

EXPLORATION ON EDUCATORS' VOCABULARY STRATEGIES IN DEALING WITH THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY GRADE 8 ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract

In a classroom where teachers' strategies matter, their primary role is to help learners deal with their difficulties in accordance with the demands of the 21st-century teaching and learning process. Teachers' observations matter in identifying vocabulary development difficulties that might hamper their comprehension. This study seeks to identify the strategies used by 11 Grade 8 English teachers with 5 – 10 years of teaching experience in regular public schools. Findings from empirical data such as interviews and document-based sources reveal that lack of exposure to new words, lack of fluency and proficiency in the English language, and negative attitude towards reading are some of the difficulties encountered by learners. In addition, vocabulary strategies such as using online learning platforms, games, and conventional strategies were suggested as effective in addressing learners' needs. It is recommended that learners' ways of learning must be considered in order to help them with programs and interventions that will promote vocabulary development which enables and helps them accomplish individual and group tasks, engage in different conversations and work with different speeches as well. This study adheres to the importance of school administrators, curriculum designers, and language policymakers in devising a program that can help the learners develop their reading comprehension as well.

Keywords: *strategies, vocabulary, ESL learners, development*

1.0 Introduction

Vocabulary development is a necessary part of enhancing integrated language skills such as: listening, speaking, reading, and writing in learning. These help learners in the process of acquiring and production of knowledge

to acquire proficiency and competence in the target language.

Thus, there are a lot of concerns that hamper educators from helping their students to achieve comprehension. Meanwhile, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in 2018 revealed that the Philippines, out of

78 nations, ranked 77th. The average score was 340, far below 450 as cited from the report of the World Bank in 2020 and OECD in 2019. The result of the PISA was supported by the National Achievement Test (NAT) conducted last 2019 which reported that 99 percent of the test-takers did not fall under proficiency level in English which was really alarming. The result of the study was akin to Silvano et al. (2019) when the authors argued that 27% of learners fall under the frustration level, 26% under the independent level, and 47% fall under the instructional level. It was evident that students were struggling in the different national and international tests given to them. In the study of Ahsanuddin, et al. (2022), they revealed that a second language learner is expected to have a 98% level (above average) to comprehend an authentic text in which it is a prerequisite to follow simple instructions and to ace different national and international examinations. In this regard, this has resulted in the point that there is a linear development between vocabulary and comprehension (Quinn et al., 2014).

In addition, the result of vocabulary development improves reading comprehension (McQuillan, 2019; Pasicola et al., 2022). It helps students to comprehend different learning tasks through the guidance of the teacher. The English

teacher is the one who is responsible for teaching the students how to use words and start conversations/interactions, explain the directions in different tasks, communicate using the target language – English, and write paragraphs and essays as well (Santillan & Daenos, 2020).

Moreover, even in the Philippine setting which is exclusive to non-native speakers of English (NNSE), there is a prerequisite of the number of words to perform satisfactorily in any activities that they have to at least consider at least (3,000 most frequent- high) for a basic conversation, (between 3,000 and 9, 000 mid-frequency) to watch movies, and a person's vocabulary knowledge must be from 8,000 – 9,000 (low- word families) to be able to read authentic texts written in English. In other words, when students immersed themselves in reading different reading materials they will be able to understand what they are reading. As a result, these students are required to know 98% to 99% of the words in the text to ensure the possibility of adequate comprehension (Masrai, 2019; Bektaş-Çetinkaya, 2021).

On the other hand, there are problems that might affect learners' vocabulary development which can hamper them to comprehend different scenarios, learning tasks, and even following simple directions. Thus, schema theory emphasizes

es that students with limited prior knowledge have more difficulty in learning new words. For this reason, these learners may experience the Matthew Effect; that is, learners who do not really read well do not read, thus having deficit vocabulary-building opportunities.

In the Philippines, the knowledge of vocabulary is salient especially to junior high school learners for them to meet the competencies prescribed by the Department of Education (DepEd) and to survive in different academic tasks. This is one of the primary concerns of educators even pre-pandemic and now that the Covid-19 pandemic is about to end and teachers and students have come back to the classroom. This revealed that there are insufficient vocabulary lessons, limited sufficient word understanding, poverty and lack of exposure to meaningful conversations, and poor reading ability (Amizai, 2021). As a result of poor vocabulary, students encounter difficulty with fluency, standardized tests and reading in general.

For this reason, in considering vocabulary development strategies; either modern or traditional, educators consider creating a visual space to learn vocabulary which is less time-consuming but somehow requires perseverance and effort, and is not-so-expensive (Huei, et al. 2021). The significance

of utilizing technology-mediated components on vocabulary encompasses the following characteristics such as availability and accessibility of materials, user-friendliness, and instant-error feedback which can result in an increase of word usage. In relation to this, there are also traditional strategies such as using context clues, dictionaries, associating with familiar words and experiences, analyzing word structure, and reading as a habit.

The research, therefore, aims to identify the strategies used by Grade 8 teachers in dealing with the difficulties encountered by students in one of the schools in the Division of Taguig City and Pateros.

2.0 Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on Mayer's Cognitive theory of multimedia learning which is based on Wittrock's generative theory and Paivio's dual-coding theory. This theory presupposes the following constructs such as dual channels, where auditory and visual process information. Individuals' ears are used to process information in the form of narrations, spoken words, and sounds. Meanwhile, videos/animations, graphs, and pictures are received through one's eyes. The second construct is the limited capacity that pertains to the ability of an individual to process information

in each channel at any one time, which is not unlimited. Therefore, when a learner experiences difficulties in cognitive processing it may result in cognitive overload that can hamper their learning. The third construct is active processing which highlights the use and effectiveness of the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (CTML) where learners are instructed to select words and images, and then integrate them with prior knowledge drawn from long-term memory that is brought back to short-term memory to facilitate processing. In addition, the cognitive theory of multimedia learning emphasizes the use of pictures and words for vocabulary development as the two multimedia presentation modes come into sensory memory through the ears and eyes. Written words and pictures are kept in the visual memory, while sounds and spoken words are held in sensory memory, respectively. When learners select information from the working memory it will surely transfer into one's memory that is being processed. Learners become aware that there are "raw materials" that pertain to images and the sound of words on the left side, whereas the right side presents knowledge that has been constructed in the working memory. During this time, the learner started to establish connections between pictorial and verbal models. The last box

on the right side shows how long-term memory works in which it can assist learners hold information and it can be linked to prior knowledge. Moreover, the cognitive theory of multimedia learning (CTML) emphasizes that learners can process concepts, words, and pictures through long-term memory; these should be actively and evidently moved back and forth from long-term memory to working memory. As a result, the connection between learners' new knowledge and prior knowledge is activated because there is a strong link between working memory and long-term memory.

This study aims to identify the vocabulary strategies (practices) of Grade 8 teachers in addressing Grade 8 English as second language learners on word recognition and acquisition.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by Grade 8 ESL learners in connection with vocabulary development based on the teachers' observation?
2. What vocabulary strategies incorporated by teachers can improve Grade 8 students in face-to-face learning?

3.0 Method

Design

This study was conducted in accor-

dance with the phenomenological design, which is one of the qualitative research designs. Phenomenological studies aim to reveal how an individual perceives and experiences the world a phenomenon as a result of his or her interaction with the world as well as to describe, understand and interpret the structure of the phenomena (Ezer & Aksüt, 2021). The researcher utilized descriptive approach in describing the lived experiences through an exhaustive phenomenological analysis within the perspective of phenomenological reduction (Georgi et al., 2017). This helps the researcher maintain the “voice” of the participants without abstracting their viewpoints. Meanwhile, the participants in this study were chosen purposively. These English teachers are regular permanent and they have been serving DepEd for 5 – 10 years. The schools were picked up using the lottery method. There were 3 participating public schools and the participants were referred by their school heads and English department head, respectively. In this regard, this study identifies the learners’ vocabulary difficulties and their possible effects on the acquisition of words; their vocabulary development strategies; the incorporation of these strategies into their day-to-day lessons, and to enumerate the vocabulary strategies in face-to-face learning.

Data Gathering Procedure

The semi-structured interview was used as empirical material to obtain insights on the participants’ vocabulary difficulties and strategies that can improve learners’ vocabulary. The researcher sought approval from the school principals, department heads, and from select Grade 8 English teachers. In terms of the development of the interview protocol for the participants, the researcher followed the four-phase process by Castillo-Montoya (2016). The four-phase process includes phase 1: ensuring interview questions align with research questions; phase 2: constructing an inquiry-based conversation; phase 3: receiving feedback on the interview protocol, and phase 4: piloting the interview. The participants were asked at their most convenient day and time so that they can be interviewed. Since face-to-face education has been fully implemented in all public schools, teachers are tasked to report and give their best to provide quality education. The interview was recorded with the permission of the participants. The data obtained from the interview was transcribed and prepared for coding. After coding, the data were analysed through Phenomenological Analysis (Colaizzi, 1978).

Empirical Materials

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as an empirical material. It is composed of seven questions which may serve as a guide to interviewer to expound on certain issues and problems relative to vocabulary difficulties and development of learners.

The data analysis plan in this research followed Colaizzi (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. The use of Colaizzi's distinctive seven steps process of rigorous analysis provides a concise and thorough description of the phenomenon under study that which confirmed by the participants who experienced it. In addition, this method also depends upon rich first-person accounts of experience that will come from face-to-face interviews, collection of journal entries, and member check interview. The researcher analyzed the data using Colaizzi (1978) which has seven steps for evaluating the data. The first step is familiarization of all participant accounts several times, the second step is identifying the significant statements which are under phenomenon; the third step is formulating meaning through bracketing; the fourth step is to cluster the themes. The fifth step is to develop an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and the sixth step is to produce the fundamental structure. Furthermore, the last seven-step seek verification of

the fundamental structure of participants' experiences (Buque, 2021).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher applies credibility Lincoln and Guba (1981). Credibility was ensured in choosing an appropriate method in terms of selecting the participants and in analysing the data. In addition, the researchers returned the transliterated interview to the participants to read, check, and verify the raw data (Stahl & King, 2020). The participants confirmed that their answers were reflected in the transcription. Meanwhile, to ensure that the result has been verified, the researcher sought help from the colleagues otherwise known as peer-debriefing.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Based on the verbatim transcripts of the eleven English teachers, significant statements were extracted to formulate meaning.

Vocabulary development difficulties of Grade 8 learners have been identified by their English teachers. Based on the teachers' observation, participants 3, 4, and 7 stated that: "*vocabulary development involves learning of new words, understanding their definitions, and knowing how to use them correctly in different con-*

texts. Meanwhile, one of the difficulties encountered by participant 2 is that: *"learners building background is limited."* This means that they lack prior knowledge/schema in the English language. Another problem encountered, as stated by participant 5 is: *"lack of exposure to new words, difficulty understanding word meanings, and limited opportunities to practice using new words."* This implies that no programs or interventions are provided to learners. As a result, participant 6 revealed that: *"contextual learning involves new words in the context of a sentence or passage rather than memorization, while vocabulary games like crossword puzzles, word searches, and Scrabble can be fun and engaging ways for learners to practice their vocabulary skills."* When I asked the participant, she mentioned that considering these games as my strategies helped my learners appreciate the importance of each word through games.

Theme 1: Teachers' Perspectives on Vocabulary Development and Difficulties

Educators have been trying to help the students in relation to how vocabulary development can foster them to acquire new words in accordance with the strategies that the teachers need to use.

In dealing with vocabulary

development, participant 5 stated that: *"for me it is the process by which a person grows his lexical knowledge for a better understanding and more effective use of a second language."* A person's quenching for words must be encouraged in order to comprehend and effectively use the language. The statement was akin to Participant 3 when she stated that: *"it refers to the process through which humans learn new words."* Meanwhile, participant 4 revealed that: *"it is the process by which a learner acquires a new set of words."* These participants have a full grasp of vocabulary development since these teachers are fully aware that it can affect students' comprehension. In the study of Cubucku (2008), the researcher argued that comprehension of learners does not happen instantly because there are several aspects of the environment that solely affect learners' vocabulary which teachers must be aware of.

In addition, participant 1 stated that: *"Good evening, sir Val. Vocabulary Development is one of the tasks that English teachers should integrate or consider in their classes because when they are able to develop the vocabulary skills of their learners then it would be helpful to develop learners' comprehension."* This means that it does not limit the teachers from helping the students understand each lesson through vo-

cabulary building. This was proved by Wagner et al. (2007) when they mentioned that comprehending passages requires an individual not only to read words but to comprehend as well. For this reason, Kachele (2019) revealed that students develop vocabulary skills through the incorporation of various literary texts to make teaching and learning meaningful and for them to enhance their reading comprehension.

On the other hand, the participants are worried about the growing needs of learners in word acquisition, specifically when Participant 3 stated that: *"learners' limited exposure to words; struggle to read; having developmental delays; cultural differences, and they are having difficulty in learning new vocabulary terms because they struggle with language in general."* Similarly, due to limited exposure to the acquisition of words; participant 5 enthused that: *"a lot of words are not used or almost absent in conversation that they become too unfamiliar and difficult for the learners to make sense of."* Due to time constraints, the participants focused on what the learners needed to study in the module. In this regard, teachers were required to maximize the use of modules for the learners. As revealed by Participant 4: *"idiomatic expressions and context clues"* were the most difficult topics for the learners to under-

stand. For this reason, Participant 1 pointed out, *"I think when it comes to vocabulary learning or vocabulary development, one of the challenges that the learners are facing is that they don't really have the grasp of the language. That is why they have a hard time understanding the words they really do not know. This is because they don't have prior knowledge about the word or I think they are not into reading."* Participant 1 has been teaching for ten years and she has already met different types of learners who have different learning styles and multiple intelligences. Moreover, participant 6 enthused that: *"learners may encounter difficulties in developing their vocabulary for various reasons, such as a lack of exposure to new words, difficulty understanding word meanings, and limited opportunities to practice using new words. Additionally, some learners may struggle with the pronunciation and spelling of new words, making it harder for them to incorporate these words into their vocabulary."* Having these problems can hamper them to acquire new knowledge.

Theme 2: Observation of Teachers' Time Frame in Enumerating and Addressing Learners' Difficulties

A lot of educators immersed themselves in reading different articles on how to determine the caus-

es of individual difficulties relative to word acquisition. Upon using various approaches in determining learners' difficulties, teachers are now prepared with their knowledge of possible strategies anchored on pervasive situations. For this reason, participant 1 confidently said: *"yes, it can be addressed since English is part of their curriculum, part of the K to 12 curriculum. Language can be integrated with literature and vice versa so I guess learners will be able to learn new words. It would be easier for them to learn the language. When teachers would unlock these unfamiliar words in their lessons, it would be of great help to the students to develop their vocabulary."* The participants strongly believed that literature lessons could help language learning since educators are expected to unlock vocabulary words and eventually use them in sentences. This claim was supported by Kern (2022) when the author explained that the students are expected to analyze the meaning of words in every literary text which can be added to their word bank. Similarly, these teachers are confident that they can help their students acquire information as long as there is an integration of topics. Learners must be guided by their teachers and provide them with a positive learning environment as Participant 2 stated that: *"yes, we engage them in learning activities, start interest-*

ing conversations, and encourage them to read as well. Interactions are the key to helping learners develop confidence in appreciating the beauty of language. Encouraging them to read can also help them to learn new words that can really be helpful in enhancing their skills. Moreover, once they are able to acquire words, they are able to apply them in real-life situations as well. This was proved by Participant 4 by saying, *"Yes it can be, the learners must be exposed to different expressions, so they can learn and apply them."* By applying what they have learned, they will not forget the words. Participant 5 manifested that: *"I think so by introducing a culture of reading, learners will be responsive because they will be able to appreciate it."* Without reading, learners cannot acquire and use sentences. Reading is as important as dealing with your studies, especially when you want to achieve your goals. Developing one's comprehension can help you deal with the speakers of the English language as they are immersed in how words are used regardless of one's context.

Further, one of the participants answered a specific time frame for the teachers to follow. According to Participant 11: *"Given a specific time frame, Yes of course. Thus, for me, it will require a lot of effort and consistency. Starting from September to May, with con-*

sistency and the right strategy since we have different students with different problems; we should make a diagnosis first. A single strategy will not be perfect for everyone. Since some of the learners are advanced and some of them need attention." Meanwhile, "Vocabulary development activities can be addressed within a specific time frame like 5 months, as long as the activities are well-planned and effectively implemented. However, the time required for each learner to develop their vocabulary may vary based on their proficiency level and learning style" as mentioned by Participant 6.

Theme 3: Vocabulary Development Strategies in Guiding Learners

In this cluster, the participants in the research, regarding their idea on the term "strategy" and how it can be implemented in the classroom.

In this regard, participant 7 answered: "My idea of a strategy is that it is more akin to the term's "technique" and "methodology". The term "strategy" denotes a more direct, impactful solution to a pre-existing problem. On the other hand, I usually associate the word "approach" with terms such as "perspective", "point of view", "attitude" etc. Simply put, when I use the term "approach", I perceive it to be a way for me to relate better to my students, or

at least try to understand where they're coming from. Only then can I apply relevant strategies to suit their needs? Participant 7 compared the strategy to an approach.

In addition, the participants identify the strategies that they used for their students. According to Participant 11: "My favorite strategies are word wall and word for the day." Similarly, participant 3 mentioned during the interview, "spelling activity, word of the day, context clues and sometimes word association. These are the strategies I adopted. I'm just bringing back the old ones that I think helped me when I was still at their level."

These participants solely adhered to the strategies that their teachers used while they were studying. They experienced how each strategy can be used with different types of learners in accordance with their level of comprehension.

Meanwhile, participant 5 stated: "I used online learning applications, in particular, such as Mentimeter, Kahoot, and Quizziz where students can choose the correct answer. I can't claim ownership of ideas though because for sure others have done the same activities that entail student engagement." Besides, participant 10 revealed: "I always start with the basics which is giving means since it's one of the foundations in widening their vocabulary. I let the students use mo-

bile dictionaries since they are into using gadgets. I also let my students play vocabulary games for them to be more exposed to different words.

Theme 4: Integration of Vocabulary Development Practices

Vocabulary development strategies have been realized if these are incorporated into preliminary activities before and during the discussion of the lessons. In this cluster, participant 7 mentioned that *"I would like to think that I use a modified strategy like this in my classes. I always remind my students to be inquisitive and attentive towards my discussions, because there are usually terms in my lessons that they might not know the meaning of. For instance, in my Media and Information Literacy class, I remember one student asking me about how we define "media" in the subject. According to this student, the only "media" in her vocabulary was the one concerning news anchors and journalists, ala-24 Oras or TV Patrol. Of course, the answer to that question would be a focal point of our discussion, but that question made me glad for two reasons. 1) She was immediately applying the vocabulary development strategy I had introduced to them. 2) She had enough foresight to recognize this to be a potential learning moment for her."* This means that the learner was ea-

ger to help herself acquire a new word by relating it to TV programs.

Furthermore, participant 10 answered: *"I always incorporate vocabulary development in my lessons because the more I do it; the more the students understand my lesson."*

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Vocabulary development is one of the sub-skills that learners need to focus on to achieve comprehension. Teachers are aware of its positive effect on the totality of an individual in terms of conversation, presentation, and speaking engagements and without the acquisition of words, learners would be able to find it difficult to express themselves in an efficient way. The use of online learning applications and other strategies can help the teachers introduce engaging discussions with the learners. Learners are able to perceive these words with their eyes and ears as they process information in the form of narrations, spoken words, and sounds as well anchored on Mayer's cognitive theory of Multimedia Learning.

The teaching and learning process of learners with different learning styles must be prioritized by the teachers. They must provide opportunities to learners by thinking of programs that are anchored to multimedia that will promote vocab-

ulary development. Language policymakers and curriculum designers may consider Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia learning in developing programs for learners.

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