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Pre-Service Teachers' Vocabulary Strategy Implementation and Effectiveness: Linking Preference to Practice in Turkish Primary EFL Contexts

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Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigates the implementation of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) by pre-service English language teachers in Turkish primary schools, aiming to bridge the persistent theory-practice gap in language teacher education. The research examines two core questions: (1) which VLS categories are most preferred by pre-service teachers after theoretical familiarization with a prominent VLS taxonomy, and (2) which categories yield the greatest short-term vocabulary gains when implemented through strategy-based vocabulary instruction with young learners. Employing a two-phase design, the study first documented the strategy preferences of 46 final-year pre-service teachers. Subsequently, during their Community Service Practicum, these teachers implemented their chosen strategies in grade 3–4 classrooms (480 learners, ages 9–11, CEFR A1–A2). Vocabulary acquisition among the primary school learners was measured using a pre-test/post-test model, with data analyzed via descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA. Findings revealed a strong preference for memory-based (30.4%) and cognitive strategies (21.7%), along with the specific technique of Pictures/Imagery (19.6%). Statistical analysis indicated that all strategy-based instruction led to significant vocabulary gains. However, Memory strategies produced significantly greater gains than Determination and Orthographic/Phonological strategies, while Pictures/Imagery and Cognitive strategies showed comparably high short-term gains. The study concludes that pre-service teachers intuitively select concrete, visually-supported strategies that are empirically effective for young beginners. This validates a “practice-to-theory” model for teacher education, where experiential implementation of preferred strategies can serve as an anchor for deeper theoretical understanding and repertoire expansion. The research provides an empirical model linking teacher cognition, classroom practice, and learner outcomes in VLS instruction.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers, quasi-experimental study, teacher education, vocabulary instruction, vocabulary learning strategies

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Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is widely recognized as central to second and foreign language development, with direct implications for learners' success in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017). In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, learners have limited access to naturalistic input outside the classroom, making formal instruction a primary source for vocabulary development (Gilquin, 2025). Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS), which support independent, deep, and durable word learning, have long been promoted as effective tools for vocabulary development (Schmitt, 2000; Oxford, 2016).

Among the most influential frameworks in the field is Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy of VLS, which categorizes strategies into determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive domains. This taxonomy continues to inform teacher training worldwide, yet a critical gap remains: while pre-service teachers may study these strategies in theory, they are seldom required to reflect on, select, or apply them in real-world teaching contexts. What teachers prefer, and how they apply those preferences when actually teaching vocabulary, remains under-researched.

A significant tension exists in the structure of teacher education: while strategy instruction is emphasized in coursework, it is rarely operationalized through actual classroom experience (Borg, 2009; Griffiths, 2018). Pre-service English teachers may become familiar with strategic frameworks, but without practice in real settings, these strategies often remain theoretical, disconnected from the practical demands of teaching. This leads to instability between the espoused goals of strategy-based instruction and the reality of what new teachers are equipped to deliver.

Complicating matters further, vocabulary instruction in many K-12 classrooms remains dominated by mechanical approaches—such as word list memorization or decontextualized drills—despite the growing body of research supporting active, strategic learning (Newton, 2013; Webb, 2005). When pre-service teachers enter such environments without a strong experiential foundation, the risk is that theory collapses into conformity with outdated methods.

Background: Vocabulary and the Need for Strategic Learning

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the most robust predictors of overall language proficiency (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017). Yet, vocabulary instruction in many EFL settings is still dominated by mechanical methods such as rote memorization, isolated word lists, or shallow translation activities (Newton, 2013; Eidshaug et al., 2024). To counter this, VLSs have been promoted as tools that not only foster deeper learning but also develop learner autonomy (Schmitt, 2000; Oxford, 2016).

Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy categorizes VLS into five domains: determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies. These provide a structured approach to teaching vocabulary that is both learner-centered and adaptable to diverse classroom contexts. Although this taxonomy is widely cited, most empirical studies have focused on how learners apply these strategies, rather than how teachers—particularly pre-service teachers—select and implement them.

Instability and Tension in Teacher Education

Despite the theoretical emphasis on VLS in many language teacher education programs, a disconnect persists between strategic knowledge and classroom practice (Borg, 2009; Cirocki et al., 2024). Pre-service teachers often receive theoretical exposure to strategy instruction but lack opportunities to test these strategies in real classroom settings (Çelik & Toptaş, 2010; Yücedağ & Arslan, 2025). This creates a structural instability in teacher education, where instruction is informed by best practices, yet often enacted through outdated routines under institutional pressure. This tension is particularly evident in the Turkish context, where the Ministry of National Education's (MoNE, 2018) English language curriculum for primary grades (3–4) is explicitly designed to be communicative.

The contradiction is even more stark when pre-service teachers are placed in primary school environments that still rely on teacher-centered methods. Research shows that without experiential learning, teacher candidates may default to the same non-strategic, transmission-based vocabulary instruction they were exposed to as learners (Nelson, 2025; Söğüt, 2024).

Pre-service Teachers' VLS Preferences

Studies exploring the strategy preferences of learners (Assagung et al., 2025; Catalán, 2003) have shown a tendency toward memory and cognitive strategies, especially repetition, grouping, and imagery. Among teachers, however, preferences are often shaped by perceived practicality and classroom applicability (Johnson et al., 2025; Pokharel, 2024).

In the current study, pre-service teachers chose strategies such as imagery, word grouping, orthographic awareness, and keyword techniques—confirming trends in the literature that indicate a preference for highly visual, hands-on, or physically interactive strategies, particularly when working with young learners (Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; Qiu et al., 2021). Table 1 below offers a consolidated view of strategy categories and examples:

Table 1

Summary of Vocabulary Learning Strategies Used in the Study

Strategy Category	Example Strategy/Technique	Examples from Participants
Memory	Keyword method, Loci method, Picture association	"Keyword method" (p.247), Imagery (p.212)
Cognitive	Repetition, Word lists, Affix analysis	Word lists, "Analyse affix"
Social (Discourse)	Asking teacher/classmates for meaning, group work	"Ask teacher," "Guessing in context"
Determination	Dictionary use, guessing meaning, morphological cues	"Guessing from context" (pp. 200–201)
Metacognitive	Self-monitoring, evaluating word usefulness	"Use English media," "Review strategies"
Orthographic/Phonological	Spelling, sound patterns, rhyming words	"Orthographic form" (p.214)
Mnemonic (cross-type)	Japanese-style mnemonic visual/audio links	"Japanese mnemonic strategy"

Note: Adapted from Schmitt & McCarthy (1998)

Strategy Effectiveness in Real Classrooms

There is robust evidence that different categories of strategies yield different outcomes depending on the context and learner profile. For younger learners (ages 9–11), memory and cognitive strategies tend to outperform others in terms of vocabulary retention and engagement (Newton, 2013; Sagarra & Alba, 2006).

Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) found that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies produced statistically significant gains in vocabulary learning, but only when paired with learner reflection. Meanwhile, Eidshaug et al. (2024) reported that rote repetition alone led to shallow learning unless combined with personalization techniques like drawing or acting.

Importantly, teacher-led strategy instruction—especially when it aligns with learners' cognitive and affective capacities—can greatly amplify the effectiveness of VLS (Gu, 2003; Rasekh & Ranjbary, 2003; Tu, 2025). This reinforces the value of this study's design, which evaluates real teaching performances and vocabulary learning outcomes among primary school students.

Problem Situation

Most existing VLS studies rely on self-report questionnaires or retrospective interviews with learners (Al-Kalbani, 2024; Aljasir, 2025; Catalán, 2003). Only a small number use experimental or quasi-experimental methods to track actual learning outcomes linked to specific strategy instruction (Bengochea & Sembiente, 2023; Kong & Hurless, 2023). Even fewer investigate how teachers' preferences correlate with measurable vocabulary growth (Pullen et al., 2010; Yang, 2025)—a key gap this study addresses.

By empirically linking what teachers prefer to what works for learners in real classrooms, this research supports calls for more, agency-driven and data-grounded approaches in L2 pedagogy (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2016).

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study addresses the theory-practice gap by empirically investigating the complete process of strategy-based vocabulary instruction—from theoretical familiarization to real classroom application and measurable learner outcomes. The study is structured in two empirical phases.

The primary purpose was to first identify which strategies pre-service teachers prioritize when tasked with bridging academic frameworks and classroom reality. Subsequently, the study aimed to evaluate the pedagogical impact of these selected strategies by measuring objective learner outcomes in primary-level contexts. By linking teacher preference directly to instructional effectiveness, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of which VLS categories are most viable and effective for young learners in the Turkish K-12 system.

This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of both teacher preferences and the relative instructional effectiveness of various strategy types in real educational settings. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: Which vocabulary learning strategies are most frequently preferred by pre-service English language teachers following their study of Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy?

RQ 2: Which categories of vocabulary learning strategies (e.g., memory, cognitive, metacognitive) lead to the greatest vocabulary gains when implemented by pre-service English language teachers in primary classrooms with students aged 9–11 learning CEFR A1–A2 level vocabulary?

This study contributes to the fields of applied linguistics and language teacher education by offering a tested, empirical model that links strategy knowledge, teacher preference, classroom practice, and student outcomes. It responds to calls for research that operationalizes teacher agency and reflective practice in vocabulary pedagogy (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). In line with recent scholarship on the digital turn in English Language Teaching (ELT), which highlights the role of technology-enhanced environments in fostering autonomy and self-regulated learning (Yaşar, 2025), the present study offers a classroom-based model that operationalizes these principles through strategy implementation. For curriculum designers and teacher educators, the study provides actionable insights into how VLS can be meaningfully embedded into teacher education and assessed for effectiveness in actual classrooms.

By bridging the gap between what teachers know, what they prefer, and what works in practice, this research builds a stronger foundation for evidence-based vocabulary instruction in future-ready ELT education.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a two-phase, classroom-based quasi-experimental design aimed at investigating both the strategy preferences of pre-service English language teachers and the effects of those strategies on vocabulary acquisition in primary school learners. The design followed a pre-test/post-test model without a control group, aligning with real-world classroom constraints during practicum placements.

- **Phase 1 – Strategy Familiarization and Preference Identification:** Pre-service English language teachers were introduced to Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy of VLS, a foundational framework that continues to inform contemporary research and pedagogical practice, particularly in studies focusing on strategy classification and instructional implementation (Oxford, 2016; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014). Based on this framework, participants selected strategies they believed aligned with their personal teaching styles and perceived learner needs. Their selections are documented and supported through video-based microteaching demonstrations.
- **Phase 2 – Strategy Implementation and Outcome Evaluation:** These strategies are then implemented by the same pre-service teachers during their *Community Service Practicum*, a component of their final-year field experience in primary-level (grades 3–4) classrooms within the K-12 system. Vocabulary pre-tests and post-tests are administered to assess the empirical impact of each selected strategy category on learners' vocabulary acquisition.

Participants

Pre-service Teachers

A total of 46 pre-service English language teachers (final-year undergraduates) from a public university in Türkiye participated in the study. All participants were actively involved in both phases of the research. All were completing their *Community Service Practicum* in local primary schools, which provided structured opportunities to engage with real learners while serving the community through educational support. They had completed prior coursework on language teaching methodology, including vocabulary instruction and learning strategies.

Primary School Learners

The strategy lessons were delivered to students in grade 3 and grade 4 (ages 9–11) at state-run primary schools. Learners had at least two years of English instruction and were functioning at CEFR A1–A2 levels. The English language curriculum for this age group, developed by MoNE (2018), is designed to be communicative and activity-based, aligned with communicative language teaching principles, and emphasizes vocabulary development through meaningful use and interaction. Each pre-service teacher worked with a unique class of 15–30 students, totaling 480 students across all schools.

The sampling approach was purposive and context-bound, reflecting the structure of the Community Service Practicum within the teacher education program. Pre-service teachers were selected based on their active enrollment in this practicum course, which provided access to authentic classroom environments. While this limits generalizability, it enhances ecological validity by situating the study within real instructional contexts where strategy implementation naturally occurs. This design aligns with the study's aim of capturing practice-based teacher decision-making rather than controlled experimental behavior.

Instruments

Vocabulary Achievement Test

A 30-item test was designed to assess receptive and productive knowledge of CEFR A1–A2 level vocabulary. It consisted of:

- 15 multiple-choice items (receptive knowledge)
- 5 picture-word matching tasks
- 5 fill-in-the-blank cloze sentences
- 5 short-definition match items

The test was reviewed by three ELT experts and piloted with 32 similar-age learners to assess clarity, appropriateness of difficulty level, and overall reliability. Target vocabulary items for each lesson were drawn from MoNE (2018) prescribed wordlists for Grades 3–4. The pre- and post-test directly sampled these lesson-specific target words, meaning that all test items assessed vocabulary that had been taught during the intervention, rather than broader CEFR-aligned vocabulary not covered in the lessons. Based on pilot feedback, minor revisions were

made to improve item wording and clarity. The final version yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .78, indicating acceptable internal consistency (see Appendix A for sample items).

Strategy Implementation Checklist

After the classroom lesson, each teacher completed a structured reflection checklist including:

- Strategy used and its category
- Task type (e.g., matching, acting out, drawing, sentence making)
- Observed student engagement (Likert scale + open-ended comments)
- Perceived effectiveness and difficulties

This allowed triangulation between teacher intent and observed practice (see Appendix B).

Strategy Selection Table

Pre-service teachers selected one VLS from Schmitt and McCarthy's taxonomy using a shared selection table. Their selections were guided by their pedagogical reasoning and prior coursework on vocabulary instruction. This table listed strategy categories (e.g., memory, cognitive) and subtypes (e.g., keyword method, grouping), ensuring no more than two teachers selected the same strategy. Teachers also uploaded their video demonstrations to a shared platform (YouTube), creating a resource bank for reflection and assessment (see Appendix C).

Lesson Plan Template

To ensure uniformity across instructional implementation, all pre-service teachers developed their vocabulary lessons based on a standardized template provided by the researcher. The template included learning objectives, CEFR level, target vocabulary items, materials used, strategy application, and post-lesson reflection (see Appendix D). It also encouraged the use of visuals, realia, and multimodal supports for younger learners, and included scaffolds to support metacognitive strategies (e.g., sentence starters for reflection).

Procedures

The study was conducted over a six-week period. The phases were structured as follows:

Weeks 1–2: Strategy Familiarization and Selection

- Pre-service teachers attended a 2-hour seminar introducing Schmitt & McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy.
- They read and analyzed selected textbook chapters (pp. 199–227).
- Each pre-service teacher selected a strategy, completed a selection form, and created a 3–5 minute instructional video demonstrating how to teach vocabulary using it (see Appendix C).

Week 3: Pre-Test Administration

- Vocabulary pre-tests were administered to learners in regular class periods (20–25 minutes).
- Pre-service teachers followed a standard administration protocol provided by the researcher (see Appendix A).

Week 4: Lesson Planning

- Pre-service teachers developed lesson plans using the selected VLS.
- Plans included vocabulary items, materials, strategy-based activities, and learning objectives aligned with CEFR A1–A2 (see Appendix D).
- All lessons were designed using a standardized template that prescribed a 40-minute duration and a fixed set of 5–7 target vocabulary items, ensuring comparable time-on-task and lexical input across strategy conditions.

Week 5: Classroom Implementation

- Pre-service teachers conducted a 40-minute strategy-based vocabulary lesson in the classrooms they were assigned to during their *Community Service Practicum*.
- Observational notes and checklist data were collected immediately afterward (see Appendix B).

Week 6: Post-Test Administration

The post-test (with reordered items) was administered one week after the lesson to measure short-term vocabulary retention.

Data Analysis

To address RQ1, descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were calculated to identify commonly selected strategies and their categories. Although *Pictures/Imagery* is classified as a subtype of Memory strategies within Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy, it was treated as a distinct category in the analysis to capture instructional variation and reflect how pre-service teachers operationalized this strategy as a salient and independent pedagogical technique in classroom practice.

It should be noted that the study involves a nested data structure, where learners are grouped within classes taught by individual pre-service teachers. Accordingly, different units of analysis were employed for different analytical purposes. The paired-samples t-test was conducted at the learner level ($N = 480$) to assess overall vocabulary gains across the full sample. In contrast, the one-way ANOVA was conducted at the class-group level ($N = 46$), with each teacher–class pair treated as a single unit, in order to examine differences in strategy implementation effects. This approach avoids violating the independence assumption required for between-group comparisons, while still capturing overall learner-level change.

To address RQ2, the following statistical analyses were conducted:

- Paired samples t-tests to compare pre- and post-test scores.
- One-way ANOVA to test differences in vocabulary gains across strategy categories.

Post-hoc comparisons were used when appropriate. All analyses were performed in SPSS v.26, with the alpha level set at $p < .05$.

Assumptions for one-way ANOVA were examined. Levene's test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met ($p = .087$), and visual inspection of Q-Q plots suggested approximate normality of gain scores within groups. Given the small cell sizes for the Determination and Orthographic/Phonological categories, results involving these groups should be interpreted with caution.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the *Bartın University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee*. The research was approved during the committee's 13th meeting on 09 July 2025 under the decision number 1, with the protocol number 2025-SBB-0692. All pre-service teachers participated voluntarily and provided written informed consent. For primary school students, parental consent was secured through the school administration, and all data were anonymized prior to analysis. The classroom implementation was conducted as part of the *Community Service Practicum* course within the national teacher education curriculum, in collaboration with local primary schools.

Findings

This section presents the results of the two-phase quasi-experimental study, addressing the research questions regarding pre-service teacher strategy preferences and the comparative effectiveness of different VLS categories on learner vocabulary acquisition.

RQ1: Strategy Preferences of Pre-Service Teachers

Analysis of the strategy selection table data (see Appendix C) from 46 pre-service teachers revealed clear preferences following their study of Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy. Table 2 summarizes the frequency and percentage distribution of the primary VLS categories selected for implementation.

Table 2

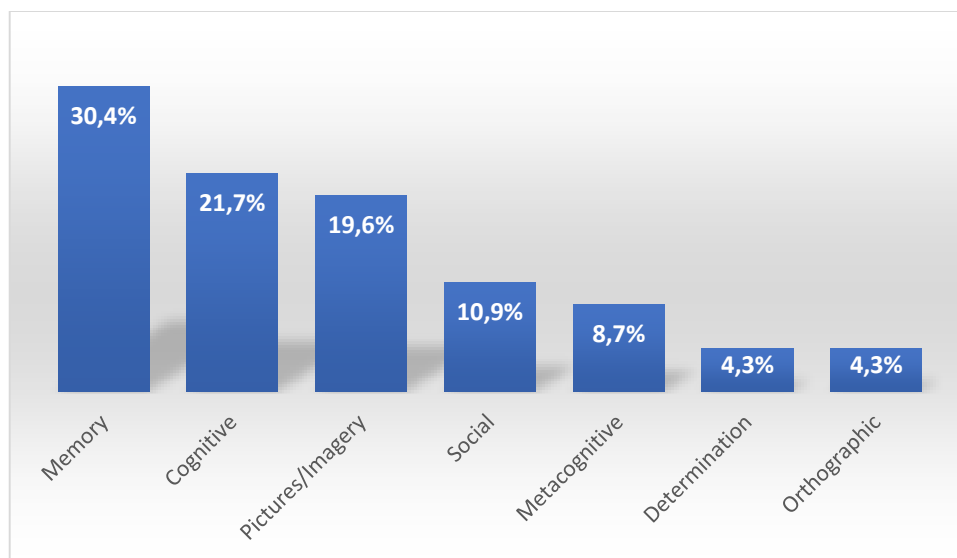
Frequency and Percentage Distribution of VLS Categories by Pre-Service Teachers (N = 46)

Strategy Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Memory	14	30.4
Cognitive	10	21.7
Pictures/Imagery	9	19.6
Social	5	10.9
Metacognitive	4	8.7
Determination	2	4.3
Orthographic/Phonological Form	2	4.3
Total	46	100.0

As shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1, Memory Strategies were the most frequently selected category (30.4%), followed by Cognitive Strategies (21.7%) and the specific technique of Pictures/Imagery (19.6%). Combined, these three categories accounted for 71.7% of all strategy selections, indicating a strong preference for concrete, activity-oriented strategies perceived as suitable for young learners. Although Pictures/Imagery appears separately in Table 2 because it was selected as a distinct technique by participants, it is theoretically a Memory strategy subtype within Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy. When combined, Memory-based strategies (Memory + Pictures/Imagery) accounted for 50% of all selections ($f = 23$), indicating a strong overall preference for memory-oriented, visually supported instructional techniques.

Figure 1

The Distribution Of VLS Category Preferences Among Pre-Service Teachers



RQ2: Effectiveness of Strategy Categories on Vocabulary Gains

To assess the impact of the implemented strategies, pre-test and post-test scores from 480 learners were analyzed. Only learners who completed both the pre-test and post-test were included in the analysis. Paired-samples t-tests confirmed a statistically significant increase in vocabulary scores from pre-test ($M = 14.32$, $SD = 4.11$) to post-test ($M = 21.75$, $SD = 4.89$), $t(479) = 35.17$, $p < .001$, indicating overall positive effects of the strategy-based instruction.

Prior to the main analysis, a one-way ANOVA on pre-test scores confirmed no statistically significant differences between strategy category groups at baseline, $F(6, 39) = 1.42$, $p = .231$, supporting the comparability of groups before instruction.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the seven VLS categories on mean vocabulary gain scores (post-test minus pre-test). The independent variable was the strategy category implemented by the teacher, and the dependent variable was the average gain score for the class group. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

For the purposes of statistical comparison, strategies that pre-service teachers selected and implemented as distinct classroom techniques (e.g., Pictures/Imagery) were treated as separate implementation groups, even when they theoretically belonged to broader categories such as Memory. This allowed the analysis to reflect actual instructional variation rather than collapsing sub-techniques into higher-level classifications.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Gain Scores by VLS Category

Strategy Category	n (Class Groups)	Mean Gain	SD
Memory	14	8.21	1.87
Pictures/Imagery	9	7.89	1.92
Cognitive	10	7.05	2.11
Social	5	6.80	1.64
Metacognitive	4	6.50	2.08
Orthographic/Phonological Form	2	5.95	1.91
Determination	2	5.60	1.84
Total	46	7.43	2.02

Within-group effect sizes (Cohen's d) for pre-to-post gains were as follows: Memory ($d = 1.62$, 95% CI [1.18, 2.06]), Pictures/Imagery ($d = 1.54$, 95% CI [1.08, 2.00]), Cognitive ($d = 1.38$, 95% CI [0.95, 1.81]), Social ($d = 1.33$, 95% CI [0.70, 1.96]), Metacognitive ($d = 1.27$, 95% CI [0.56, 1.98]), Orthographic/Phonological ($d = 1.16$, 95% CI [0.30, 2.02]), and Determination ($d = 1.09$, 95% CI [0.27, 1.91]).

The ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in mean gain scores between the different VLS categories, $F(6, 39) = 3.28$, $p = .011$. The effect size, as measured by eta-squared (η^2), was 0.34, indicating a large practical significance.

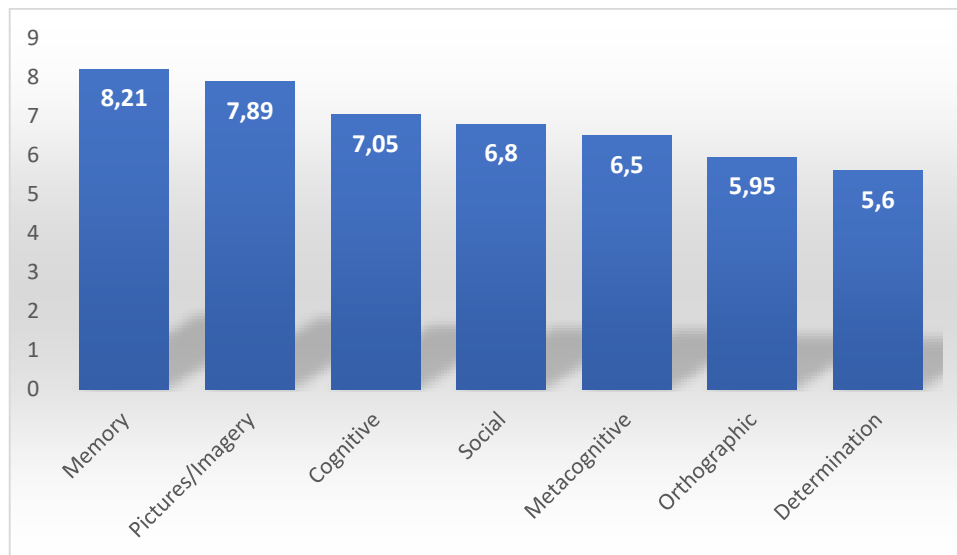
When Pictures/Imagery was collapsed into the Memory category ($n = 23$), the mean gain score for the combined Memory group was 8.08 ($SD = 1.88$), and the overall pattern of findings remained unchanged. Memory remained significantly superior to Determination and Orthographic/Phonological strategies, while comparisons with Cognitive strategies remained non-significant.

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test were performed to identify specific pairwise differences (comparisons involving Determination and Orthographic groups should be interpreted with caution due to small group sizes; see Limitations). Post-hoc comparisons showed that Memory strategies ($M = 8.21$) produced significantly greater gains than Determination ($M = 5.60$) and Orthographic/Phonological strategies ($M = 5.95$). However, no statistically significant differences were found between Memory strategies and either Pictures/Imagery ($M = 7.89$) or Cognitive strategies ($M = 7.05$), indicating that these visually

supported and activity-oriented techniques produced comparable short-term vocabulary gains. Figure 2 illustrates the mean vocabulary gains across the seven strategy categories.

Figure 2

Mean Vocabulary Gain Scores By VLS Category



Overall, the findings provide clear empirical answers to both research questions. Memory-based approaches—including both general Memory strategies and the specific Pictures/Imagery subtype—were among the most preferred and associated with the highest short-term gains. Memory strategies produced significantly greater gains than Determination and Orthographic/Phonological strategies, while Pictures/Imagery and Cognitive strategies also resulted in above-average gains and did not differ significantly from the Memory category. These results suggest that visually rich, hands-on strategy implementations are particularly effective for young EFL learners.

Discussion

The present study set out to answer two linked questions: which vocabulary learning strategies pre-service teachers prefer after studying Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy, and which categories of strategies yield the greatest short-term vocabulary gains when enacted in primary classrooms. The results—most notably the strong preference for memory-oriented techniques (including pictures/imagery as a highly selected subtype) and the statistically larger gains for Memory strategies relative to Determination and Orthographic/Phonological approaches—both confirm and complicate existing claims in the literature. Below I consider theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical implications in turn, adopting a critical stance that highlights both the study's contributions and its limits.

Addressing RQ1, the data revealed a pronounced preference among pre-service teachers for Memory, Cognitive, and Pictures/Imagery strategies. It should be noted that although Pictures/Imagery is theoretically categorized as a subtype of Memory strategies

within Schmitt and McCarthy's (1998) taxonomy, it was treated as a separate category in the analysis to capture instructional variation and highlight its distinct pedagogical salience in classroom implementation. This aligns with previous research indicating that teachers, particularly those working with young learners, tend to gravitate towards concrete, hands-on, and visually supported techniques perceived as manageable and engaging in classroom settings (Cirocki et al., 2024; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009; Qiu et al., 2021), reflecting a broader shift toward practical and experience-based pedagogy in language teacher education. The overwhelming selection of memory-oriented techniques (50% when combining Memory and Pictures/Imagery) suggests that pre-service teachers intuitively recognize the importance of durable lexical encoding for their students.

However, this finding also presents a critical tension. While their preferences skew towards memory and cognitive domains, the literature increasingly advocates for a balanced strategy instruction that strongly incorporates metacognitive and social strategies to foster learner autonomy and deeper processing (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Oxford, 2016). The low selection rate for Metacognitive (8.7%) and Social (10.9%) strategies indicates a potential disconnect: pre-service teachers may perceive these strategies as less immediately practical, more time-consuming, or more challenging to implement with young learners, despite their established long-term benefits. This echoes Borg's (2009) observation that teacher cognition and perceived classroom applicability often override theoretical prescriptions learned in coursework.

The low preference for metacognitive strategies (8.7%), in particular, suggests that pre-service teachers may view young learners as cognitively 'unready' for self-regulation, prioritizing concrete linguistic input over abstract executive functions. Alternatively, it may reflect a gap in teacher education, where the theoretical value of metacognition is taught, but practical scaffolding techniques for implementing these strategies with primary-level learners remain under-emphasized.

The results for RQ2 yield the most compelling contribution. The analysis demonstrated that Memory Strategies led to statistically greater short-term vocabulary gains than Determination and Orthographic/Phonological strategies. This finding robustly supports a substantial body of research on the efficacy of mnemonic and elaborative encoding for vocabulary retention, particularly with younger learners whose cognitive development favours concrete over abstract processing (Belleca et al., 2025; Sagarra & Alba, 2006; Widia & Sugesti, 2025). The high performance of Pictures/Imagery—a subtype of memory strategy—further underscores the power of dual-coding theory (Paivio, 1986) in vocabulary learning, where visual and verbal information channels strengthen memory traces. This theoretical relative short-term impact was mirrored in the pre-service teachers' reflection checklists. Several participants noted that learners appeared more 'engaged' and 'focused' when visual aids were paired with verbal repetition, with one participant observing that 'the students were able to recall the words almost instantly when I showed the pictures again.' These reflections suggest that the dual-encoding process was not only cognitively efficient but also served to maintain learner motivation during the implementation.

However, the lack of a statistically significant difference in gains between Memory, Pictures/Imagery, and Cognitive strategies invites a more nuanced interpretation. It suggests that for young learners at the A1–A2 level, a suite of activity-oriented, concrete instructional techniques—whether through mnemonics, visual association, or structured repetition—can produce comparable initial learning outcomes. This challenges a simplistic hierarchical view of

strategy effectiveness and instead points to the primacy of concreteness and engagement for this specific learner profile. Crucially, the underperformance of Determination strategies (e.g., guessing from context) aligns with Newton's (2013) caution that such strategies require a threshold of linguistic knowledge and may be less associated with stronger short-term gains for beginners with very limited contextual clues to draw upon.

Conceptually, this study's primary contribution lies in its operationalization of the theory-practice link. By moving beyond self-reports (Al-Kalbani, 2024; Aljasir, 2025) and correlating teacher choice with measured learner outcomes in real classrooms, it provides a validated model for what Johnson and Golombek (2016) term "mindful teacher education." The findings reveal that pre-service teachers' intuitive, practice-oriented preferences (for memory and imagery) are, in fact, pedagogically sound for achieving short-term vocabulary gains with young learners. This validates their emerging pedagogical reasoning and provides a foundation upon which teacher educators can build. Rather than dismissing their choices as theoretically unsophisticated, these preferences can be leveraged as a starting point for introducing more complex strategy instruction.

This leads to a significant conceptual insight for advancing the field: Teacher education should adopt a "practice-to-theory" bridge. Instead of presenting strategy taxonomies as abstract menu of options (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1998), educator programs can first engage pre-service teachers in implementing their preferred, concrete strategies. Following this experiential base, reflective practice can then guide them to critically analyse the outcomes, understand the theoretical principles underlying the success (e.g., depth of processing, dual-coding), and strategically expand their repertoire to include metacognitive and social strategies that foster long-term autonomy. This model directly addresses the "structural instability" noted in the literature review, where theory and practice remain disconnected (Borg, 2009; Cirocki et al., 2024). This perspective is also consistent with emerging work on digitally mediated ELT environments, where blended and AI-supported models increasingly position learners as self-regulating agents and teachers as facilitators of strategic learning processes (Yaşar, 2025).

Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of contextual appropriateness in evaluating strategy effectiveness. The strong showing of memory-based techniques does not negate the value of other strategies but emphasizes that optimal strategy selection is contingent on learner age, proficiency level, and learning context. This calls for a more dynamic, situated model of VLS pedagogy in teacher education, moving away from one-size-fits-all prescriptions.

Finally, the quasi-experimental design, integrating Phase 1 (preference) and Phase 2 (implementation/outcome), offers a methodological blueprint for future research. It answers calls for more studies that link teacher cognition with empirical learning data (Pullen et al., 2010; Yang, 2025). A limitation to acknowledge is the focus on short-term retention; future longitudinal research is needed to trace how different strategy implementations impact long-term vocabulary recall and autonomous strategy use by learners.

Conclusion

This quasi-experimental study successfully traced the trajectory from pre-service teacher strategy preference to classroom implementation and learning outcome. It conclusively demonstrates that pre-service teachers' most favoured strategies—Memory,

Pictures/Imagery, and Cognitive techniques—are associated with the strongest short-term vocabulary gains observed in this study among young EFL learners. The findings validate the practical intuition of novice teachers while providing empirical evidence to inform curriculum design.

The primary contribution of this research is a robust, empirical model that closes the critical theory-practice gap in VLS instruction. It proves that embedding strategy training within authentic teaching experiences—such as the Community Service Practicum—and linking it to measurable outcomes, transforms theoretical knowledge into actionable pedagogical skill. For teacher educators, the study argues for a reconceptualized approach: using pre-service teachers' natural leanings towards concrete strategies as a pedagogical anchor, from which a more sophisticated, theory-informed, and balanced strategy repertoire can be developed through reflective practice. Ultimately, this research strengthens the foundation for evidence-based, context-sensitive vocabulary pedagogy, equipping future teachers not only with knowledge of strategies but with the reflective agency to implement them effectively.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study open several promising pathways for advancing research on VLSs and teacher education. First, the study's results suggest the need for longitudinal investigations that extend beyond short-term post-tests. While Memory, Pictures/Imagery, and Cognitive strategies produced strong immediate gains, such outcomes do not necessarily predict long-term retention, transferability, or learners' independent strategy use. Future studies incorporating delayed post-tests are needed to determine whether the short-term advantages of Memory and Cognitive strategies persist over time, and whether Metacognitive and Social strategies confer delayed benefits not captured by immediate vocabulary post-tests.

Second, the study highlights the importance of exploring strategy implementation fidelity. Although pre-service teachers selected a single strategy and implemented it using a standardized lesson template, the micro-variations in teacher delivery, scaffolding, use of visuals, pacing, and classroom management likely influenced learner outcomes. Mixed-methods studies incorporating classroom observations, video analysis, fidelity rubrics, and teacher reflection logs could reveal how specific instructional moves mediate strategy effectiveness. Such research would contribute to situational models of strategy pedagogy, moving beyond categorical analysis toward a more detailed account of how strategies “work” in action.

Third, future research should examine learner-level moderators, including age, vocabulary size, learning difficulties, and affective factors (e.g., motivation or anxiety). The present study treated each class as a statistical unit, but learner-level data could reveal whether certain strategies benefit particular subgroups more than others. Multilevel modelling (HLM) would allow researchers to disentangle learner-, class-, and teacher-level influences, offering a more precise estimation of how strategies function in real learning environments.

Fourth, the significant role of teacher cognition warrants further exploration. The study suggests that pre-service teachers gravitate toward strategies they perceive as practical and concrete. Future research could investigate how teachers' epistemological beliefs, perceived self-efficacy, digital literacy, and prior learning experiences shape strategy selection and implementation quality. Comparative studies involving in-service teachers or teachers with

different experience levels could illuminate how strategy use evolves across the professional lifespan.

Fifth, the study's insights indicate the need for research on balanced strategy instruction, especially the under-selected metacognitive and social strategies. Although these strategies were chosen less frequently and yielded lower short-term gains, they may contribute more robustly to learner autonomy, strategic transfer, and long-term vocabulary development. Future studies could experimentally compare instructional sequences that begin with concrete, memory-rich strategies and gradually incorporate higher-level reflection and planning routines—aligning with a “practice-to-theory” model of teacher development.

Finally, emerging research on AI-supported vocabulary learning and digitally mediated ELT environments (Nelson, 2025; Yang, 2025; Yaşar, 2025) suggests new possibilities for strategy instruction. Future studies could examine how AI-based tools—such as adaptive vocabulary apps, automated feedback systems, or multimodal text generators—can support pre-service teachers' strategy training, amplify certain VLS categories, or scaffold metacognitive monitoring. Comparative studies between AI-mediated and human-mediated strategy instruction could offer new insights into the future of vocabulary pedagogy in teacher education.

Limitations

Although the study offers valuable empirical insights into pre-service teachers' strategy preferences and the effectiveness of VLS categories in real classrooms, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results.

First, the study employed a quasi-experimental design without a control group, which restricts causal inference. While the significant pre/post gains and between-group differences suggest meaningful effects, the absence of a comparison condition prevents the exclusion of external influences such as general language exposure, teacher enthusiasm, or classroom dynamics.

Second, although the sample included 46 pre-service teachers and 480 learners, the primary comparative analyses (ANOVA) were conducted at the class-group level, treating each teacher–class pair as a single unit. While this approach appropriately accounts for the nested structure of the data and avoids violations of independence assumptions, it necessarily obscures within-class (learner-level) variability. At the same time, overall pre–post gains were analyzed at the learner level, resulting in a dual-level analytical approach that should be interpreted with caution. This reflects the study's focus on teacher-level strategy implementation, but it masks learner-level variability and does not control for individual baseline differences. Consequently, the use of gain scores, rather than an ANCOVA approach controlling for pre-test scores, may limit precision in estimating strategy effects. Future research using student-level outcome data and multilevel modeling (e.g., hierarchical linear modeling or multilevel ANCOVA) would allow more accurate estimation while accounting for the nested structure of the data.

Third, certain VLS categories—specifically Determination and Orthographic/Phonological strategies—were represented by very small group sizes ($n = 2$). This imbalance limits the statistical power of the ANOVA and the reliability of post-hoc pairwise comparisons involving these specific categories. The low frequency of these strategies may

stem from pre-service teachers perceiving them as less “fun,” “concrete,” or developmentally appropriate for young learners (ages 9–11) compared to more visually or kinesthetically engaging methods. Consequently, while these categories showed lower mean gains, these results should be interpreted with caution. Larger and more evenly distributed samples are needed to draw stronger inferences about the relative impact of these less commonly selected strategies in primary contexts. This imbalance not only limits statistical power but also increases the risk that observed differences may reflect idiosyncratic classroom dynamics rather than stable strategy-related patterns.

Fourth, the measurement of effectiveness relied on a short-term vocabulary post-test administered one week after instruction, which captures initial retention but not long-term acquisition. Without delayed testing, it remains unclear whether strategies that support strong initial gains (e.g., Memory, Imagery) also yield durable learning over time.

Fifth, implementation fidelity was supported through microteaching video demonstrations and post-lesson checklists; however, independent coding of classroom delivery was not conducted. As a result, the extent to which each strategy was implemented consistently and as intended cannot be fully verified. Variations in instructional quality, scaffolding, and teacher interpretation of strategies may therefore have influenced the observed outcomes. This limits verification of the extent to which instruction adhered to the intended strategy categories, and variations in teacher clarity, scaffolding, or delivery may have influenced the results. In addition, the study did not collect direct qualitative data from learners (e.g., interviews or think-alouds) or independent observational metrics of engagement, limiting the ability to triangulate the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying observed vocabulary gains.

Sixth, the study involved CEFR A1–A2 primary school learners aged 9–11, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Strategy effectiveness is known to vary across proficiency levels, age groups, and learning contexts; thus, the conclusions may not apply to secondary or adult learners, or to contexts with greater L2 exposure.

Finally, although the study incorporated 46 unique implementations, the design still reflects a single institution’s teacher education program, limiting broader transferability. Future multi-site or cross-national studies could provide more representative insights into how teacher education models shape VLS use globally.

Statement of Conflict of Interest

In line with the Committee on Publication Ethics statement, I hereby declare that I had no conflicting interests regarding any parties to this study.

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Appendix A. Sample Vocabulary Achievement Test (CEFR A1–A2)**Part 1: Multiple Choice (Receptive Vocabulary)**

What does the word "bicycle" mean?

- a) A carb) A two-wheeled vehicle c) A bus d) A boat

What is a "teacher"?

- a) A person who drives a car
b) A person who plays music
c) A person who cooks
d) A person who helps students learn

Part 2: Picture-Word Matching

Match the correct word to the picture. (Provide image samples with options such as "apple," "dog," "chair")

Part 3: Fill-in-the-Blank (Cloze Test)

1. I brush my _____ every morning. (Answer: teeth)
2. The cat is _____ the table. (Answer: under)

Part 4: Definition Matching

Match the word with its definition.

- Happy → a) feeling good and smiling
- Book → b) something you read

Appendix B. Strategy Implementation Checklist

Teacher Name: _____

Class Grade: _____ Strategy Implemented: _____

VLS Category: (Memory / Cognitive / Metacognitive / etc.)

1. Activity Description:

.....
.....
.....

3. Student Engagement Level (1 = low, 5 = high):

1 2 3 4 5

4. Student Responses or Examples of Participation:

.....
.....
.....

5. Evidence of Vocabulary Retention (if any): Yes No

Briefly explain:

.....
.....
.....

6. Reflections on Effectiveness:

.....
.....
.....

7. Challenges Encountered:

.....
.....

Appendix C. Strategy Selection Table (Excerpt)

Teacher ID	Strategy Name	VLS Category	YouTube Link
201024	Keyword Method	Memory	https://youtu.be/example1
201050	Word Lists	Cognitive	https://youtu.be/example2
211041	Metacognitive Use	Metacognitive	https://youtu.be/example3

YouTube Videos & Classroom Practice

The collage features several YouTube video thumbnails and classroom practice photos. The video thumbnails include:

- apple (elma)**: A video showing a person holding a red apple.
- 4- KIDNAP**: A video titled "Story: While the KID was NAPPING, a criminal came and kidnapped him." It includes a list of synonyms for "Large" (Huge, Gigantic, Enormous, Vast) and "Small" (Tiny, Petite).
- KEYWORD METHOD**: A video with colorful circles and the word "GROUPING".
- Memorizing Unrelated Words: Why Is It Hard?**: A video with icons for a tree, bicycle, and house, and a person thinking.
- PICTURES / IMAGERY**: A video by BEYZA ERGEN.

 The classroom practice photos show:

- Students in a classroom with their hands raised.
- Students holding signs in front of a screen.
- Students sitting at desks in a classroom.
- Students in a classroom with a whiteboard.
- Students in a classroom with a teacher.
- A teacher wearing a blue mask in a classroom.

Appendix D. Sample Lesson Plan Template**Teacher Name:** _____ **Class Level: Grade** ____ (Age: ____)**Strategy Implemented:** _____**Lesson Title:** _____ **Duration:** 40 minutes**Target Vocabulary:** cat, school, yellow, run, book **CEFR Level:** A1–A2**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will recognize and use 5 target vocabulary items in context.
- Students will engage in a hands-on activity using the selected VLS.

Materials Needed:

- Word cards, realia, visuals, worksheets

Procedure:

1. **Warm-up (5 min):** Quick review of known words with flashcards
2. **Introduction (10 min):** Introduce new words using pictures and gestures
3. **VLS Activity (15 min):** Apply selected strategy (e.g., drawing for imagery)
4. **Practice (5 min):** Group work or pair-based vocabulary game
5. **Review and Wrap-Up (5 min):** Recall and use words in short sentences

Assessment:

- Observation and student participation
- Post-test (delivered in Week 6)

Reflections: (To be filled post-lesson)

_____ was granted by the university's ethics committee. All participants signed informed consent forms. For students, parental consent was obtained through school administration. All data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in reporting.