

Secondary ESL Teachers' Beliefs, Strategies, and Experiences in Teaching Vocabulary

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Abstract

The importance of vocabulary in language learning cannot be ignored, due to the significance that it brings into the core foundation of second or foreign language learning. Due to the declining and poor performance of learners in language subjects in recent international and national standardized examinations, this study explored the beliefs, strategies, and experiences of secondary ESL teachers in the Philippines in teaching vocabulary. This descriptive single case study included 17 secondary ESL teachers as participants and were asked to answer an open-ended online questionnaire seeking to describe their beliefs, strategies, and experiences in teaching vocabulary. For the purposes of confirmation and verification of participants' responses, semi-structured interviews through online conferencing platforms were also conducted. Anchored on the framework of Borg (2003), the participants' beliefs mirror the strategies and experiences they were accustomed to in teaching and learning vocabulary while incorporating 21st century approaches such as collaboration and autonomy-supportive language learning strategies.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Teaching and Learning Vocabulary, Teacher Cognition, ESL

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Introduction

Vocabulary is an important feature of language learning. It is considered as eternally fundamental in the acquisition of any language because it serves as a significant factor in developing language skills such as speaking and reading (Ying, Komachali & Khodareza, as cited in Choo, 2017; Laufer, as cited in Min, 2008; Yudinseva, 2015). In practice, learners undergo various levels of vocabulary development from the simplest to the most complex. As they mature, they encounter resources that aim to further enhance comprehension skills; on one hand, others rely on the use of vocabulary-decoding resources.

To achieve this aim, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are expected to be knowledgeable in content, instruction, and theory. With a wide set of vocabulary, it would be remarkable to use reading materials to introduce vocabulary and strategize its delivery for retention; however, activities or processes aiming to do so beyond the reading selections are quite non-evident. In some cases, students are perceived to lack vocabulary despite the expectations set existing policies, especially in the higher levels. Likewise, despite having ample resources and being taught of strategies to learn vocabulary, students tend to become discouraged, hence, citing a potential problem in the processes that mediate the development of vocabulary (Iqbal & Komal, 2017), and tolerating in this capacity puts them at risk of experiencing difficulties in performing essential language skills.

Developing vocabulary is undoubtedly one of the very essential competencies language learners must have. Recently, there is small success in exams assessing vocabulary proficiency; for instance, the Philippines' National Achievement Test (NAT) and the poor performance in the reading comprehension of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that students are yet to be equipped in undertaking more complex language learning tasks in higher levels. Also, there may be rising problems in mediators in need for review. As an initial aid to a complex problem, this study described the beliefs, strategies, and experiences of secondary ESL teachers in teaching vocabulary.

Research Questions

Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs evident among ESL teachers towards teaching vocabulary?
2. What are the issues that ESL teachers experience in teaching vocabulary?
3. What challenges do ESL teachers encounter in terms of:
 - a. the students' interest in literary selections?
 - b. the students' attitudes towards literature-based language learning tasks?
4. What methods in teaching vocabulary do ESL teachers find effective in the language classroom?

The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a chief element in language learning due to the fascination of how syntax is constructed (Choo, 2017; Oxford, 2013), which shows how students can develop their early communication skills, aside from grammar and pronunciation. Fahrurrozi (2017) and Hidayat (2016) each elaborated the vocabulary advantage of L1 speakers of English compared to those whose L2 or L3 is English. Further, vocabulary is attributed to academic achievement due to the dependency of essential language macro skills to the vocabulary foundation of a student – for example, understanding the complexities of science-related fields (İlter, 2019;

Lund & Johnson, 2013; Oxford, 2013; Pittman et al., 2018). Additionally, it is parallel to high literacy rates. Perhaps, one of the most notable and ironic was the Philippines' 2018 PISA results, ranking the country last in reading comprehension despite being recognized as a "highly literate" country by UNESCO (Manlapig, 2020; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018; San Juan, 2019). Hence, vocabulary is fundamental across disciplines, citing the need to comprehend the complexities of each.

Teachers' Beliefs in Teaching Vocabulary

Defined as a state of mind people hold as true despite of many truths exposed, beliefs are subjective to evaluation and judgment of an individual (Borg, 2001; Pajares, 1992). Figure 1 further explains that teachers' beliefs are shaped through their previous experience in instruction as students (Amiryousefi, 2015; Boston University School of Public Health, 2019), therefore, mirrors their practice in the language classroom. To illustrate, if a teacher learned vocabulary through extensive reading, then s/he may implement the same strategy to students because its effectivity is accepted through the teacher's belief. Moreover, teachers' practice and cognition continue to be mutually beneficial through factors like schooling, actual classroom experience, and various contextual factors.

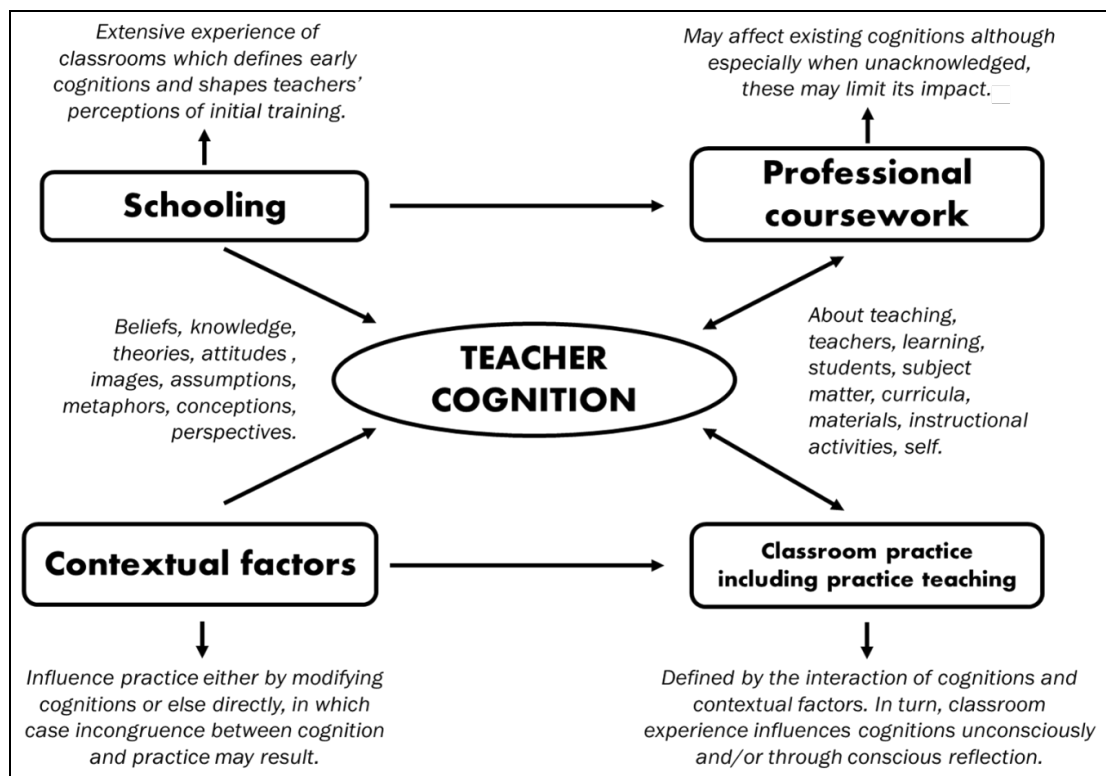


Figure 1: Schematic Conceptualization of Teaching (Borg, 2003)

Although vocabulary is considered by teachers as essential in attaining linguistic competence, it is still overshadowed by grammar as the need for students to express certain words and expressions appropriately is highlighted (Fan, et al, as cited in Gao & Ma, 2011). Moreover, Chung (2018) and Mardali & Siyyari (2019) claim that little regard is given to vocabulary in the language curriculum despite its essence and the same as their beliefs in vocabulary as not parallel with their practices. This neglect is argued by Riley, as cited in Amiryousefi (2015) explaining when teachers and students possess the same beliefs in teaching and learning vocabulary, it would eliminate misunderstanding and dissatisfaction, even, promoting a

learner-centered experience. Since most learning environments nowadays are learner-centered, teachers facilitating vocabulary learning is much expected than providing a list of what to learn. Eventually, students who are accountable to this experience are most likely to become self-regulated learners who learn vocabulary on their own.

Literature as a Gauge in Learning Vocabulary

The role of literature both as an authentic material (Hişmanoğlu, 2005; Mart, 2016; Puspitasari, 2016; Violetta-Irene, 2015) and its connection to cultural (Wales, as cited in Mart, 2016) and linguistic competence have been long-established. Dole, et al. (1995), supported by Horst (2005), Iqbal & Komal (2017), and Puspitasari (2016), claims that a student who has extensive vocabulary can better understand new vocabularies in different contexts while comprehending the text simultaneously. Also, it reduces students' dependency in other references to decode meanings and increases interest with literature as a gauge (Kooy & Chiu, 1998; Min, 2008; Violetta-Irene, 2015). With interest as a dependent variable in learning vocabulary through literatures, teachers should also consider the difficulty level of materials being given to students as anxiety and fear due to difficulty may arise and the concept of modelling to students in boosting reading interest (Baker & Scher, as cited in Estacio, 2012). Making use of these opportunities are in the hands of both the teacher and student. Although motivation may decline at some point, a collaborative effort is pointed as important as the role of vocabulary in language learning.

Methods

Name	Age	Highest degree attained	Teaching experience
T-1	23	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-2	26	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-3	25	Master's degree	1-5 years
T-4	25	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-5	21	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-6	32	Bachelor's degree	11-15 years
T-7	23	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-8	33	Bachelor's degree	11-15 years
T-9	25	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-10	31	Bachelor's degree	6-10 years
T-11	27	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-12	26	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-13	30	Master's degree	6-10 years
T-14	52	Master's degree	More than 25 years
T-15	25	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years
T-16	40	Doctorate degree	11-15 years
T-17	24	Bachelor's degree	1-5 years

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

A descriptive single-case study design was used to describe natural phenomenon, i.e. beliefs, strategies, and experiences of ESL teachers in teaching vocabulary within the context of Philippine secondary ESL classrooms (Zainal, 2007). 17 respondents, teaching in secondary ESL settings in public and private high schools, were selected using convenience sampling

(Creswell, 2012) to take part in the study. Table 1 shows the profile of each respondent, while Tables 2 and 3 show a diversity of degrees obtained and experiences in teaching ESL.

Degree	%
Bachelor's degree	76.5%
Master's degree	17.6%
Doctorate degree	5.9%

Table 2: Percentage distribution of obtained degrees

Level	N	%
Grade 7	11	64.7%
Grade 8	14	82.4%
Grade 9	8	47.1%
Grade 10	10	58.8%

Table 2: Levels Handled in Teaching ESL

An instrument consisting of four parts, inquiring namely: general information, beliefs (Gao & Ma, 2011), issues and challenges incorporating literature, and methods in teaching vocabulary were given to the participants. Prior to the collection of data, a letter that guaranteed protection of information and responses in the questionnaire, through Republic Act 10173 otherwise known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, was shown to the participants. Moreover, the instrument was validated by experts in English Language Education and Applied Linguistics.

The participants were given a link to the questionnaire via Google Forms and were asked to read the initial letter first. In case they have decided to withdraw, they were free to do so. Once they fully answered, each individual was given a code to anonymize responses to ensure confidentiality. In case a clarification on responses was needed, a semi-structured interview was scheduled via online conferencing platform of the participant's preference.

Results

Both data from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were coded using Microsoft Excel 365 into different categories and later recoded to see emerging themes. Patterns were analyzed and categorized using thematic analysis.

The Importance of Vocabulary

The participants agree unanimously that vocabulary learning is fundamental, as seen on the responses of T-10 and T-16. Besides comprehension and communication skills, it provides students the access to critical and logical thinking through their thoughts due to their vocabulary knowledge, whether oral or written.

- *I would definitely say that it is fundamental to have strong vocabulary. It's the basic requirement for learning and understanding the content of other subjects. (T-10)*
- *Vocabulary is the foundation for comprehension. Without enough understanding of words/terms, learners cannot comprehend other or totally cannot express their own ideas. It also helps the learners' ability to think logically. (T-16)*

Moreover, according to participants T-3 and T-10, factors such as students' initiative, motivation, vocabulary proficiency, and purpose on where to use it are also considered in teaching and learning vocabulary in the ESL classroom.

- *we should allow our students to look for some words on the given text that they are unfamiliar with aside from the words given to them prior to the discussion. (T-3)*
- *I also find it best when vocabulary is learned through reading. Students should develop a routine to find the meaning of a difficult word whenever it is encountered in reading. (T-10)*

As previously mentioned in the studies of İlter (2019), Lund & Johnson (2013), Oxford, (2013), and Pittman, et al. (2018), it can be supported that vocabulary is indeed important to learn, most especially in other contexts. This is attested by the response of T-10.

- *It's the basic requirement for learning and understanding the content of other subjects. (T-10)*

Learning Vocabulary Through Reading

Participants' foundation proved to be a crucial point of how they teach and learn in the classroom. Their exposure to reading materials were quite significant, as expressed in prior studies (Horst, 2005; Iqbal & Komal, 2017; Kooy & Chiu, 1998; Mart, 2016). Most of them had experiences in reading books, newspapers, journal articles, and the interest in reading literary pieces presented in the class. For example, the implementation of a summer reading activity for T-1 paved way for understanding vocabularies and further polishing of linguistic skills. T-7 and T-15 on one hand cited watching films, television shows, listening to conversations in the target language were main contributors in honing their language skills. Hence, citing extensive reading, or at least reading in general to be an important element in learning vocabulary.

Vocabulary Teaching and Learning Strategies

Vocabulary teaching and learning strategies may be passed or taught from one generation of learners to another (Borg, 2003; Oxford, 2013). Table 3 shows that majority of the participants continue to use the same methods they were exposed with during their foundation years (e.g. context clues), while a few have declared they no longer use such or have their own effective approach.

Response	N	%
Yes	15	88.2%
No	2	11.8%

Table 3: Utilization of Strategies/Approaches During Foundation Years

The responses of T-3 and T-11 validate the area of schooling in the framework of Borg (2003). Although two of the 17 participants mentioned that they no longer use the strategies they were accustomed to as students, it still validates the other three areas of the framework, respectively. Hence, it may be theorized that some strategies may not be applicable to the present context or perhaps utilizing a better strategy upon reflection during classroom immersion.

- *The common technique my former teachers used was through the use of context clues. They allow us to get the meaning first before giving the correct definition. (T-3)*
- *...or the common ones wherein there is this sample sentence using the difficult word and we would tell what that word means by its use. (T-11)*

Students' Vocabulary Proficiency and Motivation

Responses revealed an observation of diversity in the vocabulary proficiency of students and a present gap between the students' proficiency and content level. Further, struggles of school systems in implementing policies to address these gaps may have contributed to the decline of performance in the PISA 2018 and in national standardized examinations. Overall, the participants claim that their learners have a weak vocabulary proficiency.

- *Gap in content level and learners' vocabulary proficiency (T-13)*
- *It could have contributed to the PISA results. Also, the policies are vague or unclear and not implemented properly. (T-4; based on interview response)*

Claims of Iqbal & Komal (2017) on lack of motivation in learning vocabulary are supported by T-9 and T-10. Although negative perception caused by the difficulties and challenges among students in learning vocabulary may arise, manifestations of positive attitudes and executing innovative strategies in learning vocabulary, as remedy (İlter, 2019), can help to counter amotivation and short-term retention. These remedies may be done through collaboration of learners, provision of scaffolding or remediation activities, and immersion in reading activities.

- *Whenever I provide reading materials, I see to it that I observe students while they read...sometimes, I bring my own reading materials, like a newspaper...; at some point, I think it's better for them to see their teacher read with them and it enables them to read. (T-10; based on interview response)*

Lack of Teaching Resources

In the Philippines, lack of teaching resources is a common problem across various setups. Any lack thereof may be attributed to factors like class ratio, funding, and maintenance. Others may have other purposes for teaching vocabulary; for instance, improving speaking and reading through speech laboratories or using reading kits, respectively. Overall, resources that are readily available are maximized without compromise on student motivation.

- *When it comes to teaching resources, I use whatever materials that is available and when it comes to vocabulary proficiency, I ask them to do drills and activities that will increase the level of their proficiency. (T-7)*

Additionally, there is improvement in developing the affective domain. Expressing oneself better in the target language and possessing the confidence in asking peers when experiencing difficulty in vocabulary learning are evident, which is attributed to collaboration by T-3.

- *Some students who are experiencing difficulty in terms of understanding the idea of the words do not hesitate to ask from their partners the meaning of it. Also, they show eagerness to finish the reading task together with explaining the words that are new to them. (T-3)*

The Appeal of Reading Materials To Learners

Reading is not highly appealing to learners. Responses include students tendencies to view reading or literary materials as boring, a tiring task, and a requirement as mentioned by T-1 and T-5. These reasons are unacceptable especially if the target is to provide long-lasting learning; even so, this is an alarming challenge experienced by ESL teachers.

- *It's only interesting if you make it interesting. (T-1)*
- *Some students see it as a requirement (T-5)*

On one hand, motivation may still be present if an understandable background and acceptable characteristic, i.e. contemporary features or genres, are present, most especially if the reading materials are of classical origin.

- *Most of the times, they enjoy topics related to Greek myth. But they don't enjoy topics like Shakespearean poetry and the like. (T-9)*
- *Students are not usually interested in literature; however, when you start giving the background, giving an idea of what the literature might be, they will start to get curious and interested. (T-13)*

Using Reading Materials in Teaching Vocabulary

Extent of interest	N	%
Very interested	4	24%
Somewhat interested	13	76%
Not very interested	-	-
Not at all interested	-	-

Table 4: Extent of Students' Interest in Reading/Literature-Based Tasks

By analyzing the mentioned practices, students might be eyeing on an approach that makes the tasks easier than they are normally; with these strategies, it is a possibility that they can foster more interaction, collaboration, and by carefully selecting contemporary and relatable literary pieces that share the same intended concept to be taught. Hence, they become more participative.

- *I let them work in pairs so as to alleviate the tediousness in reading long passages. (T-12)*
- *Present 21st century literary pieces which are relatable to the learners, making sure it share the same concept and value with the classic ones; classic literary pieces shall also be discussed upon intensifying the learners' interest. (T-17)*

Methods in Teaching Vocabulary

According to most teachers, they still utilize methods of their former teachers. This is because they see it effective. Methods such as context clues, gamification, dictionary use, visuals, and vocabulary notebooks remain effective, but tailor-fit them to the current context into a more hybrid version, particularly including collaboration and independent learning. Combining these classical and contemporary methods have made their approach unique to what teachers are accustomed to during their years as students. Further, it is accepted that vocabulary must be learned in order to develop communicative skills.

- *Excellent test scores, deep understanding of the text, and they became talkative during English time using the language. (T-11)*
- *The healthy noise that they create whenever they participate in the activities and their high and passing scores after short quizzes. (T-7)*

Learner autonomy is observed in the process through the use of autonomy-monitoring materials (e.g. individual progress chart), however, some teachers miss out the opportunity to observe it.

- *By having their individual progress chart. The students will write how they progress and how whose words allow them to communicate with other people. They also note what are the words that are not useful for them in communicating with other people. (T-3)*
- *Journals... They can easily share what they have learned and things that they may find difficult and how they can improve their skills. (T-13)*
- *I honestly do not get to observe them in that aspect. But since we have SRA [reading tool], I'm able to see how they monitor themselves through the progress charts in their answer booklets. (T-10)*
- *I am not sure to be honest maybe their scores in the short vocabulary quiz. (T-7)*

One of the features of autonomous learning is the constant self-monitoring of learners, and teachers should keep themselves aware of how this happens in the classroom, so as to practice them in their own ways. Moreover, it has since become a significant skill that students need to learn for themselves in the 21st century (Delos Reyes & Torio, 2020). If teachers are not kept aware of this, then the general process of vocabulary learning itself will become risky.

Discussion

The research questions posed in beforehand are to be answered on this section.

First, supported by the framework of Borg (2003), ESL teachers rely heavily on their experiences as learners. They adopted the same strategies they were accustomed to during their foundation years, but they adapt to contemporary approaches such as the incorporation of collaborative learning and autonomous learning, where challenges are eased, and students get the opportunities to be taught of how these strategies used. Thus, validating Oxford's (2013) claim that vocabulary learning strategies are teachable.

Second, the issues of ESL teachers in teaching vocabulary refer to learners' proficiency, motivation, and the lack of teaching resources. According to the participants' observations, learners tend to have weak vocabulary proficiency perhaps due to difficulties and challenges they experienced, which greatly affects motivation, and could lead to poor performance in examinations. As a solution to these issues, ESL teachers maximize collaboration in their practice to ease the difficulties and provide remediation to struggling learners; while sometimes, when incorporating the use of reading materials, immersion in the activity with the learners.

Third, students treat reading or literary selections as mere requirements and a tiring task. These students prefer to have backgrounds of reading materials be known and/or possess 21st century literary characteristics, rather than the complexities of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Thus, it is essential to select reading materials that can pass on at least either

both or one of these criteria. On one hand, learners prefer to be engaged and collaborative. If the tasks are done easily as a collaborative unit, the more they work and become motivated in the task, without compromising the learning targets. Sharing open knowledge is favorable to them; they learn on their own and the teacher facilitates in maintaining the academic noise of the learners throughout the process. Therefore, aside from the knowledge given by the teacher, the learners are given an opportunity to express themselves in the learning process.

Finally, ESL teachers find their strategies effective when touched with 21st century approaches. For instance, T-3 has provided a sense of collaborative learning in his classes more often than others. He knows the needs and the likes of the learners, so he sees favorable results in the students' learning, such as the increase in vocabulary proficiency and self-confidence in communicating with peers during the learning process. Similarly, most of the participants have initiated the use of portfolios, journals, progress charts, and notebooks among their learners to monitor their own progress in vocabulary learning, for which the students are becoming accustomed to. Hence, certifying their students as autonomous, based on the definition by Little (1995, 2007).

Conclusion

Borg (2003), as indicated in the existing framework, explains that teacher cognition is in direct effect with teacher practice. Clearly, it is affirmative and evident in the strategies and experiences of secondary ESL teachers, most especially the element of collaborative learning which further leads to the development of autonomy among the participants' learners. Although the teachers were confident in the strategies and approaches they use in the classroom as effective, the integration of the development of 21st century learner skills was still evident, which is an excellent way of showing how a traditional approach or strategy, based on their beliefs, can be brought up or upgraded in the course of time. With these findings, ESL teachers' beliefs, strategies, and experiences are already influenced by all areas of the adopted framework, as these beliefs are shown through their foundation while schooling, while it may have been challenged during the time they allot in professional coursework and modified and reflected due to potential misfitting of practice in their respective contexts, whether pre-service or in-service.

It is recommended, however, that teachers be more aware of how their learners are able to manage their learning and how effective the strategies they come up with are. Further, despite the years of experience of teachers in ESL practice, there has been no significant change in the practice among those who have spent 1-5 years in teaching than those who have already taught for 11-15 years; nevertheless, those who have been able to earn a higher degree, i.e. master's degree, doctorate degree, have made more observations and applied more strategies in their classes than the rest. It may be due to the vast experience both as ESL teacher and teacher-learner. Therefore, increase in professional advancement or growth should be taken into consideration in order to keep pace with what the students need. Likewise, the possibility of tailor-fitting ESL teacher-training curricula in higher education institutions is recommended, in order to fit in 21st century learners' needs and expectations.

In terms of pedagogical implications, ESL teachers should utilize and maximize autonomy-supportive approaches in teaching vocabulary. Through this, students will be given the opportunities in learning vocabulary on their own, as well as setting and tracking their own progress. Furthermore, this will also potentially address the lack of teaching materials since the students themselves are allowed to find their own methodologies in learning vocabulary

at their own preferences. Additionally, teachers should present reading materials, especially canonical ones, in the most modern way possible.

It is essential that the evolution of ESL teachers' teaching methodologies is acknowledged through further refinement. Replacing former strategies should not be confused with refining or updating such approaches, since these methods are time-tested and are universal. As Oxford (2013) claimed that vocabulary learning strategies are teachable, then it should also be learnable – once learnable, it can be manipulated according to the learners' will.

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