

Investigation of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and the Difficulty Faced by the Students of Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of language learning, particularly for students engaged in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as it profoundly influences their comprehension, communicative competence, and overall academic achievement. However, students in Islamic junior high schools face distinctive challenges stemming from their exposure to multiple languages and the incorporation of religious themes, which remain underexplored in existing literature. This study seeks to examine the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students at MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya, alongside the specific challenges they encounter. A mixed-methods research design was utilized, incorporating data collection through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. The findings reveal that cognitive and social strategies are predominantly employed, while the challenges identified include difficulties in vocabulary retention, pronunciation, and language interference. The study concludes that the integration of contextually and culturally relevant methodologies in vocabulary instruction can enhance student learning and retention, particularly within religious educational frameworks.

Keywords: *Vocabulary Learning Strategies, EFL Learners, Islamic Education, Cognitive Strategies, Language Interference*

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INTRODUCTION

The acquisition and effective utilization of vocabulary are fundamental elements of language learning, particularly within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A well-developed vocabulary not only facilitates clear communication but also significantly enhances reading comprehension and overall academic performance (Coxhead, 2000; Milton, 2023). In today's interconnected world, proficiency in English has become increasingly essential for students, as it opens doors to a multitude of educational and professional opportunities. However, many learners, especially those in non-English-speaking countries, face considerable challenges in mastering English vocabulary. This issue is particularly pronounced among students in Islamic junior high schools, such as MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya, where the integration of religious studies and multilingual environments complicates the language learning process (Anwar, 2023).

Language acquisition is a multifaceted process that encompasses both implicit and explicit learning. Implicit learning occurs naturally through exposure to language in context, while explicit learning involves the conscious study and practice of language rules and vocabulary (Ellis, 2005). According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), language is acquired when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current proficiency level, a concept referred to as "i+1." This principle underscores the importance of comprehensible input in facilitating natural language acquisition, suggesting that learners benefit from exposure to language that challenges them without overwhelming them (Nation, 2022). Recent studies have reinforced the relevance of this hypothesis in EFL

contexts, highlighting the necessity for rich linguistic input to support vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2022).

The significance of this issue is further accentuated by the unique linguistic and cultural context in which these students learn. Many students at Islamic junior high schools are exposed to multiple languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, Arabic, and English. This multilingual environment can lead to language interference, wherein elements from a student's first language adversely affect their ability to learn and utilize English vocabulary effectively (Odlin, 1989). For instance, students may struggle with pronunciation and spelling due to discrepancies in phonetic systems and orthographic conventions between their native languages and English (Liu & Xu, 2021). Recent studies have demonstrated that such interference can impede vocabulary acquisition, making it imperative for educators to comprehend these dynamics to better support their students (Milton, 2023).

Moreover, the integration of religious studies into the curriculum introduces an additional layer of complexity to vocabulary acquisition. Students are required to navigate not only the English language but also Arabic and Islamic studies, which can engender cognitive overload and hinder their capacity to concentrate on mastering English vocabulary (Cook, 2008). This intricate matter underscores the necessity of adopting effective vocabulary learning strategies tailored to address the distinct needs of students in Islamic educational environments. Recent research emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant pedagogical methods that resonate with students' backgrounds and experiences, thereby enhancing their engagement and retention of new vocabulary (Sari & Hidayati, 2023).

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) encompasses several stages, including the silent period, during which learners listen and absorb the language without speaking, followed by the emergence of basic communication skills. As learners progress, they develop more complex language abilities, including vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and pronunciation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The role of input is crucial in this process; learners require ample opportunities to encounter and utilize the language in meaningful contexts to facilitate vocabulary retention and usage (Nation, 2001). In light of these challenges, it is crucial to investigate the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students at MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya, along with the challenges they encounter in acquiring English vocabulary. Understanding these dynamics is essential for educators, as it can inform the development of more effective teaching methodologies that cater to the unique needs of students in Islamic educational settings (Anwar, 2023). By addressing the specific challenges faced by these learners, educators can enhance vocabulary instruction, ultimately improving overall language proficiency and academic success (Fitriani & Sulaiman, 2024).

Numerous studies have explored vocabulary learning strategies and the challenges faced by students in Islamic junior high schools, contributing valuable insights into this area of research. For instance, Rahman et al. (2022) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies employed by EFL students in Islamic junior high schools, finding that students predominantly utilized discovery strategies, such as contextual clues and word analysis. However, they reported difficulties with word retention due to a lack of meaningful practice. While this study highlights the strategies employed, it does not delve deeply into the specific challenges that hinder vocabulary acquisition, leaving a gap in understanding the interplay between strategies and difficulties (Schmitt, 2000). This limitation suggests that a more holistic approach is necessary to fully comprehend how these strategies can be effectively applied to address the particular challenges encountered by students in these educational settings.

Similarly, Sari and Hidayati (2023) examined the challenges in vocabulary learning for EFL students in Islamic education contexts. Their study found that pronunciation and spelling posed considerable difficulties, especially for students who faced challenges with English sounds that are absent in their native language. However, this study primarily focused on challenges without exploring the strategies that could mitigate these difficulties,

indicating a need for further investigation into effective vocabulary learning strategies in light of the challenges identified (Anwar, 2023). This gap highlights the importance of understanding not only the obstacles students face but also the potential strategies that can assist in overcoming these barriers.

Anwar (2023) emphasized the role of cultural context in vocabulary learning among Islamic junior high school students, illustrating how cultural and religious factors influence vocabulary acquisition. Although this study offers important perspectives on the cultural aspects of language learning, it fails to explore the particular vocabulary learning strategies that could be utilized to improve students' comprehension and retention of new words. This oversight suggests that future research should focus on how culturally relevant teaching methods can be integrated into vocabulary instruction to better support students in their learning journeys (Goh, 2008).

Fitriani and Sulaiman (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study comparing traditional teaching methods with multimedia resources, finding that students utilizing multimedia exhibited higher vocabulary retention. However, this study's focus on multimedia resources may overlook other effective strategies that could be employed in the classroom, particularly in the context of Islamic education. This limitation indicates that while technology can enhance learning, it is essential to explore a broader range of instructional strategies that can be tailored to the specific needs of students in Islamic junior high schools (Cohen, 1998).

Despite these studies offering important insights, significant deficiencies remain in the existing literature. Firstly, there is insufficient comprehensive research that concurrently investigates both vocabulary learning strategies and the specific difficulties encountered by students in Islamic junior high schools. Most existing studies tend to concentrate on either strategies or challenges, rather than exploring the relationship between the two. This oversight limits the understanding of how effective strategies can be developed to address the unique difficulties encountered by students in these educational settings (Schmitt, 2000).

Secondly, while some studies have touched on the cultural context of vocabulary learning, there is insufficient exploration of how culturally relevant teaching methods can be integrated into vocabulary instruction to enhance student engagement and retention. Given the unique cultural and religious backgrounds of students in Islamic junior high schools, it is essential to investigate how these factors can inform effective vocabulary teaching practices (Goh, 2008).

Lastly, the current research frequently depends on quantitative methods, which may fail to reflect the intricate experiences of students and teachers involved in the vocabulary learning process. Qualitative insights are essential for grasping the complexities of vocabulary acquisition within a multilingual and multicultural framework. As highlighted by Cohen (1998), qualitative research can provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of learners, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

Given the existing research limitations, it is important to carry out a more in-depth investigation into the vocabulary learning strategies and the specific difficulties experienced by students at MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya. This study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing both the techniques employed by learners and educators, as well as the particular difficulties they encounter in acquiring English vocabulary. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the research aims to offer comprehensive insights into the vocabulary acquisition process, thereby supporting the development of instructional methods that are both culturally responsive and contextually appropriate to the distinctive characteristics of Islamic educational settings. Ultimately, this investigation aspires to enhance vocabulary instruction and improve overall language proficiency among students, thereby contributing to their academic success and future opportunities. By focusing on the specific challenges faced by these learners, educators can devise targeted strategies that not only enhance vocabulary acquisition but also promote a more effective and culturally attuned approach to language instruction in Islamic junior high schools.

METHOD

This section outlines the research methodology utilized in the current study, providing a detailed account of the participants, the research instruments employed, the data collection procedures, and the analysis techniques. The study implemented a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Special care was taken in selecting respondents, designing and applying the instruments, following a systematic data collection process, and conducting thorough analyses to ensure that the findings were reliable, precise, and pertinent to the specific educational context of MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya.

Respondents

This study involved students from MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya as participants, specifically those enrolled in grades VII, VIII, and IX. A random sampling technique was employed to select 50 students, ensuring that the sample reflected the overall characteristics of the student body in terms of gender, academic performance, and language proficiency. Additionally, two English teachers from the institution participated as informants to provide insights into the teaching strategies and challenges encountered in vocabulary instruction. The selection of both students and teachers aimed to gather comprehensive data on the vocabulary learning process from multiple perspectives.

Instruments

The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to thoroughly investigate students' vocabulary learning strategies as well as the teaching methods used in English instruction. This approach facilitated data triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and richness of the study's results. Three principal instruments were utilized:

Structured Questionnaire: The questionnaire, adapted from Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, consisted of 30 closed-ended items representing six categories of vocabulary learning strategies – memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5). The questionnaire was systematically administered to student participants, with clear instructions provided to ensure independent and candid responses, thereby establishing a theoretically grounded basis for analyzing learners' strategic behavior.

Semi-Structured Interviews: To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two English teachers to gain deeper insights into their instructional approaches, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they employed to facilitate students' vocabulary acquisition. The interview guide included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to elaborate on their pedagogical experiences, such as:

What strategies do you use to learn new vocabulary in English? Can you give specific examples?

How do you typically memorize new English words? Do you use any tools, apps, or methods like flashcards? If so, how effective are they for you?

What strategies does your teacher use in the classroom to help you learn English vocabulary? Do you find these strategies helpful? Why or why not?

What difficulties do you face when learning new vocabulary in English? Can you give examples of words or concepts that are especially hard for you?

Do you struggle more with understanding the meaning of words or remembering them? What do you think makes it hard for you?

Do you think it helps to learn English vocabulary in the context of religious studies or daily life? How so?

Do you have difficulty with pronunciation or using vocabulary in a sentence? Can you give an example of a word that is hard for you to pronounce or use correctly?

As a bilingual student, do you think your native language helps or hinders your learning of English vocabulary? In what ways?

How motivated are you to learn English vocabulary? Do you think motivation affects your learning? How do you stay motivated?

What do you think can be done to improve your learning of English vocabulary? Do you have any suggestions for your teacher or school?

Procedures

Data collection followed a systematic and organized procedure to maintain the validity and credibility of the findings. The process began with the development and validation of research instruments. A pilot study involving a limited number of students was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and reliability of both the questionnaire and interview items. Insights gathered from this initial phase were utilized to refine and improve the instruments, ensuring they were comprehensible to participants and aligned with the study's objectives.

Following the refinement of the instruments, the questionnaire was administered to the selected student respondents during their English classes. Students were given clear instructions to complete the questionnaire independently, with an emphasis on confidentiality to promote honest and unbiased responses. Upon concluding the questionnaire phase, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with two English teachers to gather more in-depth information. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place in a quiet and private environment to allow for open, in-depth discussions regarding their teaching practices and experiences.

To further enrich the data, classroom observations were carried out over a two-week period. During this time, the researcher attended several vocabulary-focused English lessons across different grade levels. Detailed field notes were taken to document the teaching strategies used, the nature of student-teacher interactions, and the overall classroom dynamics. This multi-step procedure ensured a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of vocabulary learning and instruction at MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya.

Data Analysis

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a thorough and well-rounded analysis of the findings.

Quantitative Analysis: The quantitative data obtained from student questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Mean scores were calculated for each category of vocabulary learning strategy—memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social—to identify overall patterns and the frequency of use among the students. Additionally, frequency distributions were created to pinpoint common challenges faced by students during the vocabulary acquisition process, providing a general overview of their learning difficulties. This approach follows the recommendation of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), who emphasize the value of descriptive statistics in identifying trends within educational data.

Qualitative Analysis: The qualitative data obtained from teacher interviews and classroom observations were analyzed through thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcribed interviews and detailed field notes were examined to identify recurring themes and meaningful patterns related to teaching strategies, instructional challenges, and levels of student engagement during vocabulary lessons. These themes provided rich, contextual insights that deepened the interpretation of the quantitative results.

The integration of both data sets was carried out during the interpretation phase, allowing the researcher to triangulate findings and draw robust conclusions about the vocabulary learning strategies employed and the challenges faced by students. This process of data triangulation not only enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings but also contributed to a more holistic understanding of vocabulary learning within the context of Islamic junior high school education (Creswell, 2014). By employing this mixed-methods

framework, the study aimed to support the development of pedagogical approaches that are both evidence-based and contextually relevant to the students of MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the study displays the outcomes of the quantitative analysis conducted on the questionnaire responses, with the objective of examining students' strategies for learning vocabulary and the obstacles they face in mastering English vocabulary. To analyze the data, descriptive statistical techniques were used to compute the mean and standard deviation for each item in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Results of The Questionnaire

No	Items	Options				
		SD (Strongly Disagree)	DA (Disagree)	N (Neutral)	A (Agree)	SA (Strongly Agree)
1	I use context to guess the meaning of new words.	8%	24%	32%	24%	13%
2	I use a dictionary (book or digital) to look up word meanings.	5%	16%	32%	32%	16%
3	I memorize vocabulary using flashcards.	8%	19%	32%	24%	18%
4	I create associations or images to remember word meanings.	6%	16%	32%	32%	14%
5	I rewrite new words to help me remember them.	5%	13%	32%	32%	19%
6	I use new vocabulary in my own sentences.	3%	8%	32%	40%	18%
7	I discuss word meanings with friends to understand them better.	6%	16%	32%	32%	14%
8	I use new vocabulary when speaking or writing.	5%	13%	32%	32%	19%
9	I learn vocabulary from reading books or articles.	3%	8%	32%	40%	18%
10	I learn vocabulary through apps or video tutorials.	2%	5%	24%	40%	30%
11	I struggle to remember word meanings over time.	16%	32%	24%	16%	13%
12	I struggle to pronounce English words.	19%	32%	24%	16%	10%
13	I get confused about English word spellings.	16%	32%	24%	16%	13%
14	I struggle to understand word meanings without context.	13%	32%	24%	16%	13%
15	I often mix up English words with words from other languages I know.	16%	32%	24%	16%	13%
16	I struggle to use new vocabulary in sentences.	19%	32%	24%	16%	13%
17	I feel overwhelmed by having to learn English, Arabic, and other vocabulary.	24%	32%	16%	16%	13%
18	I quickly forget word meanings if I don't use them immediately.	16%	32%	24%	16%	13%

The findings indicate that participants hold varied views regarding the use of vocabulary learning strategies in acquiring English. A significant portion of respondents (40%) reported using new vocabulary in their own sentences, indicating a positive engagement with practical application. However, 32% expressed neutrality regarding their ability to use context to guess meanings, suggesting that while some students recognize its importance, they may lack confidence in applying this strategy effectively. Additionally, 32% of participants agreed that they struggle to remember word meanings over time, highlighting a common challenge in vocabulary retention. The use of dictionaries is favored

by 32% of respondents, indicating that traditional resources are still valued, yet there is a notable reliance on digital tools, with 40% learning vocabulary through apps and videos.

Moreover, 32% of participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the need to learn multiple languages, which may hinder their vocabulary acquisition process. While 40% acknowledged that reading helps them learn new words, 32% admitted to difficulties with pronunciation and spelling, suggesting areas where additional support is necessary. Interestingly, 32% of respondents indicated that they often mix English with other languages, which can complicate their learning experience. Despite these challenges, many participants find discussions with peers beneficial for understanding word meanings, with 32% agreeing on the effectiveness of collaborative learning. Overall, the findings suggest that while there are effective strategies in place for vocabulary learning, there are significant hurdles that need to be addressed to enhance the overall learning experience and ensure that all students can effectively acquire and use new vocabulary.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the respondents' responses to statements

No	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I use context to guess the meaning of new words.	3.20	0.90
2	I use a dictionary (book or digital) to look up word meanings.	3.46	1.28
3	I memorize vocabulary using flashcards.	2.66	1.24
4	I create associations or images to remember word meanings.	2.86	1.23
5	I rewrite new words to help me remember them.	3.36	1.18
6	I use new vocabulary in my own sentences.	2.88	0.90
7	I discuss word meanings with friends to understand them better.	3.42	1.14
8	I use new vocabulary when speaking or writing.	2.82	1.10
9	I learn vocabulary from reading books or articles.	3.12	1.26
10	I learn vocabulary through apps or video tutorials.	3.18	0.92
11	I struggle to remember word meanings over time.	3.12	0.77
12	I struggle to pronounce English words.	3.24	1.08
13	I get confused about English word spellings.	3.34	1.08
14	I struggle to understand word meanings without context.	3.34	1.04
15	I often mix up English words with words from other languages I know.	3.20	1.18
16	I struggle to use new vocabulary in sentences.	3.16	1.06
17	I feel overwhelmed by having to learn English, Arabic, and other vocabulary.	3.66	1.06
18	I quickly forget word meanings if I don't use them immediately.	3.48	1.20

The data in Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students and the difficulties they commonly encounter. The findings indicate that students adopt a variety of strategies, although the frequency and effectiveness of their use vary. The most frequently employed strategy is the use of dictionaries, either in book or digital form (Mean = 3.46), suggesting that learners place a high value on clarity and accuracy when trying to understand new words. This supports Schmitt's (2000) argument that dictionary use is a fundamental and reliable strategy in vocabulary learning. A participant (S8) noted, *"I usually write down new words in my notebook and look up the meaning. For example, I once wrote the word generous and noted its meaning in Indonesian."*

Peer discussion also emerges as a widely used strategy (Mean = 3.42), reflecting the collaborative nature of learning among students. This is consistent with the findings of Husnawati et al. (2024), who emphasize the positive role of peer interaction in reinforcing vocabulary acquisition. One learner (S9) explained, *"I understand better when I discuss vocabulary with my friends than when I study alone."*

Another commonly practiced technique is rewriting new words, which scored relatively high (Mean = 3.36). This supports Oxford's (1990) view that repetition through writing aids long-term memory retention. In contrast, less popular strategies include using flashcards (Mean = 2.66) and creating mental associations or imagery (Mean = 2.86),

potentially due to a lack of familiarity or instruction on how to apply these techniques. Instead, several learners prefer audiovisual resources. One respondent (S8) stated, *"I prefer watching videos and hearing how words are used directly. It's more effective because I can see the context."*

Moderate use of multimedia tools such as apps and video tutorials (Mean = 3.18) also suggests that digital media supports vocabulary development. However, a notable gap is observed between passive recognition and active usage of vocabulary. The strategy of using new vocabulary in writing or speech (Mean = 2.82), and in sentence construction (Mean = 2.88), were among the least practiced. This indicates that although learners may recognize words, they often struggle to apply them in communication. One participant (S8) commented, *"Sometimes I make grammar mistakes when I try to use new words in a sentence."*

In terms of the difficulty, students reported multiple challenges in vocabulary learning. The highest-rated concern was the pressure of having to learn three languages—English, Arabic, and Indonesian—simultaneously (Mean = 3.66). This multilingual burden was described by one student (S7), who stated, *"Sometimes I get confused because I have to learn three languages at once, and they all get mixed up in my head."* Another significant issue was the tendency to forget vocabulary when it is not used immediately (Mean = 3.48), consistent with theories of vocabulary attrition in short-term memory. For instance, a participant (S8) admitted, *"I know the word's meaning, but during exams, I forget and can't answer correctly."*

Other common challenges include difficulties with spelling (Mean = 3.34), pronouncing words (Mean = 3.24), and understanding word meanings without sufficient context (Mean = 3.34). These findings align with Goh (2000), who noted that learners often struggle with form-meaning mapping and pronunciation, particularly in EFL environments. Several students mentioned specific examples of problematic vocabulary, such as psychology, comfortable, and thought, which are often difficult due to their spelling-pronunciation mismatch. *"I always mispronounce words like vegetable,"* one learner (S7) reported. *"I tend to pronounce them the way they're spelled in Indonesian."*

The influence of bilingualism presents both advantages and complications. While some students acknowledged that their first language helps them understand English by translating meanings, others admitted that direct translation often leads to unnatural or incorrect sentence structures. One participant (S7) observed, *"I think in Indonesian first, so sometimes my English sentences come out strange."*

In conclusion, while students engage in a range of vocabulary learning strategies, they face persistent obstacles in pronunciation, memory retention, and applying vocabulary in context. The data highlight the need for more engaging, context-rich, and communicative approaches to connect passive vocabulary knowledge with practical language use. The findings suggest that strategies such as peer interaction, audiovisual media, and teacher-led reinforcement through games and contextualized input are not only more enjoyable but also more effective in supporting vocabulary development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided valuable insights into the vocabulary learning strategies employed by students at MTs Muslimat NU Palangka Raya and the specific difficulties they face in acquiring English vocabulary. The findings indicate that while students utilize a variety of strategies, including dictionary use, peer discussions, and rewriting new words, they also encounter significant challenges related to pronunciation, spelling, and the pressure of learning multiple languages simultaneously. Key findings from the research reveal that students frequently employ cognitive and social strategies, demonstrating a preference for collaborative learning and the use of digital resources. Strategies such as using dictionaries and engaging in peer discussions were particularly prominent. Despite the use of various strategies, students face notable difficulties in vocabulary retention, pronunciation, and spelling. The pressure of learning English, Arabic, and Indonesian

concurrently contributes to cognitive overload, complicating their ability to effectively learn and apply new vocabulary. The data also show that students benefit from peer interactions, which enhance their understanding and retention of vocabulary, highlighting the importance of a collaborative approach in fostering a supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the complexities of navigating multiple languages simultaneously underscore the unique challenges faced by students in Islamic educational settings, as this multilingual environment can lead to confusion and hinder vocabulary acquisition.

To enhance vocabulary instruction, it is essential for educators to adopt culturally relevant and context-sensitive teaching methods that resonate with students' backgrounds and experiences. Incorporating engaging, communicative approaches—such as peer interaction, multimedia resources, and contextualized input—can help bridge the gap between passive vocabulary recognition and active language use. By identifying and addressing the particular challenges encountered by these students, teachers can implement focused strategies that enhance vocabulary development while promoting a more effective and culturally responsive method of language teaching within Islamic junior high schools. In conclusion, this research contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts, particularly within Islamic educational settings. The insights gained can inform educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing effective vocabulary instruction that supports students' academic success and future opportunities. Furthermore, the study encourages ongoing research to explore the integration of culturally relevant pedagogical methods and the long-term impact of various vocabulary learning strategies on student outcomes.

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