

Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Enhancing Word Recognition at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu

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Abstract: *Vocabulary recognition is a fundamental skill in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), especially at the junior high school level. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing English vocabulary recognition among eighth grade students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. The research employed a qualitative descriptive design. The participants were ten eighth grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth information about the strategies students use and their perceptions of these strategies. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis by identifying, coding, and categorizing emerging themes. The findings revealed that students used various vocabulary learning strategies, including repetition, note-taking, dictionary use, guessing meaning from context, and simple digital tools. Among these strategies, repetition and writing new words were the most frequently used because students considered them easy and practical. Overall, students showed positive perceptions toward vocabulary learning strategies. They believed that consistent practice helped them recognize English words more quickly and understand meanings more clearly in reading activities. However, some challenges were identified, such as boredom in memorizing word lists and distraction when using digital devices. The study concludes that vocabulary learning strategies play an important role in improving students' vocabulary recognition. Explicit instruction and regular practice of appropriate strategies are recommended to support students' vocabulary development and enhance their English learning outcomes.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most important components in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Without enough vocabulary, students cannot understand texts, express ideas, or

communicate effectively. Many experts state that vocabulary knowledge is the foundation of language skills because it supports listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). When students know more words, they can recognize meanings faster and use language more confidently. For junior high school students, vocabulary recognition is a basic step before they move to more complex language use. Vocabulary recognition means the ability to identify words, understand their meanings, and connect them with context. Therefore, improving vocabulary recognition is very important in English learning at the secondary school level.

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language starting from early education levels. However, many students still face difficulties in recognizing and remembering English words. These difficulties may be caused by limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of practice, and ineffective learning strategies. In many cases, students depend only on memorizing word lists without understanding how to use the words in real communication. This traditional approach often makes students feel bored and unmotivated. As a result, vocabulary knowledge remains limited, and students struggle to recognize words when they meet them in texts or conversations.

To solve this problem, researchers and teachers have focused on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Vocabulary learning strategies refer to specific actions or techniques that learners use to understand, remember, and use new words (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). These strategies include guessing meaning from context, using dictionaries, repeating words, making word lists, using flashcards, learning through games, and applying digital applications. Studies show that when students use appropriate vocabulary learning strategies, their vocabulary knowledge can improve significantly (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). In addition, strategy use can help students become more independent learners.

Besides focusing on strategies themselves, it is also important to understand students' perceptions. Perception refers to how students think and feel about a learning strategy. Students' perceptions influence their motivation, participation, and learning outcomes. If students believe that a strategy is useful and easy to use, they are more likely to apply it regularly. On the other hand, if they see a strategy as difficult or unhelpful, they may avoid using it. Therefore, exploring students' perceptions can give valuable information for teachers to improve classroom practice.

Several recent studies have examined students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies. Research conducted in different EFL contexts shows that students generally have positive perceptions of interactive and technology-based strategies. For example, digital applications such as Quizlet, Duolingo, and gamified platforms have been reported to increase students' motivation and engagement in vocabulary learning (Aprilani & Suryaman, 2021; Zakiyah, 2024). Students often feel that these tools make vocabulary learning more interesting and practical. Other studies also show that strategies like extensive reading and vocabulary journals can help students improve vocabulary mastery and recognition (Octavianti et al., 2023; Students' Perceptions on Using Vocabulary Journal, 2023). However, some research also indicates that students may face challenges such as limited vocabulary size, lack of discipline, and distraction when using digital media.

Although many studies have discussed vocabulary learning strategies and students' perceptions, most research focuses on senior high school or university students. There is still limited research that explores the perceptions of junior high school students, especially in Islamic junior high schools (Madrasah Tsanawiyah). Students at this level may have different characteristics, learning needs, and challenges compared to older learners. Therefore, it is important to conduct research that specifically examines their experiences and perceptions.

This study focuses on eighth grade students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. Based on preliminary observation and informal discussion with teachers, many students still have difficulties in recognizing English vocabulary. Some students forget words easily after memorizing them. Others find it difficult to understand the meaning of words when they appear in sentences. In addition, students use different strategies in learning vocabulary, but it is not clear which strategies they prefer and how they perceive them. Understanding their perceptions can help teachers select strategies that are more suitable and effective for classroom practice.

Vocabulary recognition is closely related to reading comprehension and overall academic success. When students can recognize words quickly and accurately, they can understand texts more easily. According to Nation (2013), vocabulary size strongly influences reading comprehension in EFL contexts. If students lack vocabulary knowledge, they may fail to understand main ideas and details in texts. Therefore, improving vocabulary recognition is not only important for vocabulary learning itself but also for developing other language skills.

Furthermore, the role of learner perception is supported by educational theories such as the learner-centered approach. In this approach, students' voices and experiences are important in designing effective instruction. When teachers understand students' perceptions, they can adapt teaching methods to meet students' needs. Positive perceptions can increase motivation and self-confidence, while negative perceptions may reduce participation. Therefore, examining students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies can provide both theoretical and practical contributions.

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing English vocabulary recognition among eighth grade students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What vocabulary learning strategies are commonly used by students? (2) How do students perceive these strategies in terms of usefulness and effectiveness? (3) How do these strategies help students improve vocabulary recognition? By answering these questions, this study is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how students experience vocabulary learning in their real classroom context.

The findings of this study are expected to give several contributions. First, the study can enrich the literature on vocabulary learning strategies in the context of junior high school students in Indonesia. Second, the results can provide practical recommendations for English teachers at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu and other similar schools. Teachers can use the findings to design more effective vocabulary activities that match students' preferences and needs. Third, the study can encourage students to become more aware of their own learning strategies and motivate them to use effective techniques consistently.

Therefore, vocabulary recognition is a fundamental skill in English learning, especially for junior high school students. Vocabulary learning strategies play a significant role in supporting vocabulary development, but their effectiveness also depends on students' perceptions and attitudes. Although previous studies have shown positive results regarding various vocabulary learning strategies, limited research has focused on students' perceptions at the junior high school level in the Indonesian context. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by investigating students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing English vocabulary recognition at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. Through this research, it is hoped that more effective and student-centered vocabulary instruction can be developed to support better English learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary plays a central role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Many scholars agree that vocabulary knowledge is the foundation of language competence because it supports listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). Students who have sufficient vocabulary can understand texts more easily and express their ideas more clearly. In contrast, limited vocabulary often becomes a major barrier in language learning. For junior high school students, vocabulary recognition is especially important because it helps them identify word meanings quickly and accurately when they read or listen to English texts.

Vocabulary recognition refers to the ability to recognize a word form and connect it with its meaning. This includes recognizing spelling, pronunciation, and meaning in context. According to Nation (2013), vocabulary knowledge includes both receptive knowledge (recognizing and understanding words) and productive knowledge (using words in speaking and writing). At the early stages of learning, receptive vocabulary recognition is very important because it supports reading comprehension and basic communication. When students cannot recognize words automatically, they may struggle to understand simple sentences.

To improve vocabulary knowledge, researchers have emphasized the importance of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Vocabulary learning strategies are techniques or actions used by learners to understand, remember, and use new words (Oxford, 1990; Schmitt, 1997). Schmitt (1997) classifies vocabulary learning strategies into several categories, such as determination strategies (guessing meaning from context, using dictionaries), social strategies (asking teachers or friends), memory strategies (using repetition, grouping words), cognitive strategies (taking notes, making word lists), and metacognitive strategies (planning and evaluating learning). These strategies help learners become more active and independent in learning vocabulary.

Many studies have shown that the use of appropriate vocabulary learning strategies can improve students' vocabulary mastery. Nation (2013) states that repeated exposure and meaningful use of words are important for long-term retention. Strategies such as repetition, flashcards, and word association can strengthen memory. In addition, digital tools and mobile applications have recently become popular strategies in vocabulary learning. Technology-based strategies provide interactive activities that can increase students' motivation and engagement.

Recent research also highlights the importance of students' perceptions in the success of vocabulary learning strategies. Perception refers to learners' beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about a learning method or strategy. When students perceive a strategy as useful and enjoyable, they are more likely to use it consistently. For example, Aprilani and Suryaman (2021) found that students had positive perceptions of using Quizlet for vocabulary learning because it was practical and interesting. Similarly, Zakiyah (2024) reported that students perceived Duolingo as motivating and helpful in remembering new words. These findings show that positive perception can increase students' participation and practice frequency.

Other studies also confirm that interactive and engaging strategies are preferred by students. Octavianti et al. (2023) found that extensive reading activities helped students improve vocabulary mastery because students enjoyed reading meaningful texts. In addition, research on vocabulary journals (Students' Perceptions on Using Vocabulary Journal, 2023) showed that students believed writing new words in journals helped them remember meanings and usage more effectively. These studies suggest that students value strategies that allow active involvement and repeated practice.

However, not all strategies are equally effective for all learners. Some students may prefer visual strategies such as flashcards and pictures, while others may prefer digital games or collaborative learning. Individual differences, such as motivation, learning style, and language proficiency, influence the choice of strategies. Furthermore, some studies report challenges in using digital tools, such as distraction, limited internet access, and lack of discipline. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions is necessary to identify which strategies are truly helpful in a specific learning context.

In the Indonesian context, research on vocabulary learning strategies has been conducted mostly at senior high school and university levels. These studies generally show that students use a combination of memory and cognitive strategies, such as repetition, note-taking, and dictionary use. However, there is still limited research focusing on junior high school students, especially in Islamic junior high schools (Madrasah Tsanawiyah). Students at this level may have different needs and learning experiences compared to older learners. They are still developing basic vocabulary recognition skills and may need more structured guidance from teachers.

Understanding students' perceptions at the junior high school level is important for several reasons. First, it can help teachers select strategies that match students' preferences and abilities. Second, it can support the development of learner-centered instruction. Third, it can provide insight into the relationship between strategy use and vocabulary recognition ability. When students feel that a strategy is useful and easy to apply, they are more likely to practice regularly, which can improve vocabulary recognition over time.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing English vocabulary recognition. A qualitative approach was selected because the main purpose of the study was to understand students' experiences, opinions, and beliefs in depth. The research was conducted at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu during the 2025/2026 academic year.

The participants of this study were eighth grade students who had learned English vocabulary through various classroom activities. Ten students were selected using purposive sampling. They were chosen because they were active in English class and willing to share their experiences in learning vocabulary. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school and the English teacher. The students were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured.

The main instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview. The interview guide was developed based on theories of vocabulary learning strategies proposed by Schmitt (1997) and Oxford (1990). The questions focused on three main aspects: (1) the types of vocabulary learning strategies used by students, (2) students' perceptions of the usefulness of these strategies, and (3) how these strategies help them recognize and understand English words. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility so students could explain their experiences freely while still following the main research focus.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a comfortable setting at school. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure that students could express their ideas clearly, and important responses were later translated into English for reporting purposes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed for analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher read the transcripts several times to understand the data deeply. Then, the responses were coded and grouped into themes related to strategy use, perceived benefits, and challenges. Finally, the themes were interpreted to explain how vocabulary learning strategies support students' vocabulary recognition. To ensure credibility, member checking was applied by confirming several key responses with the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on semi-structured interviews with eighth grade students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. The findings are organized into three main themes: (1) types of vocabulary learning strategies used by students, (2) students' perceptions of the usefulness of these strategies, and (3) the contribution of these strategies to vocabulary recognition. The discussion integrates the findings with relevant theories and previous studies.

1. Types of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by Students

The interview results show that students use several vocabulary learning strategies in their English learning process. Most students reported using memory and cognitive strategies. For example, many students said that they often write new words in their notebooks and repeat them several times to remember the meaning. One student explained that repetition helps them "remember words faster before a test." This finding reflects memory strategies as described by Schmitt (1997), such as repetition and note-taking.

In addition, several students mentioned using dictionaries, especially online dictionaries, to find word meanings. This strategy belongs to determination strategies, where learners discover meanings independently. Some students also said that they try to guess the meaning of words from context when reading simple texts. Although not all students feel confident in guessing meaning, they believe that this strategy helps them understand texts better.

A few students reported using digital tools, such as vocabulary learning applications and short English videos on social media. They stated that these tools make learning more interesting and less boring. However, not all students use digital tools regularly due to limited internet access at home. Overall, the findings show that students combine traditional strategies (writing, repeating, memorizing) with simple digital strategies.

2. Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

In general, students expressed positive perceptions toward the vocabulary learning strategies they use. Most of them believe that repetition and note-taking are helpful because these strategies are simple and easy to apply. Students said that writing words repeatedly helps them remember spelling and meaning. This perception supports Nation's (2013) argument that repeated exposure strengthens vocabulary retention.

Students also perceived dictionary use as useful because it provides clear meaning and pronunciation. Some students explained that they listen to pronunciation from online dictionaries to improve their understanding. This indicates that vocabulary learning strategies not only support meaning recognition but also pronunciation awareness.

Regarding digital tools, students' perceptions were mixed but mostly positive. Those who used applications or videos felt more motivated because learning became more interactive. They explained that games and quizzes helped them remember words more easily. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Aprilani & Suryaman, 2021; Zakiyah, 2024), which reported that students perceive digital vocabulary tools as engaging and motivating. However, some

students admitted that they sometimes become distracted when using mobile phones. Instead of focusing on vocabulary learning, they open other applications. This suggests that although digital strategies are attractive, they require self-control and guidance.

Some students also mentioned that memorizing long word lists is boring and difficult. They feel stressed when they must memorize many words without understanding how to use them. This perception shows that mechanical memorization alone may not be effective for long-term vocabulary recognition. Students prefer strategies that include practice, examples, and repetition in context.

3. Contribution of Strategies to Vocabulary Recognition

The findings indicate that vocabulary learning strategies play an important role in helping students recognize English words. Most students reported that after writing and repeating words several times, they can recognize the words more quickly when they see them in reading texts. They also stated that using dictionaries helps them connect word forms with meanings more clearly.

Students who practice guessing meaning from context explained that this strategy helps them understand sentences without translating every word. Although they still make mistakes, they feel more confident in reading English texts. This suggests that vocabulary learning strategies support receptive vocabulary knowledge, especially word recognition.

Students who use digital tools reported improvement in remembering words because the activities are more enjoyable. For example, quizzes and games allow them to practice repeatedly without feeling bored. This finding aligns with research showing that interactive strategies increase motivation and vocabulary retention (Octavianti et al., 2023).

However, the interviews also reveal that vocabulary recognition improvement depends on how often strategies are used. Students who practice regularly show better recognition ability than those who study only before exams. This finding supports the idea that consistency is important in vocabulary development (Nation, 2013). Strategies are helpful only when students apply them continuously.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that vocabulary learning strategies are essential for improving vocabulary recognition among junior high school students. The students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu mainly use memory and cognitive strategies, such as repetition, note-taking, and dictionary use. These strategies are simple but effective for beginners. According to Schmitt (1997), these basic strategies are commonly used by learners at lower proficiency levels because they are easy to apply.

The positive perceptions expressed by students indicate that they are aware of the benefits of vocabulary learning strategies. When students believe that a strategy helps them remember words, they are more motivated to use it. This supports the idea that perception influences learning behavior. In line with learner-centered theory, understanding students' perceptions can help teachers design instruction that matches students' preferences.

The use of digital tools also shows the influence of technology in modern learning. Although traditional strategies remain dominant, students show interest in interactive methods. However, digital distraction is a challenge. Therefore, teachers need to guide students in using digital tools effectively and responsibly.

Another important finding is that vocabulary recognition improves when strategies are used regularly. This suggests that strategy instruction should not be given only once but integrated into daily classroom activities. Teachers can train students to use different strategies and encourage them to reflect on which strategies work best for them.

In conclusion, the findings show that vocabulary learning strategies positively influence students' vocabulary recognition. Students generally have positive perceptions of these strategies, especially repetition, dictionary use, and interactive tools. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on consistency and proper guidance. These results highlight the importance of teaching vocabulary learning strategies explicitly and supporting students in applying them regularly to enhance their English vocabulary recognition.

CONCLUSION

This study explored students' perceptions of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing English vocabulary recognition among eighth grade students at MTs Negeri 2 Kota Palu. The findings show that students use various vocabulary learning strategies, especially repetition, note-taking, dictionary use, and simple digital tools. Among these strategies, repetition and writing new words were the most commonly used because students considered them easy and practical. Students also showed positive perceptions toward dictionary use and interactive digital tools, as they helped them understand meanings and pronunciation more clearly.

The study reveals that vocabulary learning strategies contribute positively to students' vocabulary recognition. Students reported that repeated practice and consistent use of strategies helped them recognize words more quickly in reading texts. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on regular practice and proper guidance from teachers. Some challenges, such as boredom and digital distraction, were also identified.

Overall, the findings suggest that teaching vocabulary learning strategies explicitly and encouraging consistent use can support better vocabulary recognition. Teachers are recommended to combine traditional and interactive strategies to meet students' needs and improve English learning outcomes.

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