RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teacher Beliefs and Approaches to Vocabulary Teaching in Malaysian ESL Primary Classrooms

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ABSTRACT – Vocabulary plays a key role in second language development, yet limited research has explored how Malaysian ESL primary teachers approach its instruction. This qualitative study investigates teachers' beliefs about vocabulary teaching, the strategies they use, and the challenges they encounter. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four ESL primary school teachers, and the data were analysed thematically. Findings reveal that teachers hold differing beliefs on explicit versus incidental instructions and using the mother tongue in vocabulary teaching. A range of strategies was identified, including direct teaching, peer learning, and encouraging independent vocabulary acquisition. However, challenges such as time constraints, low student motivation, and insufficient curricular emphasis on vocabulary were commonly reported. The study highlights the influence of teacher beliefs on instructional choices and the need for professional development to support effective vocabulary teaching. Future research using a mixed-methods approach is recommended to provide broader insights into vocabulary instruction practices in Malaysian primary ESL classrooms.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The importance of vocabulary in second language acquisition has gained significant recognition over the years, especially in English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. A strong vocabulary base is essential for language proficiency, enabling learners to express themselves effectively in spoken and written communication. In the past, teaching approaches like the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method prioritised grammar instruction, often overlooking the role of vocabulary. However, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), vocabulary has become a key focus, highlighting its critical role in developing communicative competence (Winch, 2019).

In Malaysia, the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) for primary schools incorporates the principles of CLT. It aims to ensure pupils can communicate effectively by the end of Year 6 (Curriculum Development Division, 2017). The curriculum is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It supports national goals outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, which aspires to produce bilingual learners proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English (Ministry of Education, 2013). SBELC places equal importance on developing all four language skills to promote communicative competence.

For learners to achieve these goals, a strong vocabulary base is essential. According to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, vocabulary is key in supporting comprehension and enhancing language acquisition (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Bailey & Fahad, 2021). Studies have shown that vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to student's performance in both reading and writing. For example, Ali (2020) highlights the role of vocabulary in language development, while Quines (2023) reports that learners with larger vocabularies perform better in literacy-related tasks.

Many researchers agree that effective vocabulary instruction should include incidental and explicit learning. While incidental learning occurs through repeated exposure in context, explicit instruction involves direct teaching and reinforcement of word meanings (Rasinski & Rupley, 2019). Nation (2013) stresses the importance of balancing meaning-focused input, such as listening and reading, with meaning-focused output, including speaking and writing (Dang & Webb, 2020). To achieve this balance, teachers must be familiar with various vocabulary teaching strategies, highlighting the importance of professional development in this area.

1.1 Problem Statement

Effective vocabulary instruction is essential for developing communicative competence in English, enabling learners to understand meaning, express ideas, and participate in formal and informal communication (Nation, 2013). While research supports using varied and student-centred vocabulary learning strategies (Graves & Sales, 2013; Schmitt, 2000), many Malaysian ESL classrooms rely on traditional methods such as direct translation and rote memorisation (Azman, 2016; Kho, 2023). These practices often result in passive learning experiences, limited vocabulary retention, and reduced learner motivation (Yaacob & Yunus, 2019).

Although the CEFR-aligned Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC) acknowledges the importance of vocabulary, it provides limited instructional guidance beyond word lists. As a result, vocabulary instruction is often embedded indirectly in teaching other language skills (Hassan & Gao, 2021; Bryan Lim et al., 2023), making it difficult to assess how systematically vocabulary is

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taught. Compounding this issue is the scarcity of research focusing on how Malaysian primary school teachers implement vocabulary strategies in practice. Existing studies focus on learner preferences or the effectiveness of specific methods (Swyny & Sulaiman, 2023), with limited attention given to teachers' beliefs, instructional choices, and classroom challenges.

As teachers play a central role in vocabulary development, it is vital to understand their beliefs regarding vocabulary instruction and what strategies they employ. This study, therefore, aims to explore Malaysian ESL primary school teachers' beliefs about vocabulary instruction, the strategies they use, and the challenges they face in implementing these strategies in the classroom. Schmitt's (1997) Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies serves as the framework for this investigation.

This study explores how vocabulary is taught in Malaysian ESL primary classrooms by examining teachers' beliefs, instructional approaches, and the challenges they encounter. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Investigate Malaysian ESL primary school teachers' beliefs about vocabulary teaching and learning.

2. Identify the vocabulary teaching strategies commonly used by these teachers.

3. Examine the challenges teachers face in implementing vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

To achieve the objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Malaysian ESL primary school teachers perceive vocabulary teaching and learning?

2. What strategies do Malaysian ESL primary school teachers commonly use to teach vocabulary?

3. What challenges do teachers face in implementing vocabulary teaching strategies in the classroom?
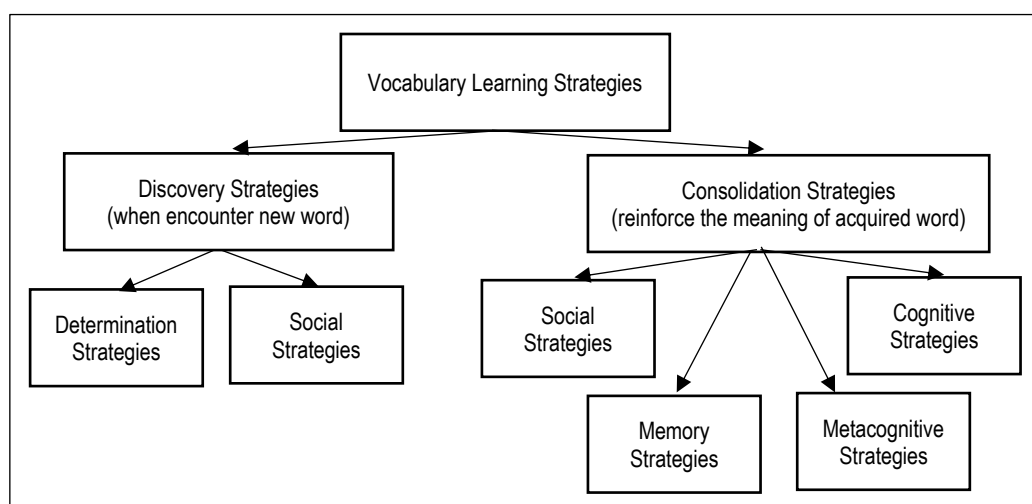
1.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are defined as techniques or methods employed by learners to acquire new vocabulary and enhance language proficiency. Schmitt (1997) introduced a comprehensive taxonomy of VLS, categorising them into two main groups: discovery strategies and consolidation strategies. Discovery strategies involve techniques when learners first encounter new words, such as determining the meaning through context or consulting a dictionary (Schmitt, 1997). On the other hand, consolidation strategies reinforce vocabulary knowledge after the initial learning phase, including practices like repetition, using mnemonic devices, and engaging in social learning activities (Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001).

As shown in Figure 1, Schmitt's taxonomy further divides these strategies into social, cognitive, memory, and metacognitive subcategories. Social strategies involve collaborative learning, where students work together to explore word meanings, often facilitated by teachers in group work. Memory strategies help students retain vocabulary by associating words with images or personal experiences. Cognitive strategies focus on mechanical methods, such as keeping vocabulary lists or using flashcards, while metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's vocabulary learning process.

Figure 1

Overview of Schmitt's Taxonomy of VLS

Research by Gu and Johnson (1996) as well as by Nation (2001) have consistently emphasised the significance of using a variety of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) to improve vocabulary retention and application. VLS supports the present study's focus on exploring whether Malaysian ESL teachers teach such strategies in classroom settings. Additionally, research by Kho et al. (2021) revealed that the vocabulary strategies used by students were mainly self-directed. This highlights a lack of explicit instruction from teachers regarding how and when to use these strategies, which suggests that vocabulary strategy instruction may not be integrated systematically into classroom practice, further supporting the need for this study.

1.2.1 Teacher Beliefs and their Impact on Vocabulary Instruction

It has been found that teachers' preference for vocabulary teaching is influenced by their beliefs (Dzulkiflee & Said, 2023). For instance, the study found that while some teachers demonstrated innovative use of digital platforms to introduce vocabulary strategies, others lacked belief in their effectiveness, resulting in minimal strategy modelling. These findings highlight the link between teachers' beliefs about teaching and their choices in planning and delivering vocabulary instruction.

Teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning play a significant role in shaping their instructional practices. According to Pajares (1992), beliefs strongly influence how teachers perceive their roles, plan lessons, and interact with students in the classroom. In the context of vocabulary instruction, these beliefs can determine whether teachers opt for a more explicit or implicit approach to teaching vocabulary, which is reflected in the study done by Dzulkiflee and Said (2023). Richards and Lockhart (1994) propose that teachers' beliefs often arise from their experiences as learners, professional training, and the specific teaching contexts they encounter. For instance, a teacher who believes in the effectiveness of rote memorisation might favour repetition and drills in vocabulary lessons.

In contrast, one who prioritises contextual learning may prefer communicative activities and authentic materials, such as stories and dialogues. Rahman et al. (2018) found that ESL teachers are often unaware of their teaching beliefs until prompted to reflect through structured interviews. Their study revealed that teachers' beliefs may not always align with their classroom practices, a common phenomenon in professional development. In a similar vein, recent research by Zaidi et al. (2022) highlights that Malaysian ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition is significantly influenced by the strategies employed by teachers, which are often shaped by their instructional beliefs.

1.2.2 Explicit vs. Implicit Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary instruction can be broadly categorised into two approaches: explicit and implicit. These approaches offer different ways of introducing and practising vocabulary, each with strengths and limitations. Explicit vocabulary teaching involves directly instructing students on word meanings, pronunciation, usage, and related concepts, often through planned lessons and specific activities. This approach typically includes pre-planned lessons, vocabulary lists, word definition tasks, sentence-level usage, and structured vocabulary exercises such as matching, gap-fills, and categorisation tasks (Nation, 2001). Teachers systematically introduce new vocabulary and ensure students understand its meaning and context. Explicit learning benefits low-proficiency learners or when vocabulary needs to be taught within a limited time frame. Marzban and Kamalian (2013) stated that explicit instruction yields rapid, short-term vocabulary gains, making it an effective tool for preparing for exams or working with struggling learners.

This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In vocabulary teaching, scaffolding within the ZPD occurs when teachers introduce new words with contextual support, such as visuals or simplified definitions and gradually reduce assistance as learners become more competent (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Shabani et al., 2010). Teachers help pupils move from passive exposure to active usage by using explicit instruction as a scaffold. However, over-reliance on explicit methods can lead to superficial learning. Studies have shown that Malaysian ESL teachers prefer rote memorisation and word lists due to time constraints and syllabus demands (Kho et al., 2021). While this ensures syllabus coverage, it often overlooks deeper understanding and long-term retention.

Implicit vocabulary instruction, on the other hand, occurs when students acquire vocabulary through exposure to the language in context, without direct teaching. This form of learning is grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language when they are exposed to comprehensible input, which is the language that is slightly above their current level (i+1) (Krashen, 1985; as cited in Bailey & Fahad, 2021). Students infer word meanings naturally without direct instruction when engaging with meaningful and understandable texts or media. This method supports deeper processing, long-term memory retention, and improved language fluency (Schmitt, 2000; Webb & Nation, 2017).

In Malaysian ESL classrooms, implicit learning is promoted through story-based learning, multimedia content, or reading programs. However, students in rural or under-resourced areas may lack consistent access to such input outside the classroom (Mokhtar & Normazidah, 2021). Therefore, teachers must provide meaningful input in class and design tasks that maximise exposure and context-based learning. While research by Marzban and Kamalian (2013) suggests that explicit teaching methods are particularly effective in improving student outcomes, especially when targeted vocabulary needs to be learned within a limited timeframe, Fainman and Tokar (2019) believe that implicit instructions foster long-term retention, allowing more profound understanding of vocabulary in use.

However, for Malaysian ESL teachers, the choice between these methods is often influenced by classroom constraints, student proficiency levels, and the specific vocabulary goals set by the curriculum. Most Malaysian ESL teachers combine explicit and implicit instruction by introducing vocabulary through explicit explanation and reinforcing it through contextualised tasks such as group discussions, storytelling or multimedia input. It has also been found that urban teachers with access to more resources tend to lean towards implicit vocabulary instruction. In contrast, rural teachers often rely on explicit instruction due to time constraints and curriculum pressures (Mokhtar & Normazidah, 2021).

Given the strengths of both explicit and implicit approaches, many researchers advocate for an integrated model that leverages the advantages of each (Schmitt, 1997; Webb, 2008; Nation, 2013). Teachers can support immediate learning needs and long-term vocabulary development by combining structured vocabulary teaching with meaningful contextual exposure. This blended approach is especially relevant in the Malaysian ESL context, where students may benefit from structured support while gradually developing independent learning skills through contextual exposure.

1.2.3   Vocabulary Instruction Challenges in Malaysian Primary Schools

While the importance of vocabulary instruction is often emphasised, Malaysian ESL teachers face numerous challenges in effectively teaching vocabulary. One of the primary challenges is the varying proficiency levels of students within a single classroom. In many cases, teachers must balance the needs of students already proficient in English with those still struggling with basic vocabulary. This discrepancy can make it difficult for teachers to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to vocabulary instruction.

Additionally, limited resources, such as access to technology or vocabulary-focused learning materials, pose another obstacle. While digital tools like Quizizz and Google Forms can reinforce vocabulary learning, many teachers lack the time or technological proficiency to integrate these resources into their teaching effectively (Mazlan et al., 2022). Moreover, large class sizes often reduce the opportunities for individualised instruction, making it difficult for teachers to cater to students with different learning needs and preferences.

Not just that, motivation is also a challenge as teachers often struggle to engage students in vocabulary learning, particularly those who view vocabulary acquisition as tedious or irrelevant to their immediate language needs. Studies by Smith and Khawaja (2011) suggest that language anxiety and low motivation are common barriers to effective vocabulary acquisition, requiring teachers to find creative ways to foster a positive learning environment that encourages active participation in vocabulary activities.

These challenges and the pressure to complete the syllabus often leave little room for in-depth vocabulary instruction. Many Malaysian ESL teachers reported that the curriculum is densely packed with content, leading them to prioritise grammar, reading comprehension, or exam-oriented tasks over focused vocabulary teaching (Yunus, Nordin, & Salehi, 2019). As a result, vocabulary instruction is sometimes treated as a supplementary activity rather than an integral part of language learning. Consequently, teachers may resort to surface-level instruction, such as rote memorisation or isolated word lists, rather than approaches that promote more profound vocabulary knowledge and retention.

1.2.4   Teacher Development and Support in Vocabulary Instruction

In light of these challenges, there is increasing recognition of the need for professional development opportunities tailored to vocabulary instruction. One key area of support is training teachers to incorporate a wide range of vocabulary approaches into their classroom practices. Moody et al. (2018) emphasise that teachers who diversify their instructional methods and integrate social, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies often achieve better student vocabulary retention and engagement results. Furthermore, studies such as Chitravelu, Sithamparam, and Teh (2022) have pointed out that Malaysian ESL teachers desire more workshops, training modules, and collaborative platforms to observe and share effective vocabulary teaching practices. Such initiatives provide teachers with practical tools and create opportunities for peer learning and professional dialogue, which are essential for sustaining long-term instructional improvement.

Another crucial component of teacher support is to prioritise reflective practice. According to Richards and Farrell (2005), reflective practice enhances a teacher's ability to adapt to the evolving needs of their students. It promotes a deeper awareness of their own teaching beliefs and practices. It allows teachers to identify which strategies resonate with their students, refine their lesson planning and apply suitable approaches to vocabulary instruction. Additionally, Teng (2020) argues that sustained support, such as mentoring, peer coaching, and follow-up training sessions, leads to greater teacher confidence and more consistent use of vocabulary strategies in the classroom. The highlighted issues reinforce the significance of the present study, which explores how Malaysian ESL primary school teachers approach vocabulary teaching. By examining the strategies employed, the beliefs held, and the support available, this study aims to help improve vocabulary instruction in Malaysian classrooms.

2.0   METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore Malaysian ESL primary school teachers' beliefs, perceptions and approaches towards vocabulary teaching.

2.1   Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to gain in-depth insights into teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing effective vocabulary instruction. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative design is deemed appropriate for research that seeks rich data from the respondents. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study explores teachers' subjective experiences and perceptions. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the vocabulary teaching strategies used by ESL primary school teachers and the underlying beliefs that inform their practices. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, detailed data on teachers' perceptions, their use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS), and the challenges they encounter in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews are particularly effective as they allow the researcher to adapt questions as the interview progresses, ensuring the researcher obtains relevant and meaningful data (Bryman, 2016).

2.2   Participants

The participants were four ESL primary school teachers from various schools in Melaka, Malaysia. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling. This technique allows researchers to select individuals most likely to provide relevant and insightful data based on the study's objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). The criteria for inclusion in the study were:

1. Teachers must have at least two years of experience teaching English in a Malaysian primary school.

2. Following the Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (SBELC), participants must teach English in schools.

3. Teachers must have a teaching qualification in English language education.

The small sample size of four participants is appropriate for the qualitative nature of this study, which aims to gain detailed insights into teachers' beliefs and approaches to vocabulary instruction. In qualitative research, the purpose is not to produce generalisable results but to explore the depth and complexity of individual experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Guest et al. (2006) stated that data saturation can be achieved with a small number of interviews, which refers to the point at which no new themes emerge from the data. Since all participants in this study meet specific inclusion criteria and work in similar Malaysian primary school settings, the sample size is sufficient to address the research objectives meaningfully.

2.3   Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with each respondent, allowing for an in-depth exploration of their beliefs, practices, and challenges in vocabulary teaching. The semi-structured format was chosen to ensure flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into relevant areas while maintaining consistent guiding questions across all interviews (Bryman, 2016).

The interviews were conducted online using Google Meet, which provided a convenient and accessible platform for both the researcher and participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, giving respondents ample time to discuss their experiences and perspectives. The questions asked during the interviews covered key areas related to the research objectives:

1. How do teachers teach vocabulary in their ESL classrooms?

2. Do teachers believe vocabulary is important in language learning?

3. What are teachers' beliefs about the best practices for vocabulary teaching?

4. What challenges do teachers face when teaching vocabulary?

All interview sessions were recorded with the participant's consent, ensuring that the researcher could focus on the flow of the conversation while later reviewing the details during transcription. After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, creating a detailed textual record of each respondent's answers (*Interview questions are available upon request*).

2.4   Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed the researcher to identify patterns and themes from the interview transcripts. The data analysis process followed several key steps:

1. Familiarisation with the data: The researcher transcribed each interview and read the transcripts multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the content.
2. Generating initial codes: Open coding was applied to the transcripts, where specific words, phrases, or text sections were highlighted for their relevance to the research questions. Initial codes were developed to categorise the data based on teachers' beliefs, strategies, and challenges in vocabulary instruction.
3. Interrater reliability: To ensure the reliability of the coding process, a second coder reviewed the codes. This step was essential in establishing interrater reliability, ensuring that the codes and themes identified were consistent and not biased by the researcher's interpretations alone.
4. Searching for themes: Once the coding process was completed, the codes were grouped into broader themes. These themes represented key aspects of the teacher's beliefs and practices regarding vocabulary teaching and the challenges they face.
5. Defining and naming themes: Each theme was defined clearly, and labels were assigned to capture the essence of the data under each theme.

3.0   RESULTS

Several key themes emerged from the analysis, reflecting the teachers' beliefs, strategies, and challenges in teaching vocabulary in the ESL context. This section presents the findings organised by themes, with supporting excerpts from the interviews. Each theme corresponds to one of the study's research questions. Excerpts from interview data support the themes to illustrate the perspectives of the participating teachers.

3.1   Teachers' Beliefs on ESL Vocabulary Teaching

RQ1: How do Malaysian ESL primary school teachers perceive vocabulary teaching and learning?

The first theme from the analysis is the teachers' beliefs regarding vocabulary teaching in ESL classrooms. Teachers hold varying perspectives on the most effective methods for teaching vocabulary, particularly in terms of whether instruction should be incidental or explicit. Additionally, teachers expressed differing opinions on using the mother tongue versus the target language (English) when teaching vocabulary. These beliefs reflect teachers' underlying philosophies about language learning and inform their approaches in the classroom.

Table 1

Teachers' beliefs on vocabulary teaching

Sub-theme	Excerpts
Incidental vs. Explicit Instruction	*Yes, incidentally, you want to learn it (T3, L45)* *The most effective, for me, is more explicit. (T4, L48)*
Mother Tongue vs. English-Only Approach	*I am an avid fan of teaching English in English. (T2, L12)* *I believe in English to Malay, as they understand more (T1, L82)*
Importance of Vocabulary	*Vocabulary is like the foundation of language. (T1, L12)*
Influence of Personal Experience	*I learned from translating; I got my vocabulary today from that. (T1, L31)*

Within this theme, the diversity of teacher beliefs about vocabulary instruction was evident across the four sub-themes. For example, in terms of instructional approach, Teacher 3 preferred incidental learning, stating that vocabulary is acquired naturally "when you want to learn it" (T3, L45), whereas Teacher 4 found explicit teaching "more effective" (T4, L48). This contrast highlights the tension between incidental and explicit methods in vocabulary teaching.

Regarding the language of instruction, Teacher 2 advocated for an English-only approach, identifying herself as "an avid fan of teaching English in English" (T2, L12). In contrast, Teacher 1 expressed the importance of using the mother tongue, believing that her pupils "understand more" when English is explained in Malay (T1, L82). These differing views suggest that teachers choose their approach based on pupils' proficiency and comprehension needs.

Teachers also acknowledged the importance of vocabulary, with one noting that "vocabulary is like the foundation of language" (T1, L12). This belief aligns with their prioritisation of vocabulary in early language development. Lastly, personal experience shaped vocabulary instruction for some, such as Teacher 1, who credited translation activities with enriching her vocabulary: "I learned from translating... I got my vocabulary today from that" (T1, L31). These findings reflect how teachers' experiences and pedagogical beliefs shape classroom practices.

3.2 Common Strategies Used by Teachers in Vocabulary Teaching

RQ2: What strategies do Malaysian ESL primary school teachers commonly used to teach vocabulary?

The second theme explores the common strategies ESL teachers employ to teach vocabulary. These strategies vary widely, from direct instruction and social learning approaches to independent learning activities and multimedia resources. Each teacher adapted their strategy to fit the specific needs of their students and the constraints of their teaching context.

Table 2

Common strategies used by teachers in vocabulary teaching

Sub-theme	Excerpts
Direct Teaching Approach	*I introduce vocabulary first before I ask them to read the sentence. (T1, L12)* *I give them the meaning immediately to ensure comprehension. (T4, L20)*
Social Approach	*If a student asks for the meaning, I pose the question to the class. (T1, L37)*
Independent Learning Approach	*I always encourage my pupils to learn the language in their own time. (T1, L64)*
Use of Multimedia	*I give them lyrics of nursery rhymes; we go through them first. (T1, L86)*

The teachers in the study utilised a variety of strategies to teach vocabulary. A common approach was direct teaching, where vocabulary is explicitly introduced before pupils engage in reading or tasks. For example, Teacher 1 explained that she "introduce[s] vocabulary first before [asking pupils] to read the sentence" (T1, L12). In contrast, Teacher 4 reinforced this method by saying, "I give them the meaning immediately to ensure comprehension" (T4, L20). This indicates a focus on clarity and immediate understanding to support language development.

In contrast, social learning strategies were also adopted, particularly through peer interaction. Teacher 3 demonstrated this approach by stating, "If a student asks for the meaning, I pose the question to the class" (T1, L37), believing in student collaboration and collective problem-solving as a learning tool. Independent learning strategies were also valued, with Teacher 1 saying, "I always encourage my pupils to learn language in their own time" (T1, L64). The statement recognises learner autonomy and encourages students to take responsibility for their vocabulary acquisition beyond the classroom.

Additionally, teachers used multimedia resources to make vocabulary learning more effective. For instance, Teacher 1 mentioned using songs and rhymes in her lessons, saying, "I give them lyrics of nursery rhymes... we go through them first" (T1, L86). This approach supports vocabulary retention by engaging pupils through sound and rhythm.

3.3 Challenges Faced by Teachers in ESL Vocabulary Teaching

RQ3: What challenges do teachers face in implementing vocabulary teaching strategies in the classroom?

The third theme identifies teachers' challenges when teaching vocabulary in ESL classrooms. Time constraints, student motivation, curriculum pressures, and teachers' abilities were all highlighted as significant barriers to effective vocabulary instruction. These challenges impact teachers' methods and affect how much time and attention can be devoted to vocabulary within a busy classroom environment.

Table 3

Challenges faced by teachers in vocabulary teaching

Sub-theme	Excerpts
Time Constraints	*If they have more time, that would be the most effective. (T1, L25)* *The homework, the routine, priorities that I should (T4, L39)*
Student Motivation and Attitude	*Most of the words they don't understand, but they don't do anything. (T1, L39)* *Some kids you have to push, not all of them are high proficiency. (T3, L88)*
Curriculum Challenges	*In our syllabus, they don't have any particular section where we are to teach vocabulary. (T2, L58)*
Teacher Ability	*Honestly, (in) my 13 years of teaching, it takes time and if you do it in groups (T1, L45)*

Time constraints emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned challenges. Teacher 1 noted that "If they have more time... that would be the most effective" (T1, L25), while Teacher 4 noted that priorities in the timetable often interfere with vocabulary instruction: "The homework, the routine... priorities that I should..." (T4, L39). These statements reflect how a crowded schedule limits the opportunity for meaningful vocabulary practice and reinforcement.

Student motivation and attitude were also significant concerns. Teacher 1 pointed out, "Most of the words they do not understand, but they don't do anything" (T1, L39), indicating a lack of initiative among some pupils. Teacher 3 echoed this, saying, "Some kids you have to push... not all of them are trying" (T3, L88), highlighting the difficulty in encouraging consistent effort, especially among lower-proficiency learners. Curriculum-related issues added further complexity. Teachers reported a lack of explicit vocabulary instruction in the syllabus. As Teacher 2 put it, "In our syllabus, they don't have any particular section where we are to teach vocabulary" (T2, L58). This indicates that the curriculum often lacks structure or emphasises systematic vocabulary development.

Finally, the demands of implementing group-based vocabulary strategies were noted. Teacher 1 reflected on her long experience, stating, "Honestly, (in) my 13 years of teaching... it takes time and if you do it in groups..." (T1, L45), suggesting that group work, while beneficial, can be time-consuming and challenging to manage within time constraints.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the beliefs, strategies, and challenges Malaysian ESL primary school teachers face in teaching vocabulary. The key themes that emerged, teachers' beliefs, instructional strategies, and challenges, highlight significant factors that influence vocabulary teaching and provide a foundation for recommendations to improve vocabulary instruction in ESL classrooms.

4.1 How do Malaysian ESL Primary School Teachers Perceive Vocabulary Teaching and Learning?

The findings revealed that teachers' beliefs are critical in shaping their approaches to vocabulary instruction, particularly in their preferences for incidental versus explicit teaching and using the mother tongue in English vocabulary instruction. The findings agree that teachers' instructional decisions are closely linked to their pedagogical beliefs (Pajares, 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Dzulkiflee and Said (2023) similarly found that Malaysian ESL teachers varied in their adoption of vocabulary strategies based on their individual beliefs, with some demonstrating reluctance towards innovative approaches despite having access to relevant tools.

Within this study, Teacher 3's preference for incidental learning reflects the belief that vocabulary can be acquired naturally through exposure. The finding aligns with Ellis's (2008) findings that vocabulary is best learned when students are exposed to meaningful language input in real-world contexts. However, as Nation (2013) highlights, incidental learning may lack the depth required for long-term retention, particularly for lower-proficiency students. The finding suggests a need for a more explicit approach in such cases.

On the other hand, teachers who advocate for explicit instruction, like Teacher 4, emphasise that vocabulary should be taught systematically. This finding supports prior research by Nation (2001) and Marzban and Kamalian (2013), who emphasise that structured vocabulary instruction facilitates better comprehension and acquisition, especially for struggling learners. This perspective also aligns with research showing that explicit vocabulary teaching enhances retention, especially for ESL learners with limited language exposure outside the classroom (Laufer & Waldman, 2021). Laufer (2017) further argues that explicit instruction clarifies meaning and provides structured opportunities for learners to practice and consolidate vocabulary.

Some teachers, such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 4, favoured a blended approach that combines explicit and incidental instruction. The finding is consistent with the recommendations of Schmitt (1997), Nation (2013), and Milton (2021), who advocate for an integrated model that draws on the strengths of both methods to support immediate learning outcomes and long-term vocabulary development.

Teachers in this study were also divided between using the mother tongue and English-only approaches in their vocabulary instruction. Teacher 1 reported that translation into the L1 supported learners' comprehension, particularly for those with low proficiency. This finding aligns with Macaro (2020), who argues that using the L1 can function as a scaffold that facilitates vocabulary learning. In contrast, Teacher 2 advocated for an English-only classroom environment in which the teacher believes complete immersion in the target language provides greater exposure.

The finding is in line with Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, which explains that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to comprehensible input in which the language is slightly above their current proficiency level (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Bailey & Fahad, 2021). These differing beliefs mirror findings by Mokhtar and Normazidah (2021), who noted that rural teachers often favour more explicit methods due to time constraints, while urban teachers are more likely to implement contextual or immersive approaches supported by better access to resources.

4.2   What Strategies do Malaysian ESL Primary School Teachers Commonly Used to Teach Vocabulary?

The teachers employed various strategies corresponding to Schmitt's (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, particularly within discovery and consolidation. The strategies identified in this study include direct instruction, social learning and independent learning. Participants such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 widely used direct teaching strategies and reported introducing vocabulary before engaging pupils in reading tasks. This finding aligns with Nation (2001) and Stahl and Nagy (2021), who recommend explicit instruction in high-frequency vocabulary as a foundation for improving reading comprehension. These strategies also reflect the cognitive and memory categories within Schmitt's taxonomy, which involve practices such as matching exercises, vocabulary lists, and repetition.

Social learning strategies, such as peer collaboration and group activities, also emerged as a popular method among the teachers interviewed. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism underpins this approach, suggesting that learners construct knowledge through social interaction and collaboration. Teacher 3's use of group work to teach vocabulary through peer explanations aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners benefit from working with more knowledgeable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Shabani et al., 2010). Studies by Alharbi (2015) and Webb (2020) reinforce that social interaction and peer-assisted learning can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition, particularly in collaborative environments where students feel supported.

Independent learning strategies, such as promoting self-directed reading and vocabulary exploration, were also highly valued by the teachers in this study. This approach is consistent with findings from Nation (2013), who emphasises the importance of fostering autonomous learning habits among ESL students. Nation (2013) argues that independent learning, particularly through extensive reading, allows students to encounter new vocabulary in varied contexts, reinforcing their understanding and retention of words. Teacher 2's belief in the power of reading aligns with this view, as extensive reading has been shown to significantly contribute to vocabulary growth (Day & Bamford, 2020).

4.3   What Challenges do Teachers Face in Implementing Vocabulary Teaching Strategies in the Classroom?

The findings identified several key challenges, the most frequently mentioned being time constraints. Teachers reported that the curriculum demands often left little room for focused vocabulary instruction. This issue aligns with Richards (2015) and Yunus et al. (2019), who found that curriculum overload is a persistent barrier to effective vocabulary teaching. Mazlan et al. (2022) also reported that many teachers struggle to integrate vocabulary instruction meaningfully due to time limitations.

Another significant challenge was student motivation, particularly among lower-proficiency learners. Teachers such as Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 highlighted a lack of engagement and initiative among some pupils. These concerns are supported by studies that found language anxiety and low motivation are common obstacles to vocabulary learning. Although digital tools and interactive activities can increase engagement, Mazlan et al. (2022) found that many teachers struggle to integrate such methods effectively due to either time constraints or limited technological skills.

Curriculum-related issues were also highlighted as a barrier to effective vocabulary instruction. For example, Teacher 2 observed that the syllabus does not explicitly address vocabulary teaching, requiring teachers to indirectly integrate vocabulary instruction through other language skills. The finding showed that large class sizes hinder teachers' ability to differentiate instruction, limiting the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching across diverse learners.

These challenges highlight the need for professional development opportunities that address vocabulary instruction. Studies by Moody et al. (2018) and Chitravelu et al. (2022) emphasise that ongoing training and collaboration help teachers improve and broaden their instructional practices. Richards and Farrell (2005) advocate for reflective practice to refine instructional decision-making. Mentoring and support programmes are also important, as highlighted by Teng (2020), to strengthen teachers' confidence in applying diverse vocabulary strategies in the classroom.

5.0   CONCLUSION

Although this study involved a small group of ESL primary school teachers, the insights from the interviews offer a meaningful understanding of how vocabulary is taught in Malaysian classrooms. The findings suggest that teacher beliefs, instructional strategies,

and classroom challenges are closely connected and influence how vocabulary is taught during lessons. One of the key takeaways is the importance of adopting a balanced approach to vocabulary instruction. While some teachers favoured incidental methods and others preferred explicit teaching, many acknowledged the need to use both depending on the context. The notion reflects the value of combining structured instruction with meaningful language exposure to support learners at different proficiency levels. Teachers should be encouraged to integrate strategies, including direct explanation, contextual tasks, peer interaction, and independent reading.

The findings also indicate the need for more targeted professional development focused on vocabulary teaching. Several teachers reported feeling underprepared to teach vocabulary effectively, especially in schools with limited resources. Thus, training programmes should offer practical guidance on managing time, selecting appropriate strategies, and supporting learners with varying needs. These efforts can help teachers to be more confident and consistent in applying vocabulary strategies in their classrooms. The teachers in this study also raised curriculum-related challenges. Some were uncertain about how vocabulary should be incorporated into their lessons, often relying on their judgment to determine its importance. In light of this, a more structured emphasis on vocabulary within the curriculum could help ensure that all learners receive sufficient exposure to new words, regardless of their background or school environment.

While the small sample size and qualitative nature of this study may limit the generalisability of the findings, the data collected still offer meaningful insights into vocabulary instruction practices in Malaysian ESL classrooms. Findings in this study contribute to the existing literature by providing context-specific evidence of the realities teachers face, which reflects what other teachers encounter in similar teaching contexts.

This study also has several implications. First, it highlights the importance of equipping teachers with pedagogical knowledge and practical tools to support vocabulary development. Second, it calls attention to the role of curriculum planners in ensuring that vocabulary receives adequate focus within instructional guidelines. Third, it emphasises the value of ongoing support systems such as peer mentoring and reflective practice. For future research, it is recommended that studies include a larger and more diverse sample of teachers to explore patterns across different school contexts. Incorporating classroom observations and learner perspectives could also offer a more comprehensive view of how vocabulary is taught and experienced. Additionally, adopting a mixed-methods approach may strengthen the reliability of findings and provide a fuller understanding of the effectiveness of specific vocabulary strategies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mohd Radzi Manap (Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing)

Nor Fazlin Ramli (Conceptualisation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing)

Siti Nur Badriah Mohd Tahir (Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft)

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