this study, a fluent EFL learner is defined as a student who demonstrates strong performance in vocabulary and speaking, as identified through lecturer recommendation based on academic performance.

Addressing this gap, the present study employs a qualitative single-case study to explore vocabulary learning strategies used by a fluent EFL learner.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What vocabulary learning strategies are used by the participants?
- (2) How are these vocabulary learning strategies applied in learning vocabulary?

This study aims not only to identify the types of vocabulary learning strategies used but also to examine how these strategies reflect underlying cognitive and metacognitive processes in vocabulary learning. By doing so, the study seeks to provide a deeper analytical understanding of how a fluent EFL learner regulates, adapts, and applies vocabulary learning strategies in authentic learning contexts.

The findings are expected to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of vocabulary learning and to support pedagogical practices that promote strategic and autonomous learning in EFL contexts.

METHODS

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were developed based on Schmitt, (1995) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, which includes determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. This framework provided a systematic basis for exploring the participants' strategy use.

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to explore vocabulary learning strategies used by a fluent EFL learner. A single-case study was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth and detailed investigation of an individual learner's experiences, providing rich and contextualized data.

The participant was a third-semester student of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kotabumi, selected using purposive sampling. The selection criteria focused on identifying a fluent EFL learner. In this study, fluency was operationally defined based on the participant's strong performance in vocabulary and speaking courses, as well as a recommendation from the lecturer. These criteria ensured that the participant had sufficient proficiency and experience in using English in academic contexts.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure that the participant could express experiences and perspectives clearly and comfortably. The interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy during the transcription process. The data obtained from the interview were considered sufficient to provide in-depth insights into the participants' vocabulary learning strategies.

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview, allowing flexibility for the researcher to explore the participant's responses in greater depth. The interview was conducted once with a duration of approximately 30-45 minutes, and consisted of focused open-ended questions.

Prior to data collection, the participant was informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate by providing informed consent. The researcher ensured confidentiality by anonymizing the participant's identity throughout the research process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through member checking, in which the participant was allowed to review and confirm the accuracy of the data and interpretations. Dependability was ensured by providing a clear and systematic description of the research procedures. In addition, the use of a well-established

theoretical framework (Schmitt, 1995) contributed to the consistency of data analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using a systematic qualitative procedure. First, the audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim into written form. Second, the researcher conducted initial coding by identifying meaningful units related to vocabulary learning strategies. Third, the coded data were categorized into five strategy types based on Schmitt, (1995) taxonomy: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. Finally, the data were interpreted by linking the identified strategies to the participants' learning experiences, allowing for deeper analysis of how cognitive and metacognitive processes were reflected in strategy use.

To ensure systematic and consistent analysis, specific indicators were used to classify the data into the five strategy categories. Determination strategy refers to instances where the participant independently discovered the meaning of new words without relying on others, such as through contextual guessing, dictionaries, or digital tools. Social strategy refers to learning vocabulary through interaction with others, such as asking questions or communicating with peers or more proficient speakers. Memory strategy involves linking new vocabulary with prior knowledge through association, imagery, or grouping techniques. Cognitive strategy reflects more mechanical processes, such as repetition, note-taking, and direct practice of vocabulary. Metacognitive strategy indicates the participant's ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning process, including setting goals and regulating their exposure to vocabulary learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of interview data with a fluent EFL learner. The data were analyzed based on Schmitt's (1995) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, which includes determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. The analysis aims not only to identify the strategies used but also to examine how these strategies reflect cognitive and metacognitive processes in vocabulary learning.

Table 1. Vocabulary Learning Strategies and their Application

Strategy	How the Strategy Is Used
Determination	Inferring meaning from context and confirming it using AI tools
Social	Practicing vocabulary through interaction with native speakers
Memory	Retaining vocabulary through repeated exposure in meaningful contexts
Cognitive	Applying vocabulary directly in communicative situations
Metacognitive	Regulating vocabulary learning based on personal needs and monitoring

As shown in Table 1, the participant employed all five categories of vocabulary learning strategies. The following discussion explains how each strategy was applied in real learning situations.

Determination Strategy

The participant frequently applied determination strategies by inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words from context before confirming them using external resources.

“Saya nyarinya bukan di kamus... tapi di AI seperti ChatGPT atau Gemini, karena dijelaskan secara detail.” (Participant)

“I don’t usually look up words in a dictionary... instead, I use AI tools like ChatGPT or Gemini because they provide detailed explanations.”

In addition, the participant reported guessing meanings based on contextual cues:

“Saya bisa nebak arti kata dari bahasa tubuh atau vibes dari film.” (Participant)

“I can guess the meaning of a word from body language or the overall vibe of a movie.”

These findings indicate that the participant actively engages in cognitive processing by utilizing contextual clues and prior knowledge before verifying meanings. The use of AI tools also reflects an adaptive strategy in contemporary learning environments, consistent with previous studies showing that EFL learners commonly use contextual guessing to understand unfamiliar vocabulary (Wahyudin et al., 2021), as well as digital dictionary applications such as U-Dictionary, which support learners in independently identifying and confirming word meanings more effectively (Adinda & Rahayu, 2023).

Social Strategy

Although the participant tended to learn independently, social strategies were still applied in certain situations, particularly through interaction with native speakers.

“Sekarang sering ngobrol sama native speaker... kadang langsung nanya.” (Participant)

“Now I often talk with native speakers... sometimes I ask them directly.”

However, the participant also stated:

“Dari dulu memang enggak punya siapa-siapa yang bisa ditanya, jadi lebih ke individu.” (Participant)

“In the past, I didn’t really have anyone to ask, so I mostly learned independently.”

This suggests that social strategies function as complementary rather than dominant strategies. The participant’s preference for independent learning reflects learner autonomy, while occasional interaction supports communicative vocabulary development. This finding is in line with previous research indicating that social interaction contributes to vocabulary learning, depending on learners’ experiences and contexts (Oktaviani & Wahyudin, 2022).

Memory Strategy

The participant initially used memorization strategies but later reduced their use due to cognitive overload.

“Dulu saya punya target sehari 10 kata... tapi ternyata overwhelm.” (Participant)

“I used to set a target of learning 10 words a day... but it became overwhelming.”

Instead, vocabulary retention occurred through meaningful exposure:

“Saya lebih ingat kalau sering dipakai atau didengar.” (Participant)

“I remember words better when I hear or use them frequently.”

This indicates a shift from mechanical memorization to contextual learning, where retention is strengthened through repeated exposure in meaningful contexts. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that meaningful use enhances vocabulary retention (Utami & Daulay, 2024), as visual and contextual media such

as comics can further reinforce learners' engagement and memory in vocabulary learning (Rakhmawati et al., 2021).

Cognitive Strategy

Cognitive strategies were reflected in the participant's active use of vocabulary in real contexts rather than relying on memorization.

“Biasanya saya langsung latihan saat itu juga setelah cari arti.” (Participant)
“I usually practice using the word immediately after I learn its meaning.”

The participant also emphasized learning through exposure:

“Belajar dari nonton film atau dengar orang ngomong.” (Participant)
“I learn from watching movies or listening to people speak.”

These findings demonstrate that cognitive processing occurs through active engagement, such as practicing and applying vocabulary in communication. The participant adapted learning strategies to real-life situations, reflecting flexible and context-driven cognitive strategy use. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of practice and contextual use in vocabulary learning (Wahyudin et al., 2021), as also reflected in interactive learning activities such as vocabulary games, which encourage learners to actively engage with and apply new words in meaningful contexts (Majidah, 2017).

Metacognitive Strategy

Metacognitive strategies were evident in how the participant regulated learning based on personal needs.

“Sekarang belajar kosakata sesuai kebutuhan aja.” (Participant)
“Now I learn vocabulary based on what I need.”

Additionally, the participant stated:

“Target hafalan sekarang sudah saya kurangi.” (Participant)
“I've reduced my memorization targets.”

This shows that the participant is able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning process. Such self-regulation reflects metacognitive awareness, which plays a significant role in effective vocabulary development (Septiani et al., 2024), as also reflected in the use of strategies such as the Vocabulary Self-Collection

Strategy (VSS), where learners actively select, monitor, and evaluate vocabulary based on their learning needs (Febrisera & Sugirin, 2021).

The findings reveal that the participant employed multiple vocabulary learning strategies in a flexible and integrated manner. Rather than relying on a single strategy, the participant adjusted strategy use based on context, learning needs, and personal preferences.

Importantly, vocabulary learning was primarily driven by contextual exposure, communicative interaction, and self-regulated learning rather than mechanical memorization. This reflects the role of cognitive and metacognitive processes in shaping effective vocabulary acquisition.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that EFL learners employ diverse strategies influenced by individual characteristics and learning environments (Oktaviani & Wahyudin, 2022; Utami & Daulay, 2024). However, this study provides deeper insights by demonstrating how a fluent learner strategically integrates these strategies in authentic learning contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the vocabulary learning strategies employed by a fluent EFL learner in a higher education context. The findings indicate that the participant utilized all five categories of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Schmitt (1995) namely, determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies.

The analysis reveals that the participant's strategy use was dynamic and context-dependent rather than fixed or isolated. Vocabulary development was primarily facilitated through contextual inference, meaningful exposure, communicative engagement, and conscious strategic adjustment rather than mechanical memorization. Among the identified strategies, cognitive and metacognitive strategies appeared to be more dominant, as they were more frequently reflected in the participants' learning practices. This suggests that effective vocabulary learning is closely related to learners' ability to actively engage with language and regulate their own learning processes.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the view that vocabulary learning strategies are closely linked to cognitive and metacognitive processes, particularly in the case of more proficient learners who demonstrate higher levels of self-regulation and strategic awareness. This study extends previous research by providing deeper insight into how these processes operate in authentic learning contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that vocabulary instruction in higher education should not only focus on memorization but also promote meaningful exposure, strategic flexibility, and learner autonomy. Teachers are encouraged to design learning activities that support active language use, contextual learning, and self-regulated learning strategies.

However, this study is limited to a single participant, which means that the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL learners. The results should be interpreted cautiously, as they reflect the experience of one fluent learner in a specific context.

Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants with varying proficiency levels and learning backgrounds. Further studies may also explore different contexts or employ multiple data collection methods to provide more comprehensive and generalizable insights into vocabulary learning strategies

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