

**EFFECTS OF THREE VOCABULARY LEARNING TECHNIQUES ON  
VOCABULARY RETENTION OF ESL UNDERGRADUATES IN A  
MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY**

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PERPUSTAKAAN UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA PAHANG	
No. Perolehan 067942	No. Panggilan P 53.9 287 2012 vs Thesis
Tarikh 31 OCT 2012	

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**March 2012**

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**March 2012**

**Chairman: Professor Jayakaran Mukundan, PhD**

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This study investigates the effects of three vocabulary learning techniques, which are Contextual Clues, Dictionary Strategy and TMM Vocabulary, in retaining words learnt among ESL learners. Conducting the study serves several purposes. Firstly, it aims at finding which of the vocabulary learning techniques may result in the highest number of words retained, as measured in the immediate and delayed recall tests. Secondly, it investigates the students' attitudes after they are exposed to the vocabulary learning techniques. Finally, it seeks to find out students' preferences and difficulties of using the techniques in retaining words learnt.

The results of the study support Ellis' Model of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in that instructions need to match L2 learners' aptitude of helping them to retain the words learnt using the vocabulary learning techniques taught to them. Social Constructivist Learning Theory is also used to explain the findings. The theory describes that the construction of knowledge inside the classroom depends on the

inter-dependence of social and individual processes. While learners interpret the learning in their own ways, they also need to be dependent on their friends and be facilitated by their teachers in their attempt to retain the vocabulary learnt in class.

The study has adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods in collecting its data. A quasi-experiment that tested the effects of retaining vocabulary using Dictionary Strategy, Contextual Clues and TMM Vocabulary involved 123 first-year university students. A survey gauged their attitudes after being exposed to the techniques. Qualitative procedures included the collection of data from interviews, which were conducted to identify both their preferences and the hindrances they encountered in using the techniques.

Results from the study showed that there was a significant difference ( $p = .033 < .05$ ) in Immediate Recall Tests when students were exposed to Dictionary Strategy, Contextual Clues and TMM Vocabulary. The finding for the Delayed Recall Post-test, however, was not supported ( $p = .735 < .05$ ). There was also evidence that students' attitudes were found to be significant ( $p = .002 < .05$ ) when they were exposed to the three vocabulary learning techniques. Finally, students' preferences and hindrances relating to the use of the respective vocabulary learning techniques were dependent on the treatments as well as their proficiency levels.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KESAN TERHADAP KEBOLEHAN MENYIMPAN PERBENDAHARAAN  
KATA PARA PELAJAR YANG MEMPELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS  
SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA MENGGUNAKAN TIGA TEKNIK  
PEMBELAJARAN PERBENDAHARAAN KATA DI SEBUAH  
UNIVERSITI DI MALAYSIA**

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Kajian ini menyelidik kesan terhadap tiga teknik mempelajari perbendaharaan kata iaitu petunjuk konteks, strategi menggunakan kamus dan pembelajaran bahasa menggunakan bantuan komputer di kalangan para pelajar yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua. Kajian yang dijalankan ini mempunyai beberapa tujuan. Pertama, ianya bertujuan untuk mencari teknik mempelajari perbendaharaan kata yang dapat menyumbang kepada jumlah perkataan paling tinggi mampu disimpan sebagaimana diukur dengan menggunakan ujian ingatan terus dan ujian penangguhan ingatan. Kedua, ianya menyelidik sikap para pelajar setelah didedahkan kepada teknik-teknik tersebut. Akhirnya, ianya bertujuan untuk mengetahui kecenderungan dan halangan menggunakan teknik-teknik ini untuk menyimpan perkataan yang dipelajari di dalam ingatan para pelajar.

Dapatan kajian menyokong model Penerimaan Bahasa Kedua Ellis di mana pengajaran perlu sesuai dengan kebolehan para pelajar yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua, agar dapat membantu mereka menyimpan makna perkataan Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan teknik-teknik yang dijelaskan. Teori Pembelajaran Konstruktivisme Sosial juga digunakan untuk menjelaskan dapatan-dapatan kajian. Teori tersebut memerikan bahawa pembinaan ilmu di dalam kelas bergantung pada proses kesalingbergantungan sosial dan individu. Selagi pelajar mentadbir pembelajaran dengan cara mereka, selagi itulah mereka bergantung pada rakan sebaya, dan bantuan guru dalam usaha mereka untuk menyimpan perkataan yang dipelajari di dalam kelas.

Kajian ini menggunakan kedua-dua kaedah metodologi terdiri dari kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Satu eksperimen kuasi yang menguji kesan menyimpan perkataan Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan petunjuk konteks, strategi menggunakan kamus dan pembelajaran bahasa menggunakan bantuan komputer telah melibatkan 123 pelajar universiti. Satu kaji selidik juga digunakan untuk mengukur sikap para pelajar setelah didedahkan kepada teknik-teknik tersenarai. Kaedah kualitatif yang digunakan termasuk pengumpulan laporan secara lisan yang bertujuan untuk mengetahui kecenderungan dan halangan yang dihadapi oleh para pelajar di dalam menggunakan teknik-teknik ini.

Dapatan penyelidikan mendapati bahawa terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan ( $p = .033 < .05$ ) di dalam ujian Ingatan Terus bila pelajar telah didedahkan kepada petunjuk konteks, strategi menggunakan kamus dan pembelajaran bahasa menggunakan bantuan komputer. Dapatan ujian penanguhan ingatan, walau

bagaimanapun, tidak disokong ( $p = .735 < .05$ ). Terdapat juga bukti bahawa sikap para pelajar berbeza ( $p = .002 < .05$ ) apabila mereka didedahkan kepada ketiga-tiga teknik pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata tersebut. Akhirnya, kecenderungan dan halangan yang berkaitan dengan penggunaan teknik pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata adalah bergantung kepada rawatan serta peringkat kemahiran para pelajar.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 26 March 2012 to conduct the final examination of Zuraina binti Ali on her thesis entitled "Effects of Three Vocabulary Learning Techniques on Vocabulary Retention of ESL Undergraduates in a Malaysian University" in accordance with the Universities and University College Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
BNC	The British National Corpus
CAI	Computer Aided Instruction
CALL	Computer-Assisted Language Learning
CAVOCA	Computer Assisted Vocabulary Acquisition
CCECD	Continental's Concise English-Chinese Dictionary
CMLHS	Centre for Modern Languages & Human Sciences
COCA	The Corpus of Contemporary American English
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
EFL	English for Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
IIUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
IRT	Immediate Recall Test
KR-20	Kuder-Richardson Formula 20
K-S Test	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LDCE	Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English
LEI	The Longman Interactive
LLS	Lexically Less Skilled
LS	Lexically Skilled
MUET	Malaysian University English Testing
MYTO	The Malaysian Theses Online

OALD	Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
PLSP	Perceptual Learning Style Preferences
SAV	Subjective Approach to Vocabulary
SCL	Student-Centred Learning
SD	Standard Deviation
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPSS	Statistical Package of Social Sciences
TESL	Teaching English as A Second Language
TMM	Tell Me More
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi MARA
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
UMP	Universiti Malaysia Pahang
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Vocabulary is the central component for the acquisition of a second language (L2), regardless of students' academic levels (Constantinescu, 2007; Nakata, 2007). Also, it plays an important part in their academic achievement (Constantinescu, 2007; Morris & Cobb, 2004). For students in tertiary education, Liu (1998) expresses that inadequate vocabulary can be a major obstacle in the course of learning at a university. Folse (2004a) argues that possessing a sizeable vocabulary enables language learners to comprehend what they read or hear. In fact, vocabulary is one of the most important components in learning a language, and language curricula must reflect this notion (Folse, 2004a).

In Malaysia, the importance of vocabulary for students at tertiary level can be seen in relation to the higher education revolution, as remarked upon by Syed Barkat Ali Syed Ali (as cited in Oorjitham, 2005), the Chairman and Principal Consultant of Transformational Leadership Development Sdn. Bhd.

“... quality education hinged on the use of an internationally popular language such as English and the more the vocabulary [the students have], the more concepts can be transmitted”

Limitation in the English vocabulary, therefore, may impede the transmission of information as many reference books are written in the English language. Unfortunately, the area of vocabulary learning and teaching has long been overlooked by most linguists and language teachers (Vijayaletchumy Subramaniam,

Mohd. Sahandri Gani Hamzah, Noor Aina Dani, Normaliza Abd Rahim, Nik Rafidah, Nik Affendi & Abdul Rashid Daing Melebek, 2008). However, they contend that it is in these recent years that vocabulary learning and teaching has become “refreshed” and consequently has led linguists and language teachers to be involved in facilitating vocabulary acquisition among English language learners. Since then, linguists and language teachers have been keen on searching for the most effective approaches and strategies for helping students develop vocabulary acquisition (Iu, 2003). Yet, vocabulary learning and teaching remains a debatable issue, as people have differing opinions on how learners acquire vocabulary effectively and efficiently, or how it can best be taught (Cheung, 2007).

Despite the earlier discussions, the essence of learning vocabulary is to ensure that L2 learners are able to retain the meaning of the words learnt, and be used whenever recalled. Chen (2008) argues that L2 vocabulary acquisition required L2 learners to use the newly learnt words continuously. However, such is not sufficient as they “need to combine its use with known language messages to deepen and broaden the meaning of the words” (Chen, 2008, p.2). This is necessary so as to ensure that the words and their meanings can be accessible from L2 learners’ memory banks and be used spontaneously (Chen, 2008).

Nevertheless, the vocabulary learning methods – Contextual Clues, Dictionary Strategy, and Tell Me More Vocabulary (TMM Vocabulary) – may influence the ability to retain words learnt among students in higher education. Other methods present several major problems. For instance, the mnemonics technique, i.e. keyword methods, is more useful for young learners (Fulk, Lohman & Belfiore, 1997;

Howard, DeDappo, De La Paz, 2008; Zhang & Schumm, 2000), the vocabulary notebook does not offer any ease with which to retrieve the vocabulary learnt (Nation, as cited in Hinkel, 2005), and the use of flashcards lacks the context of learning the target words (Yoneoka, 2006).

### **1.1.1 Guessing Meaning from Context in Learning Vocabulary**

Most vocabulary is acquired by deriving word meaning from context (Beck & McKeown, 1991), a method that requires learners to compensate for limited knowledge (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Waring (2000) indicates that guessing meaning of the unknown words from context is the most important vocabulary learning strategy specifically for students at tertiary level. Since teachers do not have enough time to teach every word that students do not understand in class, deducing meaning from context leaves students to guess the unknown words successfully. Sadly, he claims, teachers merely expect students to know how to guess well, yet there are thousands of students who need help to be more successful at guessing (Waring, 2000).

Moreover, learning from context has a different effect on incidental vocabulary (Gu, 2003). Beginning L2 learners may have more trouble learning incidental vocabulary because of their inability to make sense of new words and their contexts (Gu, 2003). Yet, Robb (1989) argues that extensive reading may improve their effort in guessing from context, since the activity is interesting. Also, teachers can instruct them to be aware of the linguistic information - for instance parts of speech that are presented within a text – in order for them to be successful at guessing (Cheung, 2007). Thus,

realising this, the aim of learning from context - which is to create the conditions for learners to learn independently of the teacher - can be achieved (Waring, 2000).

### **1.1.2 Dictionary Use in Learning Vocabulary**

The use of the dictionary is another method from which to learn vocabulary. It is a basic reference tool for teachers and learners (Read, 2000). Iu (2003) asserts that using the dictionary is more straightforward because unknown words can be looked up almost instantaneously. Hence, in using the dictionary in the English curricula at tertiary level, students need to use one that can simplify the process of looking up a word (Chi 2003).

Moreover, the use of the dictionary is one of the study skills that is taught, together with note-taking, in English for Academic Purposes. In Lings's (1979) study, more than half of the interviewees responded that they consulted the dictionaries when difficulties arose in understanding texts. However, students' dictionary skills are often not adequate to cope with their learning demand (Chan, 2005). They may consult one or more dictionaries in learning English, but the strategy does not seem to be 'right' (Chan, 2005). Also, the use of the dictionary was discouraged on the grounds that dependence on it may prohibit the development of useful skills, such as guessing from context (Thornbury, 2002). To promote effective use of dictionary, therefore, students should be taught on the usefulness of the words in the dictionary (Nation, 1989).

### **1.1.3 The Use of Tell Me More Vocabulary (TMM Vocabulary)**

Tell Me More forms part of a series of language learning software by Auralog, a French software development company. The software is available in many different languages such as Arabic, French, German, Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Dutch and Spanish that is directed toward individual users as well as classroom learners (Auralog, 2010). TMM is a good example of a programme that can be used to enhance input in highlighting new vocabulary items (Lafford, Lafford & Sykes, 2007). Moreover, its use is of valueable in a higher education context for guided remedial or extension work work on a self-access basis (Leakey, 2006).

Tell Me More contains six workshops: lesson, cultural, vocabulary, grammar, oral and written (Lafford, 2004). In particular, the Vocabulary Workshop contains various types of vocabulary exercises: picture-word association, fill-in-the-blanks, crossword puzzles, and others (Lafford, 2004). Besides that, TMM Vocabulary creates interactive activities which provide solutions to some of the problems arising from traditional teaching methods (Auralog, 2004).

Despite all the claims regarding the use of Contextual Clues, Dictionary Strategy and TMM Vocabulary, empirical evidence of their effectiveness in helping L2 learners to retain words learnt are still scant. There is no study to date has investigated the relative effectiveness of the three types of vocabulary learning techniques in a single study. Therefore, the present study is intended to compare the use of conventional (Contextual Clues and Dictionary Strategy) techniques of learning vocabulary with that of computers, TMM Vocabulary, to empirically test their alleged efficacies in facilitating students to retain words learnt.