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## LEARNING L2 BY UTILIZING DICTIONARY STRATEGIES: LEARNER AUTONOMY AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The research aimed to discover what strategies learners employed in using dictionaries and examine the EFL learners' perspectives in using dictionaries to learn English. Dictionaries were considered meaningful by EFL learners as they were central devices that assisted learning second-language vocabulary. However, not many researchers have investigated the use of these three dictionary strategies in the English for Foreign Language (EFL) context, especially in Indonesia. The data were collected using dictionary strategy questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. One hundred forty-eight students from an Indonesian higher education institution completed a questionnaire survey voluntarily, and then they were selected as samples regarding purposive sampling that typically represented the population. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first asked for participants' personal information and provided several statements from Gu and Johnson about dictionary strategies. The second solicited their opinion about using a dictionary, translated in the Indonesian language. The results show that Indonesian students are aware of how to use dictionaries for comprehension, extended, looking-up strategies, and exploring their beliefs about applying dictionary strategies. These results can help language teachers have a deeper perspective on students' dictionary strategies in learning so that educators can use those three main dictionary strategies. One such strategy is that teachers can introduce the approaches to their students either implicitly or explicitly by designing meaningful assignments and providing relevant activities and tasks for the students. Therefore, deciding to use a dictionary to overcome the issue is one of the best ways to deal with vocabulary acquisition as it offers more benefits.*

**Keywords:** dictionary strategy, learner autonomy, learning strategy, EFL Learner

### INTRODUCTION

English has been growing as a widely-spoken language in the world, especially among non-native English speakers. To have better competence, these particular people are encouraged to learn English so that they can function in this era of globalization. They typically not only receive knowledge from formal schools but are also required to activate self-regulated learning (Hamouda, 2013). Nonetheless, the unavailability of English teachers outside of schools

requires learners to identify what kinds of information are trustworthy, which they could use whenever having difficulties. Therefore, the use of English dictionaries could fulfill the students' learning needs. Abood (2020) has pointed out that dictionaries contribute to a breadth of helpful linguistic and cultural knowledge. Similarly, Walz in Spracklin (2019) has mentioned that using a dictionary is one of the impactful learning strategies that can be crucial and effective learning resources in providing lexical information in second language learning. Thus, it is commonly agreed that dictionaries

are considered excellent companions for language learners since they give immediate opportunities and access to the meaning of unfamiliar words. However, based on the researchers' understanding, only a few studies have contributed to investigating the dictionaries' strategies used in the Indonesian context. The research then fulfills this gap.

Dictionaries are deemed helpful by EFL learners as they are crucial tools to develop language acquisition (Yan, 2019). Indeed, they are fundamental contributors to the learning resources dealing with vocabulary knowledge (Hamouda, 2013). At present, the use of dictionaries has become one of the appealing strategies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as it has considerable advantages in improving vocabulary growth and understanding. For example, the students' vocabulary ability in form-meaning relation can be enhanced as they immediately expose the meaning of the target words in the dictionary. It creates the possibility for the students to directly notice the meaning of the words in the dictionaries. This could be a good starting point to learn words in English. Therefore, it is an excellent indication to figure out what strategies the students mostly use and apply when using dictionaries to approach unknown words and their perspectives regarding the use of a dictionary.

From all the definitions, it can be summarized that vocabulary is the core component of language proficiency that consists of a set of lexemes that provides much of the basis for how well learners read, write, listen, and speak (Hakim, Abidin, & Bahari, 2018). Furthermore, it can be summed up that vocabulary is all the words known and used by a person in a language, complete with their meanings, and the meanings are used depending on the context. Furthermore, those definitions clearly show that vocabulary, besides the other English components and skills, is the first and fundamental element that should be learned by English learners to master English well. Thus, learning vocabulary is crucial in developing learners' English (Hakim et al., 2020).

The application of dictionary strategy seems to have several focused dimensions. According to Gu and Johnson's (1996) questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies, dictionary strategies consist of three components: dictionary strategies for comprehension, extended dictionary strategies, and looking-up strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996). However, not many studies have investigated the use of these three dictionary strategies in the English for Foreign Language (EFL) context, especially in Indonesia. Due to this current issue, the present research is interested in examining what dictionary strategies are commonly used by Indonesian EFL learners and their perspectives regarding the use of dictionary strategies in vocabulary learning.

A strategy is needed in the process of reaching learning goals. Hardan (2013) has mentioned that learners need to know what learning strategies to apply and how to use them effectively. The term learning strategies (LS) has been defined by many researchers

since the 1980s. Brown (2002) has defined it as a series of actions leading to learning improvement. Similarly, Wenden in Ghalebi, Sadighi, and Bagheri (2021) has stated that learning strategies are a wide range of actions used by learners to succeed in learning. In terms of language learning, characterized language-learning strategies (LLS) as thoughtful self-regulation approaches applied by learners to have more comfortable and faster learning (Griffiths, 2018). O'Malley and Chamot in Hashim, Yunus, and Hashim (2018) have gone further to describe this term as techniques and devices used by second language learners to remember and organize samples of the second language to help them comprehend, learn, or gain new information. Therefore, the critical concept of language learning strategies (LLS) by Hardan (2013) is the process of technique usage by learners in language practices.

Considerably more research has been conducted to define language learning strategies (LLS). For example, as seen in his explanatory model (Figure 1), Gu and Johnson in Ng, Azizie, and Chew (2021) have gone deeper into a task's perspective in defining LLS. To complete a language task, a person needs to use strategies so that the learning can be much easier. Also, it could be seen that strategies used by a learner could be determined by the context, which means that different learning contexts may result in different strategies being used to complete the same task. For example, beginner and advanced students may use different approaches in knowing and remembering the words to understand collocations in vocabulary. Hence, no matter the task, it is acceptable for the learners to use whatever types of language strategies they find most interesting and useful. It can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Person-Task-Context-Strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996)

Vocabulary is one of the main aspects of second language acquisition (Lekawael, 2017) because it has a fundamental role in supporting learners' success in learning English. The learners need as much vocabulary knowledge as possible because there are various lexical classifications, which have to be known by language learners (Nation, 2013; Huang & Elsami, 2013). Therefore, language learners need to incorporate effective and appropriate Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). Baskin et al. (2017) have

defined this term as having two fundamental strategies. Firstly, the discovery strategy is employed to discover and explore words; secondly, the consolidation strategy aims to consolidate words once they have been encountered. Similarly, Asgari and Mustapha (2011) have defined VLS as the process of acquiring new lexical resources. Gu (2020) has added that VLS is also a tool in empowering learners to make wise decisions in terms of what to learn and how to learn. Therefore, the core definition of VLS relates to the process of using a tool or strategy in developing vocabulary knowledge.

Indeed, second language learners need to use relevant and useful vocabulary strategies in language learning, as there is a wide variety of approaches to developing vocabulary knowledge. Gu and Johnson in Ng, Azizie, and Chew (2021), and Asgari and Mustapha (2011) have reported that the participants in their research used a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies. One of the strategies relates to the use of the dictionary. This strategy provides learners with detailed information and guidance on linguistic aspects (grammatical functions, pronunciation, word-meaning, and usage) together with written elaborations in a clear and structured vocabulary (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011). Additionally, Mohammadi and Es-hagi (2018) may show examples of lexical dimensions applied in different contexts.

Thus, it is essential to note that access to a dictionary contributes to the learners' vocabulary development, as supported by several studies from Kim (2019); Zaytseva, Miralpeix, and Pérez-Vidal (2021); Farrokhi, Zohrabi, and Bolandnazar (2021); Afshar (2021); Aravind and Rajasekaran (2020); and Hakim, Abidin, and Bahari (2018). EFL learners seem to rely heavily on dictionaries (Makoko & Otlogeswe, 2020; Thi, 2021; Ariffin, 2021). Hence, they may apply some dictionary strategies whenever they use one, as stated in Gu and Johnson's study (Ng, Azizie & Chew, 2021). Some students may focus on dictionary use for comprehension, but some may employ extended and looking-up strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to discover more about the strategies used in the dictionary, along with the students' opinions on these.

## METHODS

The research employs a total of 148 students from an Indonesian higher education institution who voluntarily completed a questionnaire survey on the use of dictionary strategies. They are selected as samples in regard to purposive sampling that typically represents the population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Firstly, a dictionary strategies questionnaire is employed. This seventeen-item questionnaire is adapted from Gu and Johnson (1996) to elicit participants' dictionary-strategy use. It is conducted using an online google form, which allows the researchers to gather data quickly, as it supports cost-efficiency and is time-saving (Wright, 2005;

Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first asks for participants' personal information and provides several statements from Gu and Johnson about dictionary strategies. The second is soliciting their opinion about using a dictionary, translated into Indonesian. The data is then analyzed, converted into percentages, and finally represented in Figure 2.

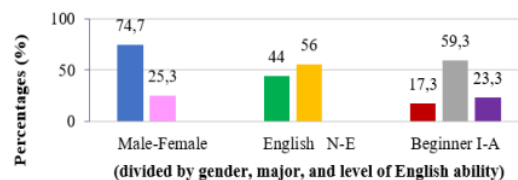


Figure 2 Participant Demographic Information

Semi-structured interviews are used to elicit deeper and broader information from participants' perspectives regarding their responses to the questionnaire. Whereas the latter provides quantitative data, the interview gathers qualitative information. Four students from Indonesian higher institutions who completed the questionnaire and met the criteria (for example, the students who answered all the questionnaires and learned English by using dictionaries) are voluntarily interviewed. The interview is conducted via WhatsApp as it is an online platform that has many advantages, such as being a free and quick way to gather data from different geographical locations. The main questions are, for example, "Do you think using dictionary strategies is useful to learn words and improve your vocabulary knowledge, and why?" Then, the qualitative data from students' opinions are analyzed and reported into the findings section.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 shows the results from questionnaire adapted from Gu and Johnson (1996) based on each item in percentage terms.

Figure 3 provides information regarding the use of three key dictionary strategies by Indonesian students. In general, the most commonly used approach is comprehension strategy with a mean percentage of 65,8%, followed by looking-up, and extended strategy with 55,7 % and 43,4%, respectively.

By looking in more detail into each group of items in Figure 2, it can be noticed that each item in comprehension strategies ranges from 50% to 88%, in which S1 with 88% (132 respondents) gains the highest rate not only among its group items but also amongst all strategies in the other categories. The remaining items, like S2, S3, and S4 with 60,7 %, 64,7%, and 50%, respectively, have also been chosen

by the participants. This means that the students tend to use a dictionary whenever they encounter new words (Shadmanova & Raximova, 2019; Nation, 2013; Chen 2017) to confirm their guess (Wang & Qi, 2018; Huang & Eslami, 2013; Nation, 2013), and to attempt to understand keywords, which play significant roles in

comprehending the texts (Nation, 2013). However, if the students have a lack of understanding about these common comprehension strategies, understanding a text would be a challenging job for them. That is why this category of strategies comprises the most crucial part of vocabulary learning.

Table 1 The Results from Questionnaire Adapted from Gu and Johnson based on Each Item in Percentage Terms

Dictionary Strategies	Statements	Code	Results	%	Mean
			R	%	
Comprehension strategies	When I see an unfamiliar word again and again, I look it up.	S1	132	88	65,8
	When I want to confirm my guess about a word, I look it up.	S2	91	60,7	
	When not knowing a word prevents me from understanding a whole sentence or even a whole paragraph, I look it up.	S3	97	64,7	
	I look up words that are crucial to the understanding of the sentence or paragraph in which it appears.	S4	75	50	
Extended-dictionary strategies	I pay attention to the examples of use when I look up a word in a dictionary.	S5	52	34,7	43,4
	I look for phrases or sent expressions that go with the word I look up.	S6	69	46	
	I consult a dictionary to find out about the subtle differences in the meaning of English words.	S7	66	44	
	When I want to know more about a word that I already have some knowledge of, I look it up.	S8	45	30	
	When I don't know the usage of the word I already have some knowledge of, I look it up.	S9	33	22	
	I make a note when I want to help myself distinguish between the meanings of two or more words.	S10	90	60	
	When looking up a word in the dictionary, I read sample sentences illustrating various meanings of the word.	S11	74	49,3	
	When I get interested in another new word in the definitions of the word I look up, I look up this word as well.	S12	92	61,3	
Looking-up strategies	If the new word is inflected, I remove the inflections to recover the form to look up.	S13	89	59,3	55,7
	If the new word I try to look up seems to have a prefix or suffix, I will try the entry for the stem.	S14	63	42	
	If the unknown appears to be an irregularly inflected form or a spelling variant, I will scan nearby entries.	S15	83	55,3	
	If there are multiple sense or homographic entries, I use various information to reduce them by elimination	S16	83	55,3	
	I try to integrate dictionary definitions into the context where the unknown was met and arrive at a contextual meaning by adjusting for complementation and collocation, part of speech, and breadth of meaning.	S17	100	66,7	

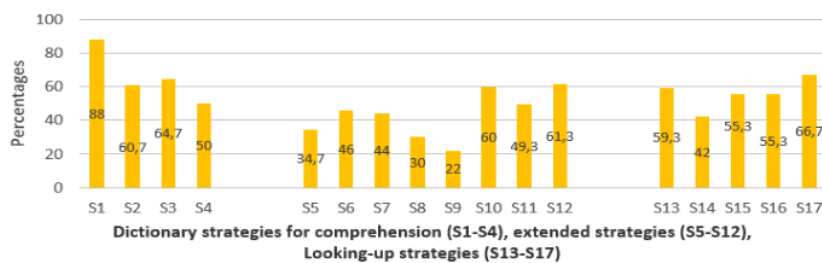


Figure 3 The Percentages of Dictionary Strategies

Then, looking-up strategies gain the second priority (mean = 55,7%) among the students when using dictionaries, with each item ranging from 42% to 66,7%. However, these rates do not seem considerably too high, which means that in most cases, only around half of the total participants employed these strategies. It is assumed that the students may encounter words with suffixes and prefixes, spelling variants, multiple senses/ homographic entries, contextual meaning, collocation, etc. Of course, those components of words could pose misleading effects for the learners if they do not become familiar with them (Nation, 2013). Therefore, the result could imply that still, not many students know how to apply the looking-up strategies, or they may rather apply other strategies.

Lastly, the extended strategies range from 22% to 61,3%, making this strategy the least chosen one. It can be inferred that the students may not be familiar with these strategies, so their level of understanding of words may be lacking. This is because they do not attempt to gain more knowledge about concepts such as the examples of words used in sentences, words' other meanings, etc. Perhaps the students do not know how to apply these strategies, even by their teachers. That could be the reason why the strategy remains unexplored by many students.

Overall, this finding confirms other research on dictionary use, in which the students mostly consult their dictionaries for word comprehension (Battenburg, 2017; Hamouda, 2013). However, the other strategies, such as looking-up and extended strategies, are not frequently used by the students. Further research is suggested to look for the reasons why students occasionally apply the two strategies.

The participants are asked about their beliefs in using dictionary strategies in the questionnaire. In terms of the usefulness of understanding English words, it is found that 147 students (98%) answer with "yes" and only three students (2%) claim that they only feel "so-so", while none of them chose "no". Also, 85% of the students confirm that dictionary strategies could develop vocabulary understanding, and 15% remain "so-so". However, none of them chose "no" in those two items. Therefore, this result provides a piece of additional evidence that the participants mostly feel that dictionary strategies are helpful for them in learning English and could enhance vocabulary learning. It can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 Learners' Opinions about Dictionary Strategies

Items	Answers		
	Yes	So-so	No
Do you believe that using dictionary strategies are useful in understanding English words?	98%	2%	0%
Do you believe that using dictionary strategies could improve your vocabulary understanding?	85%	15%	0%

When being interviewed, some participants have the same arguments and confirm that,

"I use dictionaries every day because I think it is useful for an English learner like me. Every time I read English texts and I find new words, I will immediately open my dictionary. It provides me with quick access to know the meaning. And, I feel like my vocabulary develops after several times. And, that's what I am always looking for."

Previous studies like Alahmadi and Foltz (2020), Pikhart and Klimova (2020), and Deecharoen (2020), support these findings by saying that dictionaries indeed contribute to the process of language acquisition. On the other hand, one person mentioned that,

"In terms of its usefulness, I think using a dictionary is just so-so. I mean, I do not really feel it helps me understand unfamiliar words because I always have difficulties using the dictionary. You know, I am so bad at spelling because whenever I want to find a word, I need to know its correct spelling in the dictionary. I just sometimes give up when I couldn't find the entry words."

He justifies his reasons that the use of dictionary strategies does not considerably pose any concerns for him due to the challenges he faces every time he deals with vocabulary. Another respondent reports that,

"Well, sometimes I do not know how I should approach new words when using a dictionary, meaning? Grammar? Synonyms? So many things. I just do not know what to do. No one ever tells me about things in detail. I just figure it out by myself."

The interviews show that there are still a few students who do not really take all dictionary approaches into account because they lack guidance and information about using the strategies appropriately.

Overall, the researchers would consider the dictionary strategies are helpful for students to develop their vocabulary understanding. Unfortunately, regarding interviews, a few students believe that the approach does not considerably affect their learning because they face several issues when dealing with vocabulary. Consequently, they could not appreciate the advantages of applying the strategies. What these students indicated, however, could be overcome by providing training for the students in using dictionary strategies so that, with time, they no longer encounter significant difficulties. Research from Hashimoto (2021) has suggested that dictionary training is essential to allow students to become skilled users of dictionary strategies. Then, it is the role of language teachers and course planners to incorporate a greater focus on making sure that the learners initially become

much more capable of applying dictionary strategies. As a result, students could solve related issues and be aware of what approaches or procedures they need to employ when dealing with different lexical knowledge. Therefore, deciding to use a dictionary to overcome the issue is one of the best ways to deal with vocabulary acquisition (Lefkos & Maria, 2021), as it offers more benefits (Nation, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

The research has two main concerns: firstly, it aims to investigate which aspects of dictionary strategies (comprehension, extended, and looking-up strategies) that the Indonesian students have acknowledged the most; secondly, it also looks for students' beliefs regarding the use of dictionary strategies. On account of the concerns, the results of the research could assist language teachers in having in-depth perspectives about students' dictionary strategies in learning so that the teachers could make use of those three primary dictionary strategies. One of the ways they could do so is to introduce an approach to their students either implicitly or explicitly by designing meaningful tasks and giving relevant activities and assignments to the students. Thus, as soon as the students gain a more in-depth understanding of the dictionary strategies, they will use them to help fulfill the tasks.

However, the result of the research cannot be generalized because the number of participants in the interview is limited. More participants are needed, and direct classroom observation is also required to figure out and confirm the participants' answers. As a result, the research cannot be generalized. More contexts should be done in the future to see whether the result of the research would be the same or contradict other contexts, for example, students from other EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts (Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and others).

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