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AWARENESS AND USE OF VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR VOCABULARY BUILDING AMONG BILINGUAL ESL LEARNERS IN PAKISTAN

CONSCIÊNCIA E UTILIZAÇÃO DE ESTRATÉGIAS DE APRENDIZAGEM DE VOCABULÁRIO PARA A CONSTRUÇÃO DE VOCABULÁRIO ENTRE ALUNOS BILINGUES DE ESL NO PAQUISTÃO

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Abstract
Vocabulary learning is a key component of second language acquisition, especially in multilingual contexts where learners shift across languages. This study examines the awareness, use, and conceptualization of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) among bilingual ESL learners in Pakistan, drawing on the direct and indirect strategy frameworks of Oxford (1990) and Schmitt (1997). Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data using surveys were complemented with qualitative data using classroom observations in higher secondary schools. Findings show that learners have moderate awareness of direct strategies such as repetition and dictionary use, as well as limited understanding of indirect strategies like metacognitive planning, contextual inference, and self-monitoring. Teacher-centered, exam-driven practices underutilize the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism. The present study recommends explicit strategy instructions, teacher professional development, and curriculum reforms to promote learner autonomy and strengthen vocabulary learning in Pakistani ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Esl Learners. Bilingualism. Pakistan. Strategy-Based Instruction.

Resumo
A aprendizagem de vocabulário é um componente fundamental da aquisição de uma segunda língua, especialmente em contextos multilíngues, onde os alunos alternam entre idiomas. Este estudo examina a consciência, o uso e a conceituação das Estratégias de Aprendizagem de Vocabulário (VLS) entre alunos bilíngues de ESL no Paquistão, com base nas estruturas de estratégias diretas e indiretas de Oxford (1990) e Schmitt (1997). Utilizando um desenho de métodos mistos, os dados quantitativos obtidos por meio de pesquisas foram complementados com dados qualitativos obtidos por meio de observações em sala de aula em escolas de ensino médio. Os resultados mostram que os alunos têm uma consciência moderada das estratégias diretas, como repetição e uso de dicionário, bem como uma compreensão limitada das estratégias indiretas, como planejamento metacognitivo, inferência contextual e automonitoramento. As práticas centradas no professor e orientadas para os exames subutilizam as vantagens cognitivas associadas ao bilinguismo. O presente estudo recomenda instruções estratégicas explícitas, desenvolvimento profissional dos professores e reformas curriculares para promover a autonomia dos alunos e fortalecer a aprendizagem de vocabulário nas salas de aula de ESL do Paquistão.

Palavras-chave: *Estratégias de aprendizagem de vocabulário. Alunos de ESL. Bilinguismo. Paquistão. Instrução baseada em estratégias.*

1 INTRODUCTION

It is known that vocabulary development is a major element of second language learning and the keystone of communicative competence and academic achievement among learners. Without a vocabulary, it is impossible to conduct meaningful communication, as Wilkins (1972) pointed out, and lexical knowledge is the core of mastering language. This significance is even further intensified in multilingual situations like in Pakistan, where students are negotiating meaning between English, Urdu, and regional languages all the time. Nevertheless, the teaching of the English language in Pakistan is still largely based on memorization and translations that do not provide students a chance to develop their vocabularies in any meaningful way. Shamim (2008). Long-term memory, learner self-confidence, and lexical knowledge can all be gradually improved via Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). As described by Schmitt (2000) and Nation (2001), VLS involves intentional actions with which learners comprehend, memorize, recall, and apply vocabulary in situational contexts. These strategies can be classified into direct strategies, e.g., memory techniques, cognitive processing, and compensation, and indirect strategies, which facilitate the learning process by planning, monitoring, motivation, and social interactions .They complement each other and enhance language knowledge both in breadth and depth as well as independent language learning Oxford(1990).The incorporation of VLS in a bilingual environment is more complicated because the learners already possess linguistic repertoires. Studies (Catalan, 2003; Guo & Yang, 2022; Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003) indicate that some of the cross-linguistic strategies that learners use in constructing second language vocabulary include translation, cognate recognition, and inferencing (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2001). Nonetheless, the lack of knowledge and variability in applying these strategies has been documented in developing settings, where the explicit training of the strategy is not normally incorporated in the teaching process (Shamim, 2008). The current research fills this gap by considering the perceptions, awareness, and use of direct and indirect VLS by bilingual Pakistani ESL learners. In particular, the research questions are as follows:

1. To what extent are Pakistani bilingual learners aware of the vocabulary learning strategies used for building English vocabulary?
2. What are the direct vocabulary learning strategies (as per Oxford's taxonomy) that Pakistani bilingual ESL learners use in their vocabulary learning process?
3. What are the indirect vocabulary learning strategies (such as metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) that Pakistani bilingual ESL learners commonly use in their vocabulary learning process?

The following are the hypotheses of the current study:

Hypothesis 1:

Pakistani bilingual learners who are more aware of vocabulary learning strategies show better retention of English vocabulary compared to those who are less aware.

Hypothesis 2:

Pakistani bilingual ESL learners who frequently use direct vocabulary learning strategies (such as memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies) will demonstrate better vocabulary retention.

Hypothesis 3:

Pakistani bilingual ESL learners who utilize a combination of metacognitive, affective, and social indirect vocabulary learning strategies will demonstrate better vocabulary learning and retention.

The investigation of these dimensions will provide insights into the interplay between linguistic background, pedagogical practices and strategy awareness in Pakistani ESL classrooms. The results will justify the integration of explicit VLS teaching into the educational system and teacher education to promote the growth of vocabulary and communicative proficiency.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in established theories and models of second language acquisition, vocabulary learning, and language learning strategies, with a specific focus on bilingual ESL contexts. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) are generally defined as deliberate actions and mental processes learners employ to understand, retain, and use lexical items effectively. Research consistently acknowledges vocabulary as a core component of language proficiency; however,

theoretical perspectives differ regarding how vocabulary is best acquired and what types of strategies contribute most effectively to long-term lexical development.

A dominant theoretical foundation in VLS research is Oxford's Language Learning Strategy Theory (1990), which classifies strategies into direct and indirect categories. Direct strategies involve direct engagement with the target language, including memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies support learning through metacognitive, affective, and social processes. This model has been widely adopted in empirical studies and provides a comprehensive framework for examining learners' strategic behavior. A strong consensus in the literature suggests that direct strategies, such as repetition, rote memorization, and dictionary use, are frequently employed by ESL learners, particularly in examination-driven educational systems. However, researchers also note that excessive reliance on these strategies may limit deeper lexical processing and communicative competence.

Complementing Oxford's model, O'Malley and Chamot's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (1990) emphasizes the role of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in academic language development. CALLA posits that successful language learners actively plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning processes. Previous studies using this framework indicate that learners who receive explicit strategy instruction demonstrate higher awareness and more effective strategy use. Despite this, a recurring contradiction in the literature is that although metacognitive strategies are theoretically recognized as crucial, they remain underutilized in many ESL classrooms, particularly in developing and bilingual contexts. This mismatch between theoretical importance and classroom practice highlights a significant gap addressed in the present study.

Nation's Vocabulary Learning Theory (2001) further contributes to the theoretical foundation by conceptualizing vocabulary knowledge as comprising form, meaning, and use. Nation argues that vocabulary acquisition requires both deliberate learning and incidental exposure, supported by repeated encounters and deep processing. Research aligned with this theory agrees that surface-level strategies may assist short-term recall, yet they are insufficient for long-term retention and functional use. Nevertheless, many empirical studies report that learners continue to favor mechanical strategies due to curriculum constraints and lack of pedagogical support, revealing a persistent tension between theory and practice. The role of bilingualism introduces another important

theoretical dimension. Bilingual education research generally agrees that learners' first language can function as a cognitive resource that supports vocabulary acquisition through cross-linguistic transfer, translation, and lexical association. While some studies highlight the facilitative role of these strategies, others caution against overdependence on translation, suggesting that it may hinder autonomous and context-based vocabulary use if not strategically guided. This divergence in findings indicates the need for context-specific investigation into how bilingual learners balance direct and indirect strategies. Previous empirical research in ESL and EFL contexts demonstrates broad agreement that learners' awareness of VLS is positively related to their frequency of use. However, inconsistencies remain regarding the impact of institutional type, teacher training, and instructional practices on strategy development. Studies conducted in private and resource-rich institutions often report higher strategic diversity, whereas public-sector contexts frequently show limited exposure to indirect strategies. The lack of systematic strategy training and teacher modeling emerges as a recurring concern across studies.

In summary, the existing literature establishes the theoretical significance of Vocabulary Learning Strategies while revealing clear gaps between theoretical models and classroom realities. There is a strong consensus on the importance of strategic vocabulary learning, yet contradictions persist regarding the dominance of direct strategies and the marginalization of indirect ones. Moreover, limited research has comprehensively examined both awareness and use of VLS among bilingual ESL learners in the Pakistani context, particularly by integrating quantitative and observational data. The present study addresses these gaps by applying established theoretical models to investigate strategy awareness, usage patterns, and contextual influences, thereby contributing both theoretical insight and pedagogical relevance to the field.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The ability to acquire a second language depends largely on vocabulary, as vocabulary equips learners with extensive lexical knowledge that allows them to express meaning in ways that go beyond mere grammatical accuracy (Nation, 2001). The process of vocabulary learning is generally considered active and strategic, as learners make use of both the direct strategies, including memory and cognitive strategies, and the indirect strategies, including metacognitive and affective strategies, as well as social strategies

(Cohen, 2011; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Global studies repeatedly show that students that utilise metacognitive planning, contextual guessing, semantic elaboration, and self-regulation are better equipped with vocabulary information as compared to students who only use rote learning or dictionaries (Gu and Johnson, 1996; Laufer and Hulstijn, 2001). Recent research points to a major shift in second language vocabulary acquisition toward technology-enhanced learning. Studies demonstrate that when systematically integrated, digital tools such as spaced-repetition software, language learning applications, and multimedia resources significantly improve learners' long-term retention, boost motivation, and foster greater autonomy (Teng, 2023; Xodabande, 2022). Crucially, this technological mediation is most effective when paired with explicit strategy instruction. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that pedagogy focused on teaching specific vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) makes a substantial and positive contribution to developing both the breadth and depth of learners' lexicons across diverse populations (Agustín-Llach *et al*., 2019). Together, these findings highlight that the strategic use of technology, guided by explicit instructions, is key to maximising vocabulary development outcomes. The Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL), created by Rebecca Oxford (1990), was a great breakthrough in systematising and quantifying language learning strategies. This self-report questionnaire consists of 40 questions, which are divided into six dimensions: The six dimensions include memory (e.g., using imagery, association), cognitive (e.g., analysing, taking notes), compensatory (e.g., guessing, cooperating with others), metacognitive (e.g., planning, self-evaluating), affective (e.g., managing emotions), and social (e.g., asking questions, cooperating with others). The SILL has offered a standardised model that has been greatly used to explore the strategic profiles of learners, their correlation with language proficiency, and the cultural differences (Oxford, 1990).

Research in vocabulary acquisition has effectively utilised the SILL framework to identify which strategic behaviours most reliably predict successful lexical learning and use. A landmark study by Gu and Johnson (1996), for instance, demonstrated that vocabulary size and reading comprehension are strongly linked to the combined use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies. This finding reveals a critical dynamic: effective learning is not merely the result of directly manipulating words (a cognitive act) but is significantly enhanced by the planning, monitoring, and reflective oversight enabled by

metacognitive awareness. Thus, the most successful learners strategically manage the process of learning just as deliberately as they engage with the language itself.

However, studies using the SILL in various global contexts show that learners' educational culture frequently imbalances and significantly shapes their strategic repertoires. Research conducted in the Pakistani ESL context consistently indicates that students predominantly prefer fundamental cognitive and memory strategies while significantly underutilising more interactive social and self-regulating affective strategies (Gul *et al*., 2016; Manzoor *et al*., 2017). This imbalance indicates that although learners may directly interact with vocabulary, they frequently lack the strategies to regulate motivation, alleviate anxiety, or engage in collaborative learning—components that Oxford's (1990) model identifies as essential for comprehensive language development. This strategic gap indicates a pedagogical deficiency: the lack of explicit, comprehensive instruction in the complete array of learning strategies in numerous instructor-led classrooms (Shamim, 2008).

In summary, Oxford's (1990) SILL framework has been an important tool for figuring out how students use language. It has always been said that a balanced and consciously used set of strategies is important for vocabulary growth. Research in the Pakistani ESL context, however, indicates a notable strategic disparity. Research shows that students at the intermediate and tertiary levels prefer cognitive, determination, and basic metacognitive strategies, but they don't use affective, social, and deeper self-regulatory strategies as much (Gul *et al*., 2016; Manzoor *et al*., 2017). This pattern is frequently ascribed to conventional public-sector education, which is predominantly characterised by word lists, translation, dictionary utilisation, and exam-centric approaches that obstruct more profound lexical processing (Shamim, 2008; Raheem *et al*., 2021).In contrast, students in private, English-medium schools are more aware of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This is because they have more access to communicative pedagogy and better teaching materials (Mankash *et al*., 2023; Ahmed, 2023). Emerging trends indicate a moderate, informal integration of digital tools such as mobile dictionaries and flashcard applications among university and engineering students, although these tools remain outside formal educational frameworks (Talpur *et al*., 2025; Khan & Iqbal, 2024).Similar trends are seen around the world; EFL learners often say they use determination and metacognitive strategies a lot but don't use affective and memory strategies enough. Proficiency, institutional support, and learner beliefs

influence these patterns (Taamneh, 2021; Haddad, 2018; Atifnigar, 2020). International research strongly supports the efficacy of explicit strategy instruction and technology-mediated learning such as mobile apps, multimedia, and corpora in boosting long-term retention and engagement (Hongjin, 2021; Alisoy & Sadigzade, 2025; Agustin-Llach *et al*., 2019).These findings collectively underscore a significant deficiency: although international scholarship promotes systematic, strategy orientated pedagogy, Pakistani ESL classrooms predominantly lack a structured incorporation of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) instruction. Bilingual Pakistani learners have natural cognitive advantages, like knowing how different languages work together, but they mostly use strategies that are unstructured and based on their own intuition, with little help from teachers or the school system. This highlights the pressing necessity for localised research on VLS awareness among Pakistani bilingual learners and for pedagogical interventions that explicitly instruct a comprehensive array of strategies both direct and indirect while proficiently utilising digital tools.

4 METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was used to explore the awareness and the application of direct and indirect Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) by bilingual Pakistani ESL learners. The quantitative data were gathered by a structured questionnaire which was based on an adaptation of the Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford (1990), while the qualitative data were collected during classroom observations to put into a proper context the strategic behaviour of learners. The research was carried out in four ESL high schools in Punjab, two government and two privately run schools, which is typically reflective of bilingualism in ESL settings in Pakistan and the use of the English language in four schools in addition to Urdu and local languages. The sample consisted of 400 (purposive) learners aged between 16 and 18. At the time of the study, the learners had studied English for at least ten years, with the majority of them speaking Urdu and some speaking Punjabi. The learners and the school administrations were fully informed about their voluntary participation and their anonymity.

4.1 InstrumentsTwo major instruments were used: the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) Questionnaire and classroom observations. The questionnaire was adapted from Oxford's (1990) SILL. It consisted of 35 items separated into six categories

1. Memory Strategies (e.g., making a picture, associating, repeating, etc.)
2. Cognitive strategies (e.g., taking notes, use of dictionary, inferencing)
3. Compensatory strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, situation guessing)
4. Metacognitive (e.g., self-monitoring, goal setting) strategies.
5. Affective Strategies (e.g., reducing anxiety and increasing motivation)
6. Social Strategies (e.g., seeking clarification, group learning).

The answers were noted on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 = Never to 5 = Always.

4.2 Classroom observations

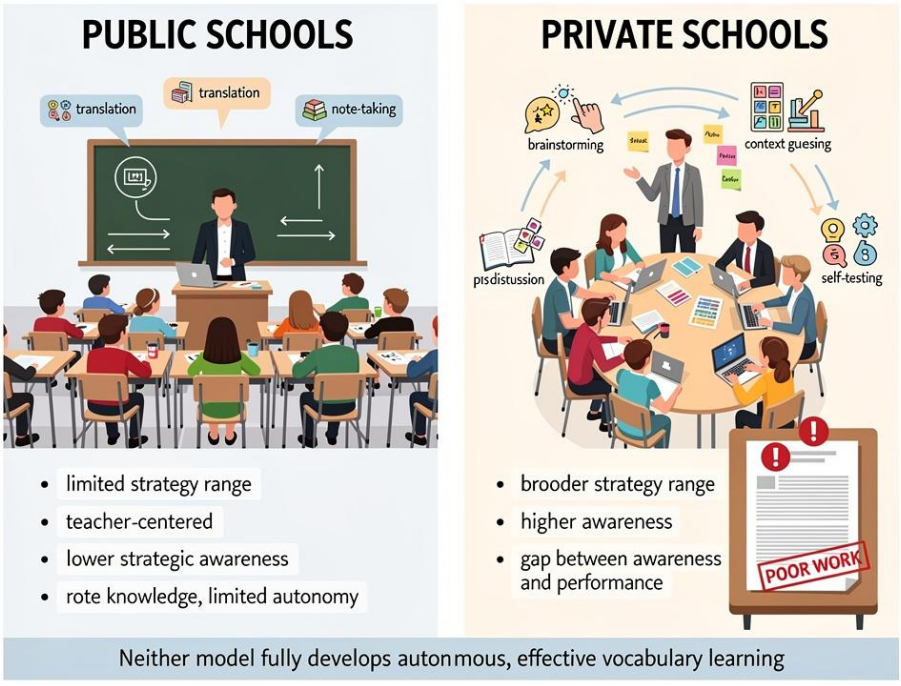
To complement the quantitative data, classroom observations were conducted to gain a nuanced understanding of learners' vocabulary learning behaviors. A purposive sample of four bilingual ESL classrooms was selected to ensure representation from both public and private institutional contexts. A structured observation protocol was developed to systematically document key dimensions of the learning environment. This protocol operationalized indicators related to: (1) the use of the first language (L1) as a pedagogical scaffold, (2) the implementation of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) by students, (3) the nature of vocabulary-focused instructional activities, and (4) teacher practices in vocabulary instruction.

Observations were carried out over multiple sessions within each selected classroom to enhance the consistency and reliability of the data. This longitudinal approach allowed for the documentation of recurrent patterns and spontaneous learner behaviors. Consequently, the method provided the flexibility to record rich, contextual details elucidating the processes of vocabulary acquisition within bilingual educational settings, thereby offering crucial qualitative insights to triangulate with the quantitative findings. Classroom observations were used to supplement the quantitative data. They provided a deeper insight into the vocabulary learning behaviour of learners. Four out of

eight bilingual ESL classrooms were selected to have a representation of both public and private institutions. A checklist of observations was created to lead the process by targeting how students engaged with the vocabulary learning tasks, the difficulties they faced during the process of learning new words, and how bilingualism helped or hindered their learning process. The checklist used indicators like the use of first language (L1) in supporting the learners, the use of vocabulary learning strategies, classroom learning activities, and practices of the teacher towards vocabulary teaching. In the classroom, the observations were conducted more than once during various sessions to promote consistency and reliability of the information. The observations provided the researcher with flexibility in writing down spontaneous behaviors and other contextual elements that led to vocabulary acquisition in bilingual environments.

Figure 1

School Comparison



5 RESULTS

5.1 Instrument reliability and instrument validity

To ensure the psychometric rigor of the research instruments, several validation procedures were implemented. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of .87, which indicates high reliability. Content validity was established through a systematic evaluation by three ESL experts from local universities, who assessed the instrument for clarity, relevance, and alignment with established vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) frameworks. Construct validity was further supported through a pilot study and subsequent item analysis.

The observation checklist was refined for cultural and linguistic appropriateness based on feedback from specialists in bilingual language education. To enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, member checking procedures were employed, whereby interview and observation transcripts were returned to participants to verify accuracy and confirm interpretations.

5.2 Data collection procedure

Data were collected over a one month period across four schoolsl settings using two primary instruments: a Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) questionnaire and a classroom observation checklist. The questionnaire, adapted from the taxonomies of Oxford (1990) and Schmitt (1997), was administered by the researcher during scheduled English sessions. Prior to distribution, participants were briefed on the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided with instructions in both English and Urdu to ensure comprehension. Participants were allotted 25 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire, with clarifications offered bilingually as needed. This instrument was designed to assess learners' awareness and frequency of use of both direct and indirect VLS.

To supplement the quantitative data, four classroom observations one from each school were conducted, each lasting 25 to 30 minutes. Using a structured checklist, the researcher documented student vocabulary-related behaviors, strategy deployment,

bilingual interactions, and instructional practices. This mixed-methods approach enabled methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the findings.

5.3 Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages to determine the levels of awareness and reported frequency of use for each category of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS). These measures were further compared across public and private school contexts to identify potential institutional differences. Qualitative data derived from classroom observations were analyzed thematically following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding focused on emergent themes related to learners' strategic awareness, the role of bilingualism, and observable strategy preferences. Subsequently, quantitative and qualitative findings were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of VLS utilization within bilingual ESL environments.

This section presents an integrated analysis of the data, combining results from the student questionnaire, classroom observations, and cross-contextual comparisons between public and private school learners. The core patterns identified through this mixed-methods approach are summarized in the accompanying tables.

Table 1

Classroom Observation Comparison (Public vs Private Schools)

Code	Theme/Category	Public School Observation	Private School Observation
MEM	Rote learning / repetition	Vocabulary introduced through translation and repetition drills; focus on memorizing word lists.	Repetition used alongside contextual explanations; students practiced pronunciation and examples in context.
DIC	Dictionary use	Rarely used; students depended on the teacher for word meanings.	Frequent use of bilingual dictionaries and mobile dictionary apps during class activities.
COG	Contextual guessing / cognitive use	Minimal; guessing discouraged as the teacher directly provided meanings.	Used occasionally; learners inferred meanings from reading passages or class discussions.
SOC	Peer interaction / social strategy	Limited group discussion; most interaction was teacher-led.	Students engaged in pair work and peer-correction tasks; encouraged to use English in small groups.
MET	Self-monitoring / metacognitive	Absent; no reflection or planning activities observed.	Some learners noted new words in personal notebooks and reviewed them voluntarily.
BIL	Use of L1 (Urdu/Punjabi)	Heavy reliance on Urdu translation for comprehension; English rarely used spontaneously.	Urdu was occasionally used for clarification but English was encouraged for classroom communication.

Code	Theme/Category	Public School Observation	Private School Observation
TEC	Digital tools / technology use	None observed due to lack of resources.	Limited integration of mobile devices for dictionary and multimedia examples.

Classroom observations revealed marked pedagogical divergences between public and private institutional settings. In public schools, vocabulary instruction was predominantly characterized by a reliance on translation, rote memorization, and teacher-centered exposition, with minimal evidence of learner-initiated cognitive or social strategy deployment. Conversely, private school classrooms exhibited broader strategic repertoires, incorporating systematic dictionary use, peer collaborative tasks, contextual inferencing, and the incidental integration of digital tools. These observed patterns suggest notable variations in instructional scaffolding and explicit strategy cultivation across the two contexts.

Table 2

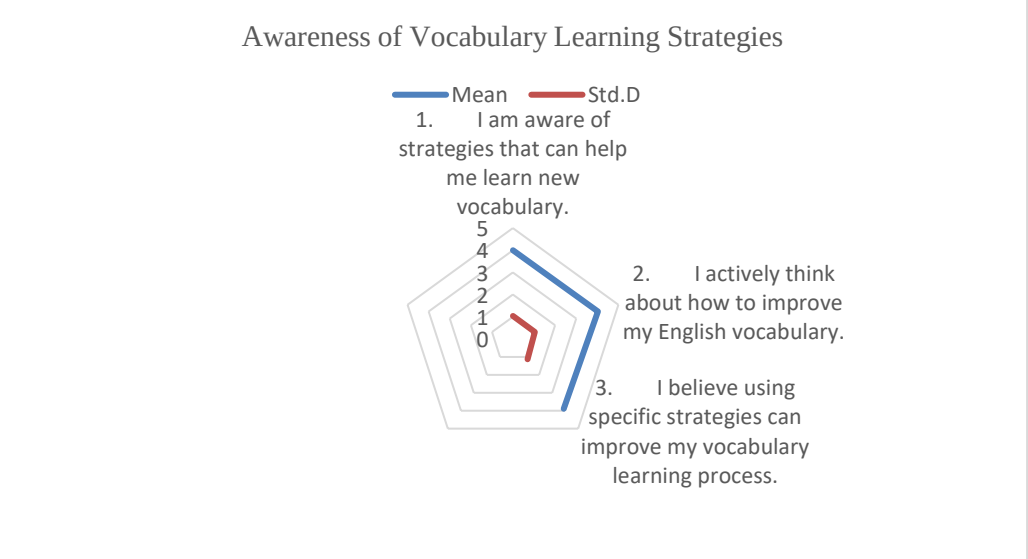
Awareness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies

	Mean	Std.D
1. I am aware of strategies that can help me learn new vocabulary.	4.00	1.036
2. I actively think about how to improve my English vocabulary.	4.03	1.036
3. I believe using specific strategies can improve my vocabulary learning process.	3.89	1.132

Note Mean=M;Standard Diviation= Std.D

Figure 2

Awareness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies



5.3.1 Figure of awareness of vocabulary learning strategies

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that the students are well aware of the vocabulary learning strategies. The average mean of the general awareness (M = 4.00) shows that the majority of learners are aware that there are strategies that can assist them in learning new words. Equally, the greatest mean (M = 4.03) indicates that students consider the need to enhance their vocabularies. The attitude to strategic learning was also rather positive with the belief that vocabulary learning could be improved with the help of certain strategies (M = 3.89). The standard deviations (1.03-1.13) are moderate, which implies that the majority of students concur, but some have a different degree of confidence. At large, the learners are well aware and have good perceptions about vocabulary learning strategies**.**

Table 3

The Use of Direct Vocabulary Learning Strategies

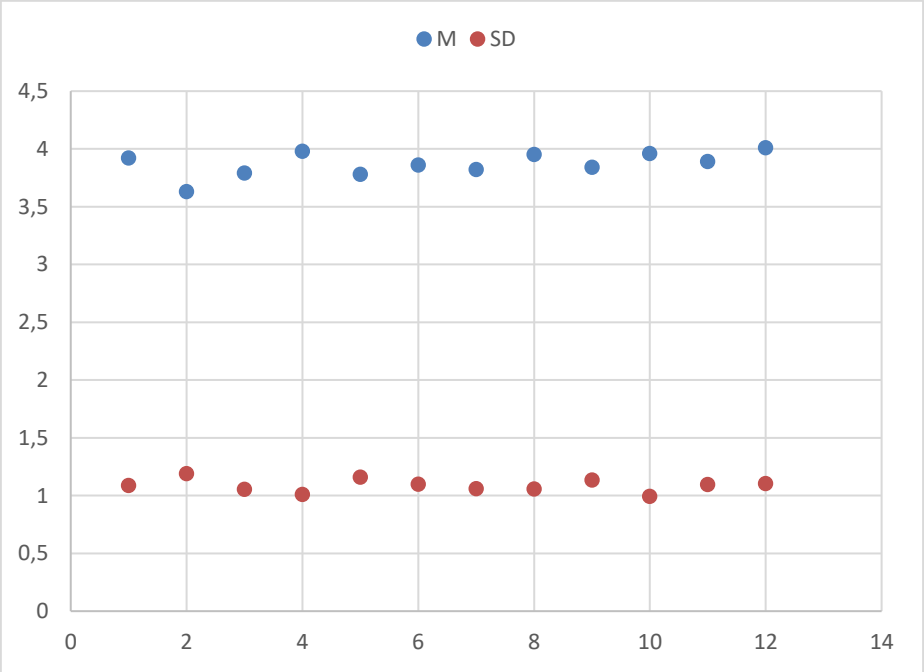
Item	Strategy Statement	*M*	*SD*
1	I use flashcards or similar tools to remember new words.	3.92	1.087
2	I associate new English words with my native language (e.g., Urdu or Punjabi).	3.63	1.190
3	I group words by themes, synonyms, or antonyms.	3.79	1.053
4	I visualize images or scenes to remember new words.	3.98	1.010
5	I use mnemonics, rhymes, or acronyms to memorize words.	3.78	1.159

Item	Strategy Statement	*M*	*SD*
6	I read books, articles, or newspapers in English to learn new words.	3.86	1.098
7	I highlight or underline unfamiliar words while reading.	3.82	1.059
8	I repeatedly write or pronounce new words to remember them.	3.95	1.057
9	I break down words into prefixes, suffixes, or roots to understand their meanings.	3.84	1.135
10	I use bilingual or monolingual dictionaries to find word meanings.	3.96	0.993
11	I substitute unfamiliar words with simpler or familiar ones during communication.	3.89	1.094
12	I use gestures or visual cues to understand unfamiliar words.	4.01	1.102

Note Mean=M;Standard Diviation= Std.D

Figure 3

The Use of Direct Vocabulary Learning Strategies



5.3.2 Figure of awareness of direct vocabulary learning strategies

The findings suggested that the students moderately use direct vocabulary learning strategies. The largest mean (M = 4.01) of using gestures or visual cues implies that the learners depend heavily on the visual aids when they are exposed to new words. The other strategies that have been used more frequently are visualization (M = 3.98), dictionaries (M = 3.96), repetition (M = 3.95), and flashcards (M = 3.92), indicating that students tend to rely on traditional memory-based and cognitive memorisation. Other strategies that are frequently used include breaking words into roots and affixes (M = 3.84), reading English texts (M = 3.86), and highlighting unfamiliar words (M = 3.82). The relative low mean in relating words to L1 (M = 3.63) shows that the learners indeed employ translation but

not extensively as the other direct strategies. The standard deviations of 1.0-1.2 imply that the difference in the use of strategies among students is moderate. Altogether, the information indicates that learners actively use the broad scope of the direct vocabulary acquisition techniques, with the evident liking toward visual, repetition-related, and dictionary-based techniques.

Table 4

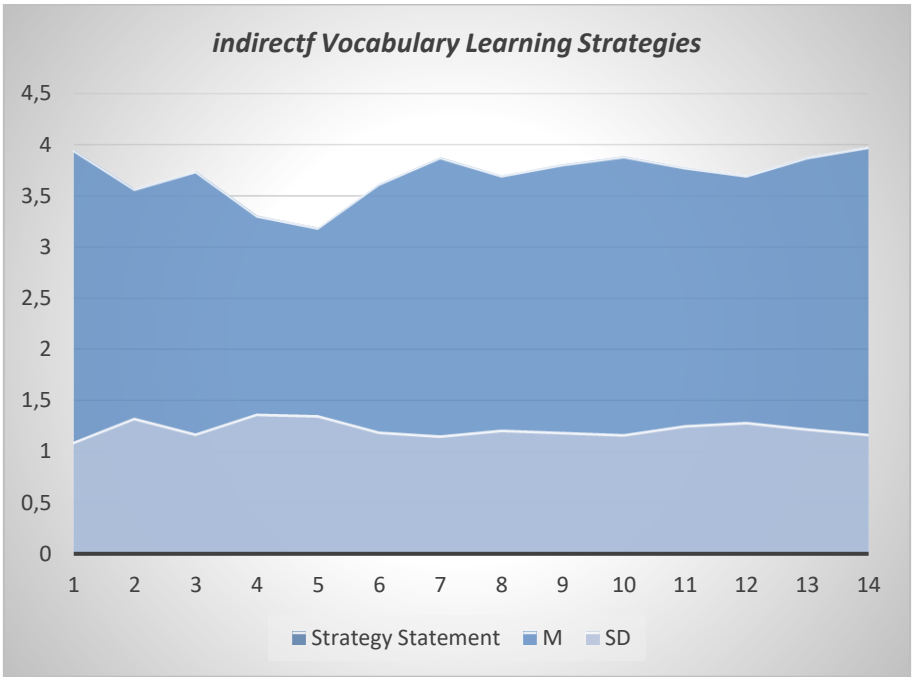
Use of Indirect Vocabulary Learning Strategies subscale

Item	Strategy Statement	*M*	*SD*
1	I plan specific goals for learning new vocabulary (e.g., learning five words a day).	3.95	1.091
2	I review vocabulary regularly to avoid forgetting.	3.57	1.325
3	I use language apps or tools (e.g., Duolingo, Quizlet) to track my vocabulary progress.	3.74	1.171
4	I monitor my improvement in vocabulary over time.	3.31	1.365
5	I choose learning materials (e.g., novels, videos) based on my vocabulary needs.	3.19	1.349
6	I motivate myself by rewarding progress in vocabulary learning.	3.62	1.189
7	I practice vocabulary in a stress-free and relaxed environment.	3.88	1.153
8	I reduce my fear of making mistakes when using new words.	3.70	1.208
9	I stay positive and persistent in learning new vocabulary.	3.81	1.186
10	I practice new vocabulary by speaking with friends, teachers, or native speakers.	3.89	1.166
11	I ask for help when I don’t understand a word or its usage.	3.78	1.254
12	I participate in group activities (e.g., discussions, role-plays) to learn and practice vocabulary.	3.70	1.285
13	I observe how proficient English speakers use vocabulary in real-life situations.	3.88	1.220
14	I join online forums or groups where I can practice using new English words.	3.98	1.168

Note Mean=M;Standard Diviation= Std.D

Figure 4

Indirectf Vocabulary Learning Strategies



5.3.3 Figure of awareness of indirect vocabulary learning strategies

The findings indicate that the students portray a moderate use of indirect vocabulary learning strategies with some of the strategies being more frequently used than others. The largest mean score (M = 3.98) of joining online forums or groups indicates that learners are becoming more receptive to the digital and social interaction as the process of vocabulary practicing. The most common are also the measures of vocabulary learning by means of social interaction with others (M = 3.89), monitoring proficient speakers (M = 3.88), and studying in a comfortable atmosphere (M = 3.88), which suggests that the students attach importance to social activities and affective comfort in vocabulary learning.

Other motivation-related scales like being positive (M = 3.81) or being less afraid of making mistakes (M = 3.70) also scored rather high and demonstrated that affective factors are important. Nevertheless, metacognitive strategies, including planning materials (M = 3.19) and monitoring improvement (M = 3.31) obtained lower means, as it is possible that self-regulation and planning are weak among learners. The standard deviations (1.17-1.36) indicate that there is a wide range of responses of the students.

On the whole, the findings suggest that learners use social and affective strategies on a moderate level, but their application of the metacognitive ones including planning, monitoring, and the ability to choose learning materials are comparatively less strong. This indicates the need to have a clear training on self-regulated vocabulary learning.

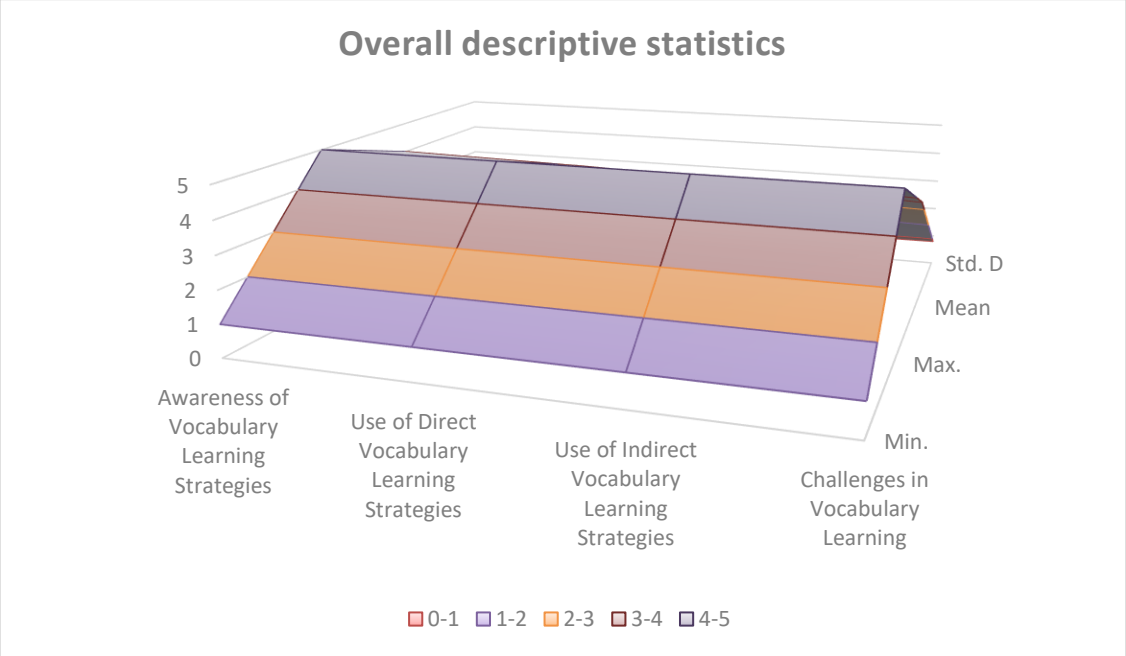
Table 4

Overall descriptive statistics of subscales

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. D
Awareness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies	1	5	3.97	.832
Use of Direct Vocabulary Learning Strategies	1	5	3.87	.756
Use of Indirect Vocabulary Learning Strategies	1	5	3.71	.748
Challenges in Vocabulary Learning	1	5	3.43	.799

Figure 5

Overall descriptive statistics



5.3.4 Figure of overall descriptive statistics

The general values of descriptive statistics show that students are highly aware about vocabulary learning strategies (M = 3.97), meaning that they are highly aware of how vocabulary growth can be supported by the strategies. Their direct strategies are

rather frequent as well (M = 3.87) and it indicates that such techniques as repetition, using a dictionary, and analysis of words are often used by the learners. Direct strategies have a lower mean score (M = 3.71), implying a moderate use of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies, and providing insufficient self-regulation abilities. The least mean is the vocabulary learning difficulties (M = 3.43), as the students face some challenges especially in the application of new vocabulary, retention of words or control of learning conditions. The standard deviations denote the moderate variation in the responses of all subscales. On the whole, the learners seem to be aware and moderately strategic, but they face significant challenges that could be addressed with the help of special instruction.

6 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The quantitative data, as presented in the accompanying tables, indicate a generally high level of learner awareness regarding vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), with mean scores consistently at or above 4.0 on the measurement scale. Reported frequency of use for direct strategies such as repetition, dictionary use, visualization, and word analysis is also notably high. In contrast, the use of indirect strategies, encompassing metacognitive processes like planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation, is moderately lower, suggesting these regulatory behaviors are less systematically integrated into learners' routines. Furthermore, the challenge subscale yielded the lowest mean scores, indicating learners perceive moderate difficulties in the vocabulary acquisition process. Observational data reveal distinct pedagogical differences between institutional contexts. Instruction in public schools was predominantly characterized by reliance on memorization, teacher-centered delivery, and limited instructional resources, which constrained opportunities for varied strategy application. In contrast, private school classrooms demonstrated a wider repertoire of strategies, supported by greater resource availability, exposure to multimedia input, and more student-centered pedagogical approaches. These institutional factors appear to significantly influence learners' autonomy and the diversity of strategies they are able to employ.

In summary, the integrated findings demonstrate that while strategic awareness is high and direct strategy use is prevalent, the deployment of indirect, metacognitive strategies is less consistent. The observational data further underscore how institutional

context specifically, resource allocation and pedagogical orientation mediates learners' access to and development of strategic vocabulary learning competencies.

7 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings indicate that Pakistani bilingual ESL learners demonstrate moderate awareness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), with a pronounced reliance on direct, teacher-centered techniques such as repetition, dictionary use, and translation. This pattern aligns with established observations of exam-oriented, teacher-fronted instructional approaches in the local context (Shamim, 2008). While such strategies may support short-term recall, they offer limited engagement with deeper lexical processing or contextual application, a limitation consistent with broader second language acquisition research (Nation, 2001; Prince, 1996). Strategies requiring inferencing or contextual guessing were employed less frequently and inconsistently, predominantly by learners in environments with richer instructional support, mirroring trends identified in other L2 settings (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).Similarly, the use of indirect strategiesincluding planning, self-monitoring, affective regulation, and collaborative learning remained underdeveloped, despite their documented role in fostering learner autonomy and lexical proficiency (Schmitt, 2000; Cohen, 2011). A discernible institutional divide was observed: public-school learners exhibited the most constrained strategic repertoires, while their private-school counterparts showed marginally greater engagement with cognitive and metacognitive techniques. This disparity underscores the influential role of pedagogical exposure and resource availability.

Overall, the results suggest that systematic and effective VLS application rarely develops implicitly, even among bilingual learners who possess theoretical cross-linguistic advantages conducive to vocabulary development (Gu & Johnson, 1996). Consequently, these findings underscore the necessity for structured pedagogical interventions, including explicit strategy instruction, teacher professional development, and the integration of technology-enhanced learning environments, to cultivate both direct and indirect vocabulary learning competencies in Pakistani ESL classrooms.

8 LIMITATIONS

Qualitative data indicate that bilingual learners primarily rely on cross-linguistic associations and translation as core vocabulary learning strategies. While such approaches can risk promoting superficial memorization, they also hold potential for deeper cognitive processing when combined with elaboration and contextual engagement—a view supported by research indicating that strategic translation can facilitate lexical encoding (Prince, 1996; Nation, 2001). However, in the Pakistani context, these inherent cross-linguistic advantages remain underutilized due to a lack of explicit strategy instruction and a predominantly examination-oriented pedagogical culture (Shamim, 2008; Schmitt, 2000). Contemporary research on bilingualism further underscores that bilingual learners often possess heightened metalinguistic awareness and can effectively leverage multiple linguistic resources when appropriately guided (Agustín-Llach *et al*., 2019).

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The sample was confined to four schools within one province, which may not fully represent Pakistan's broader linguistic and educational diversity. Classroom observations, though structured, were limited in duration and may have been influenced by observer presence, potentially affecting the authenticity of learner behaviors. The absence of teacher perspectives also constrains a comprehensive understanding of instructional practices, which are known to significantly shape strategy use (Schmitt, 2000). Furthermore, restricted access to digital tools and the prevalence of examination-focused pedagogy limited learners' exposure to technology-mediated methods, despite growing evidence that such approaches can enhance task engagement and cognitive involvement in vocabulary learning (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Zhang & Li, 2011).Collectively, these limitations underscore the need for more explicit and systematic integration of VLS instruction, alongside efforts to address the digital divide, in order to fully realize the strategic potential of bilingual learners in ESL contexts.

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings yield several practical implications for enhancing vocabulary learning among bilingual learners of English in Pakistan. For classroom practice,

instructors should integrate explicit strategy instruction into regular lessons, modeling techniques such as inferencing, semantic mapping, and structured self-study routines. This instruction should aim to develop learners' capacity to set goals, monitor progress, and utilize digital resources (e.g., Quizlet, online corpora) autonomously. At the curricular level, designers of ESL programs should systematically embed Vocabulary Learning Strategy (VLS) instruction, with particular emphasis on cross-linguistic strategies that enable learners to leverage translation, cognate recognition, and codewitching strategically.

For educational policy, there is a clear need to prioritize professional development in strategy-based pedagogy and digital literacy, while simultaneously advancing learner-centered methodologies and investing in ICT infrastructure to ensure equitable access to digital vocabulary tools. Finally, for the research community, future studies should employ longitudinal designs, cross-institutional comparisons, and investigations into motivational and sociocultural variables. Such research would provide a more nuanced understanding of how contextual and affective factors mediate strategy use and lexical development in bilingual settings.

10 CONCLUSION

I This study indicates that bilingual ESL learners in Pakistan demonstrate moderate awareness of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), yet their actual strategy use remains largely confined to direct, rote-oriented techniques such as memorization, repetition, and dictionary consultation—practices aligned with traditional, examination-focused instruction. While these methods may aid short-term recall, they do not substantially foster deeper lexical processing, communicative competence, or autonomous learning. Moreover, learners showed limited engagement with indirect strategies—metacognitive, affective, and social—reflecting a lack of systematic instruction in areas such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and collaborative learning.

Although bilingual learners possess inherent potential for cross-linguistic strategy use, this capacity remains underutilized in the absence of explicit pedagogical guidance. The study further revealed notable institutional disparities: learners in private schools benefited from more communicative and technology-enhanced environments, whereas those in public schools relied predominantly on memorization-based approaches. Across

both contexts, a common constraint was insufficient teacher training in strategy-based instruction. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for systematic, integrated VLS instruction that combines direct and indirect strategies, promotes learner autonomy, and aligns with contemporary communicative and digital pedagogical practices.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical guidelines and protocols established by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Formal ethical approval was secured prior to any data collection activities.

All participants were fully informed of the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including guarantees of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement. They were explicitly advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Throughout the data collection process, the principles of anonymity and voluntary participation were rigorously upheld.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no competing interests in relation to this research. The study was self-funded; no external financial or institutional support was received for its design, execution, or publication. All aspects of the research—including conception, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation—were conducted independently by the authors. The decision to publish the findings was made solely by the authors for the purpose of academic contribution, without influence from any external party.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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