

A STUDY OF VOCABULARY LEARNING  
STRATEGIES AMONG PRE-UNIVERSITY ESL  
LEARNERS AT IIUM

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Insufficient vocabulary knowledge is a barrier that hinders learners to acquire a second language as it leads to incompetency in mastering all four language skills. However, in order to increase their vocabulary stock and master the second language, learners will need the right tools, in which among these tools are vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs). This study is aimed at exploring the types of vocabulary learning strategies and to determine the most and least used strategies for vocabulary learning among English language learners in a public university in Malaysia. A quantitative and qualitative mixed research method was employed in the study. In the first phase, data was collected using the vocabulary learning strategy questionnaire adapted from Schmitt (1997). The study sample for data collection consisted of 260 CELPAD students at IIUM Gombak which was obtained through purposeful sampling. SPSS software (version 22) was run to analyse the data using descriptive analysis. The results of the first phase showed that CELPAD students were “moderate” strategy users overall. With regard to strategy categories, the results revealed that memory strategies were the most frequently used and determination strategies were the least frequently used among the learners. In the second phase, was analysed through a semi-structured interview with four CELPAD students. The findings suggest that the participants actively invoke a variety of strategies in order to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words in their reading comprehension. Five emergent themes were found: dictionary use, guessing context, skipping, use of multiple sources, and note-taking strategy. To conclude, further research is recommended in various contexts regarding vocabulary learning strategies.

## خلاصة البحث

عُدَّ ضعف معرفة المفردات عائقًا للمتعلم عند اكتساب المهارات اللغوية الأربع في أي لغة ثانية، ولزيادة معرفة المفردات وإتقان اللغة الثانية؛ يحتاج المتعلمون إلى الأدوات المناسبة التي من بينها إستراتيجيات تعلُّم المفردات. وعليه؛ يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف أنواع إستراتيجيات تعلم المفردات (VLSs)، وتمييز أكثرها وأقلها استخدامًا لتعلُّم المفردات الإنجليزية بين متعلمي اللغات في إحدى الجامعات الحكومية الماليزية، وقد توسَّل البحث نهجًا مختلطًا، ففي المرحلة الأولى جُمعت البيانات من خلال استبانة إستراتيجية تعلُّم المفردات المعتمدة من شميت (1997)، واشتملت عينة البحث الهادفة على 260 طالبًا وطالبة، ثم استخدم برنامج الحزمة الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية (النسخة 22) لتحليل البيانات وصفيًا). وقد أظهرت نتائج المرحلة الأولى أن استخدام الإستراتيجيات لدى الطلبة في درجة "متوسط" عمومًا، وأن إستراتيجيات الذاكرة كانت الأكثر استخدامًا لديهم، في حين كانت إستراتيجيات التحديد الأقل استخدامًا. أما في المرحلة الثانية فقد استخدم أسلوب دراسة الحالة من خلال مقابلة شبه منظمة مع أربعة من الطلبة، وتبيَّن من خلالها أنهم استندوا بقوة إلى مجموعة متنوعة من الإستراتيجيات لتحديد معاني المفردات غير المألوفة في فهمهم أثناء القراءة. ومن ثم؛ خلص البحث إلى خمس إستراتيجيات رئيسة؛ هي: استخدام القاموس، والتخمين في السياق، والتخطي، واستخدام مصادر متعددة، وتدوين الملاحظات. وهكذا؛ يوصي البحث بإجراء مزيدًا من البحوث في الميادين المختلفة لإستراتيجيات تعلُّم المفردات.

## APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Education.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract .....   | ii        |
| Abstract in Arabic .....   | iii       |
| Approval Page.....   | iv        |
| Declaration .....  | v         |
| Copyright .....  | vi        |
| Acknowledgements.....  | vii       |
| List of Tables .....   | xi        |
| List of Figures .....  | xii       |
| List of Abbreviations .....  | xiii      |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>                               | <b>1</b>  |
| 1.1 Introduction .....   | 1         |
| 1.2 Background of the Study.....                                     | 1         |
| 1.3 Problem Statement .....  | 5         |
| 1.4 Research Objectives .....  | 8         |
| 1.5 Research Questions .....   | 9         |
| 1.6 Significance of the Study .....                                  | 9         |
| 1.7 Delimitations of the Study .....                                 | 11        |
| 1.8 Definitions of Terms .....                                       | 11        |
| 1.8.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies .....                           | 11        |
| 1.8.2 Vocabulary.....  | 11        |
| 1.8.3 Vocabulary Knowledge .....                                     | 12        |
| 1.8.4 Reading Task .....   | 12        |
| 1.8.5 CELPAD.....  | 12        |
| 1.8.6 Pre-University.....  | 12        |
| 1.9 Chapter Summary.....   | 13        |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....</b>                       | <b>14</b> |
| 2.1 Introduction .....   | 14        |
| 2.2 The Importance of Vocabulary Learning in a Second Language ..... | 14        |
| 2.3 Vocabulary and the Four Skills of a Language.....                | 17        |
| 2.4 Second Language Vocabulary Learning .....                        | 19        |
| 2.4.1 Vocabulary Learning Approaches .....                           | 21        |
| 2.5 Theoretical Framework .....                                      | 23        |
| 2.5.1 Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies .....     | 26        |
| 2.6 Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Language Learners .....       | 29        |
| 2.7 Review of Related Research .....                                 | 34        |
| 2.8 Chapter Summary.....   | 38        |
| <br>   |           |
| <b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>                               | <b>39</b> |
| 3.1 Introduction .....   | 39        |
| 3.2 Phase 1 .....  | 39        |
| 3.2.1 Research Design .....  | 40        |
| 3.2.2 Population .....   | 40        |
| 3.2.3 Sampling .....   | 41        |



|   |   |           |
|---|---|-----------|
| 3.2.3.1   | Characteristics of the Sample .....   | 41        |
| 3.2.3.2   | Sample of the Study .....   | 41        |
| 3.2.4   | Instrumentation .....   | 42        |
| 3.2.5   | Validity of VLSQ .....  | 45        |
| 3.2.6   | Reliability of VLSQ.....  | 46        |
| 3.2.7   | Pilot Study .....   | 46        |
| 3.2.8   | Data Collection Procedures .....  | 47        |
| 3.2.9   | Data Analysis.....  | 48        |
| 3.3   | Phase 2 .....   | 49        |
| 3.3.1   | Research Design .....   | 49        |
| 3.3.2   | Sampling Procedures .....   | 49        |
| 3.3.3   | Data Collection .....   | 50        |
| 3.3.4   | Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures .....  | 52        |
| 3.4   | Chapter Summary.....  | 53        |
| <b>CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....</b>                  |   | <b>54</b> |
| 4.1   | Introduction .....  | 54        |
| 4.2   | Phase 1 .....   | 54        |
| 4.2.1   | Demographic Profile of the Respondents .....  | 54        |
| 4.2.1.1   | Gender.....   | 54        |
| 4.2.1.2   | Nationality .....   | 55        |
| 4.2.1.3   | Academic Degree.....  | 56        |
| 4.2.1.4   | English Language Level .....  | 56        |
| 4.2.2   | Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used by ESL Learners .....   | 57        |
| 4.2.3   | Vocabulary Learning and Overall Pattern of the Use of the Five Strategies among Pre University ESL Learners ..... | 58        |
| 4.2.3.1   | Memory Strategies Group.....  | 58        |
| 4.2.3.2   | Cognitive Strategies Group.....   | 61        |
| 4.2.3.3   | Metacognitive Strategies Group .....  | 62        |
| 4.2.3.4   | Social Strategies Group .....   | 63        |
| 4.2.3.5   | Determination Strategies Group .....  | 64        |
| 4.2.4   | VLS Use Based on Discovery Meaning and Consolidate Meaning Categories .....                                       | 65        |
| 4.3   | Phase 2: Qualitative Analysis.....  | 67        |
| 4.3.1   | Theme 1: Dictionary Use.....  | 68        |
| 4.3.2   | Theme 2: Guessing Context.....  | 70        |
| 4.3.3   | Theme 3: Skipping.....  | 71        |
| 4.3.4   | Theme 4: Use of Multiple Sources .....  | 72        |
| 4.3.5   | Theme 5: Note-Taking Strategy .....   | 73        |
| 4.4   | Chapter Summary.....  | 74        |
| <b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....</b> |   | <b>75</b> |
| 5.1   | Introduction .....  | 75        |
| 5.2   | Summary of the Key Findings .....   | 76        |
| 5.2.1   | Most and Least Used VLS among ESL Learners.....   | 76        |
| 5.2.2   | Vocabulary Learning and Overall Pattern of the Use of the Five Strategies among Pre University ESL Learners ..... | 80        |
| 5.2.3   | A Comparison of the usages between Consolidating Strategies and Discovery Strategies .....                        | 82        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 5.2.4 The Use of VLS to Identify the Meaning of Unfamiliar Vocabulary in Reading Task ..... | 82        |
| 5.3 Summary of the Research Findings .....  | 83        |
| 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research .....   | 84        |
| 5.5 Conclusion .....  | 85        |
| <b>REFERENCES.....</b>  | <b>86</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX A: PERMISSION LETTER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH.....</b>                               | <b>90</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE.....</b>   | <b>91</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....</b>   | <b>95</b> |

## LIST OF TABLES

| <u>Table No.</u> |   | <u>Page No.</u> |
|------------------|---|-----------------|
| 2.1              | Schmitt's Taxonomy of Strategies  | 27              |
| 3.1              | Distribution of Population  | 41              |
| 3.2              | Percentage of Population Distribution (n = 260)                                       | 42              |
| 3.3              | Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of L2 Vocabulary Learning                                   | 43              |
| 3.4              | Categories of Vocabulary Learning Strategies  | 45              |
| 3.5              | Reliability Statistics of VLSQ  | 47              |
| 3.6              | Internal Reliability in VLSQ  | 47              |
| 3.7              | Questions in the Interview Guide  | 51              |
| 4.1              | Frequency Distribution of Gender  | 55              |
| 4.2              | Descriptive Statistic of the Respondents' Nationality                                 | 55              |
| 4.3              | Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents' Academic Degree                            | 56              |
| 4.4              | Descriptive Statistic of the Respondents' Level of English                            | 57              |
| 4.5              | Rank Order of the Reported Vocabulary Learning Strategies                             | 57              |
| 4.6              | Memory Strategies Group   | 59              |
| 4.7              | Cognitive Strategies Group  | 61              |
| 4.8              | Metacognitive Strategy Group  | 62              |
| 4.9              | Social Strategies Group   | 63              |
| 4.10             | Determination Strategies Group  | 64              |
| 4.11             | Mean and Standard Deviation of Discovery Meaning and Consolidating Meaning Categories | 65              |
| 4.12             | Mean and SD of Six Groups of Strategies   | 66              |
| 4.13             | Thematic Analysis of the Research Findings  | 68              |

## LIST OF FIGURES

| <u>Figure No.</u> |  | <u>Page No.</u> |
|-------------------|--|-----------------|
| 2.1               | Schmitt's Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies | 28              |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| ANOVA  | Analysis of Variance   |
| CELPAD | Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development         |
| COG    | Cognitive Strategies   |
| DET    | Determination Strategies   |
| EFL    | English as a Foreign Language  |
| ELT    | English Language Teaching  |
| EMU    | Eastern Mediterranean University                                     |
| EPT    | English Placement Test   |
| ESL    | English as a Second Language   |
| FSL    | French as a Second Language  |
| GLS/s  | General Learning Strategy/ies  |
| IUM    | International Islamic University Malaysia                            |
| L1     | first language   |
| L2     | second language  |
| L5     | Level 5  |
| L6     | Level 6  |
| LLS/s  | Language Learning Strategy/ies                                       |
| M      | Mean   |
| MEM    | Memory Strategies  |
| MET    | Metacognitive Strategies   |
| P.     | Participant  |
| PG     | Postgraduate   |
| PGC    | Postgraduate Committee   |
| Q      | question   |
| SD     | Standard Deviation   |
| SILL   | Strategy Inventory for Language Learning                             |
| SOC    | Social Strategies  |
| SPM    | <i>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</i> (Malaysian Certificate of Education) |
| SPSS   | Statistical Package for the Social Sciences                          |
| TOEFL  | Test of English as a Foreign Language                                |
| UPM    | University Putra Malaysia  |
| VLS/s  | Vocabulary Learning Strategy/ies                                     |
| VLSI   | Vocabulary Learning Strategy Inventory                               |
| VLSQ   | Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire                         |

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Learning a language requires a learner to be able to master the vocabulary of the target language. In order for a language learner to be competent and proficient in mastering a second language, they are required to have a wide range of target words. This is very important to ensure that they will be able to successfully tackle comprehension production activities in learning the second language. Vocabulary is considered as a vital aspect in language use and a core element in learning and mastering either a second or foreign language (Nation, 1990). It is believed that no one can understand, speak, read or write without having enough vocabulary. Besides, it is agreed that vocabulary takes its role in developing a student's language proficiency and enhance his/her language skills and also thinking abilities (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, vocabulary learning is a crucial factor that affects the success in language acquisition.

### **1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) are a part of language learning strategies (LLSs) which in turn are a part of general learning strategies or GLSs (Nation, 2001). Since the late 1970's, vocabulary learning strategies have gained a greater attention among language learners. There is a better understanding of how learners are approaching their ability to acquire a second or a foreign language. According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989), language learning strategies are operations used by learners to aid the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information.

There is no doubt that language learning strategies (LLSs) play an important role in mastering both the second and foreign language as it is an essential function in the development, culture, and advancement of human society. In other words, it is the key factor for effective communication and interaction between individuals, groups, and countries. Oxford (2003: 8) defines language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.” She classifies LLS in relation to the four skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing). Similarly, O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) define it as, “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information.”

In this respect, there is a wide consensus among researchers on the effectiveness of good vocabulary which has been recognised as crucial to language use, that is to say having a limited vocabulary knowledge is barrier that hinders the learners to acquire the second language and leading incompetency in mastering all four language skills. However, in order to master vocabulary and increase vocabulary stock, learners would need the right tools. Among these tools are vocabulary learning strategies (VLS). Stoffer (1995), Nation (2001), and Gu (2003) describe VLS as steps taken by the language learners to acquire new English words. However, Schmitt (1997: 203) defines VLS as “the process by which information is obtained, stored, retrieved, and used.”

According to Schmitt (2010: 4), vocabulary learning strategies are very important in second language (L2), especially since “learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books.” Furthermore, Fan, (2003: 222) posits that “vocabulary is the biggest part of meaning of any language and it is the biggest

problem for most learners.” Generally, language learners are aware of the importance of vocabulary and most of them have always believed that vocabulary is one of the language features that are difficult to be dealt with (Celik & Topats, 2010).

Most instructors or teachers have a less impact on learners’ ability to acquire the second language, particularly vocabulary, since the process of acquiring a language does not only occur in classroom setting. According to Sokmen (1997: 255), “it is impossible for learners to acquire all the vocabularies they need in the classroom. However, learners need to find their own initiatives and alternatives in order to help them gain and improve their vocabulary.” Therefore, vocabulary learning is a key in building up skills and knowledge into second language learning by equipping them with a variety of vocabulary learning strategies. It is certainly a tremendous effort for language learners to learn new words (Nation, 1990).

A plethora of empirical research has proven that language learners need to seek for effective and appropriate ways for themselves on how to learn, comprehend, acquire, recall, retain, use, and expand their vocabulary. In fact, it is not needed that language learners have to expand their knowledge of vocabulary, but they have to understand words well enough to be able to use them appropriately in their social life (Ranalli, 2003). Therefore, it is useful to teach language learners strategies because they enhance learners’ responsibility of their own learning process specifically, and the strategies further foster learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction.

A growing body of research evidence has revealed various VLS taxonomies and classifications and these strategies have been grouped into different categories based on the empirical findings (see Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003; Nation, 2001; Schmitt 1993; Schmitt, 1997). For instance, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) divided learning vocabulary into remembering a word and learning a new word. Gu (2003), on the other hand,



classified second language (L2) vocabulary learning strategies as cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and activation strategies. Schmitt (1997) improved vocabulary learning strategies based on Oxford's (1990) work within the scope of determination (not seeking another person's expertise), strategies, social (seeking another person's expertise), and by remembering categories comprising of social, memorisation, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Fan (2003), in refining Gu's (2003) classification, categorised vocabulary learning strategies into a "primary category" which contained dictionary strategies and guessing strategies, as well as "remembering category" which integrated repetition, association, grouping, analysis, and known words strategies.

Vocabulary learning strategies have emerged as an important phenomenon since the late 1970s among researchers. These strategies have received special attention in this field as well. Additionally, research on vocabulary learning strategies has boosted researchers' knowledge on the language learning process. According to Abraham and Van (1978) and Gu and Johnson (1996), language learners normally use a variety of strategies and approaches during a language learning situation which can be seen in the strategies used in learning and communication. The use of strategies selected by the learner differ from one to another based on individuals and their learning environment. Furthermore, employing these strategies occur through a variety of techniques. Schmitt (1997) emphasises that the ability to use vocabulary learning strategies requires knowledge which is obtained through learning, and the use of these strategies will improve and enhance vocabulary learning.

In lieu of the importance of vocabulary learning strategies in enhancing language learners' ability to communicate in English, the current study is geared to investigate the strategies used by second language learners at the International Islamic

University Malaysia (IIUM), in which English is the medium of instruction for a majority of the programmes and courses. For the purpose of teaching and learning English and other required languages, the university has set up a centre for languages, which is known as the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD). CELPAD is responsible for ensuring that all students have a strong command of the languages required for their academic endeavour.

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Vocabulary is the basic cornerstone of language use. Without enough vocabulary, learners cannot communicate effectively. Having a limited vocabulary is one of the major challenges that learners face during the process of acquiring a second language and many argue that learning the vocabulary of a second language is possibly the most challenging aspect of becoming proficient in the target language (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000). Various vocabulary learning difficulties could slow down some learners' vocabulary learning. As stated by Fan (2003: 222), "vocabulary forms the biggest part of the meaning of any language, and vocabulary is the biggest problem of most of the learners." Based on Fan's statement, it is evident that vocabulary is essential for successful communication in any language. Similarly, Hedge (2000: 50) believes that "without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way." This is due to the fact that vocabulary acquisition involves several types of word knowledge, for instance; meanings, collocation, and form. In addition, a recent study conducted by Mustafa and Asgari (2011) strongly contends that the lack of vocabulary knowledge will have an adverse effect in mastering the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Many second language learners have described vocabulary deficiencies as their biggest problem in mastering the second language, and the lack of vocabulary knowledge seems to be a problem across all skills (Basurto, 2004).

Since English language is the medium of instruction at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), enrolled students are therefore required to sit for the English Placement Test (EPT) conducted by the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD). Students are required to at least attain a Band 5 in order to pass the EPT exam and further their studies in their respective faculties. Writing skill is one of the basic skills of the English language which is generally considered as the most difficult of the other skills for foreign language and thus, students need to have adequate vocabulary in order to develop their writing performance. Milton (2013) contends that a lack of vocabulary can influence the quality of writing as compared to other factors such as attitude, motivation, and preparation for the exam. Therefore, ESL students should dominate the aspect of vocabulary in terms of quantity and quality with the goal of understanding and expressing meaning in writing.

Researchers, material writers, and students alike agree that vocabulary is a crucial element in learning a second language. However, it is still unclear which are the best techniques that can be used to facilitate the learning process of vocabulary items (Schmitt, 1997). ESL learners need to seek for effective ways to improve their language skills. However, some of them may still be incompetent, particularly in communication ability due to their inability to identify and use the best means, techniques, or methods to learn the target language. Ideally, these techniques help students to understand the concepts of unfamiliar words, acquire more words, and use them effectively for communicative purposes. According to Dóczy (2011) in order to

communicate effectively in the target language learners require the number of vocabularies.

Acquiring a large number of words is the need for student to read and write when they need to. Nonetheless, in some situations, learners may face certain difficulties, and learners may also experience difficulties in learning second and foreign languages as they progress in gaining proficiency. As a result, they may require some techniques, activities, or actions to use in learning the second or foreign language (Thornbury, 2002). These strategies are very significant to help learners acquire an amount of vocabularies in second and foreign languages. Thus, vocabulary learning is the most challenging task for those who need to master another language because the unknown word that learners encounter when learning may negatively influence their language skills, both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing). They, therefore, require some techniques and strategies in order to master vocabulary more effectively and at a faster pace. The strategy that learners employ for certain tasks to master vocabulary can be considered as vocabulary learning strategies.

Reflecting on my own experience as second language learner and the researcher of this study, I am aware of the contextual influences which may affect an individual learner's ability to manage his/her language learning. The learner's contribution to the language learning process includes learner aptitude, beliefs, motivation, learner strategies, and personality (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Ellis, 2008). In addition, studies have provided evidence on the crucial role of vocabulary in mastering a second language. It has been agreed that vocabulary learning needs to be integrated with language use in order to demonstrate high level of self-initiation and selective attention and to employ a wide range of vocabulary

learning strategies (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Schimt & McCarthy,1997). However, the literature has shown that past researchers have paid little to no attention and importance to vocabulary learning strategies when compared with other aspects of the language, such as grammar, phonology, or discourse analysis. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) in IIUM, no previous studies have been conducted to investigate vocabulary learning strategies employed by pre-university ESL students in CELPAD. Due to the identified gap, there is a need to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by language learners, particularly those who are still weak and poor in utilising vocabulary learning strategies in an effort to help learners to control and minimise the difficulties they face in acquiring the vocabulary of the target language in a way that it would more effectively facilitate their use of vocabulary learning strategies.

Therefore, the present research is interested to study the English language learners in a language centre at one of Malaysia's public universities in order to investigate their use of vocabulary learning and strategies.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this study mainly is to identify the vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) adopted by pre-university students at IIUM. The objectives are as follows:

- i. To identify the vocabulary learning strategies applied by pre-university ESL learners.
  - a. To determine the most common vocabulary learning strategies for each subcategory applied by pre-university ESL learners.
  - b. To recognize the least common vocabulary learning strategies for each subcategory applied by pre-university ESL learners.

- ii. To identify the patterns of using the five vocabulary learning strategies among pre\_ university ESL learners.
- iii. To find out how pre-university ESL learners use VLS to identify the meaning of an unfamiliar word in a reading task.

## **1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Based on the objectives of the study, the research questions are as follows:

- i. What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by pre-university ESL learners?
  - a) What is the most commonly used vocabulary learning strategies by pre-university ESL learners?
  - b) What is the least used vocabulary learning strategies by pre-university ESL learners?
- ii. What are the patterns of using the five vocabulary learning strategies among by pre-university ESL learners?
- iii. How do pre-university ESL learners use VLS to identify the meaning of an unfamiliar word in a reading task?

## **1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Vocabulary learning is one of the major challenges in learning foreign languages that learners face during their learning (Ghazal, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to provide a platform to benefit second language learners and to simultaneously increase teachers' awareness of the different strategies employed by their students.

Firstly, the outcomes of the study would enable second language learners to understand the vocabulary learning strategies that should be utilised in their learning

process so that they will become more motivated, self-responsible and more positive towards and focused on achieving better academic results and helping them to choose the strategies that suit their learning styles and personalities and also offer a wide range of strategies to enhance vocabulary acquisition.

The importance of having different vocabulary strategies in the learning process can help the student to yield greater proficiency and self-confidence. Subsequently, students will spontaneously develop an effective learning practice

Secondly, it will provide beneficial information to CELPAD English teachers pertaining to the role of vocabulary learning strategies. This information is valuable and useful because they offer teachers to better understand the factors that could account to facilitate English vocabulary acquisition among pre-university ESL students and to help them learn vocabulary items as fruitful as possible. It will also provide a holistic view on the contribution of VLS, English proficiency level, and gender. Therefore, these factors may help them to design the most sufficient and proper way of teaching.

Thirdly, this study will provide information regarding the factors that contribute to the academic success of CELPAD students. It is envisaged that counselors and CELPAD administrations would be able to use the information to find appropriate ways to help students improve their vocabulary proficiency and greater self-confidence.

Lastly, this study can assist leaders, policymakers, student services provided by the office of deans and directors, diversity officers, academic advisors, student support personnel, and admissions committee members to discover the types of vocabulary learning strategies that are associated with higher vocabulary gains at different stages of development.

## **1.7 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study is primarily limited to the use of vocabulary learning strategies by pre-university ESL Learners from CELPAD at two distinct levels (i.e. Level 5 and Level 6) at IIUM, Gombak. Therefore, the data provided may not apply to other CELPAD departments, for instance, Arabic language learners.

## **1.8 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

Provided is the definition of the conceptualized and operationalized terms incorporated in this research work.

### **1.8.1 Vocabulary Learning Strategies**

“*Vocabulary learning strategies*” denotes “any set of techniques or learning behaviors, which language learners reported using to discover the meaning of a new word, to retain the knowledge of newly learned words, and to expand one’s knowledge of vocabulary” (Intaraprasert, 2004: 53). In this research work, vocabulary learning strategies are the methods, tactics, and approaches taken by a second language learner to determine the meaning of the unfamiliar vocabulary as well as to make his/her learning process more effective.

### **1.8.2 Vocabulary**

“*Vocabulary*” refers to “words we must know to communicate effectively; words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary)” (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009: 385). On the other hand, vocabulary is outlined by Hornby (1995: 133) as “the total number of words in a language; vocabulary is a list of words with their meanings.”