

Developing Students' Vocabulary by Using Build-a-Sentence: Students' Perspective

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Abstract: Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental pillar of language proficiency, yet learners in intensive environments often struggle to transition from rote memorization to active production. This qualitative descriptive study explores students' perspectives on the implementation of the "Build-A-Sentence" strategy at MAS Nur Asri Abadan. In this Islamic boarding school, English is mandated for daily communication. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten tenth-grade students and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students perceive the strategy as a superior alternative to traditional memorization, noting that it provides "linguistic formulas" essential for daily survival in a residential setting. While the strategy fosters "cognitive joy" and personal expression, students identified grammatical complexity and tenses as significant hurdles. The study underscores that in a "living laboratory" like a boarding school, sentence-building functions not merely as a classroom exercise but as vital social currency. These insights suggest that vocabulary pedagogy in immersive settings should prioritize social-constructivist approaches and collaborative games to better align with the communal ethos of the Islamic boarding school culture.

Keywords: Build-A-Sentence; Vocabulary Development; Students' Perspective

INTRODUCTION

In the field of second language acquisition, vocabulary is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of communicative competence, often surpassing grammar in its practical significance (Lessard-Clouston & Stevens, 2018; Wilkins, 1972). Besides, for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the primary difficulty is not merely identifying words but integrating them into coherent syntactic frameworks (Nation & Webb, 2011; Schmitt, 2008). Nevertheless, vocabulary development continues to pose a major obstacle, as many learners fail to broaden their lexical knowledge effectively, thereby impeding their literacy abilities and academic achievements (Blachowicz et al., 2013; Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

To overcome this instructional stagnation, the "Build-A-Sentence" strategy has gained recognition as an innovative pedagogical method that prompts learners to construct original, grammatically correct sentences incorporating novel vocabulary (Sahnan & Daulay, 2025; Scott et al., 2012). This technique draws on the Involvement Load Hypothesis, which posits that greater cognitive engagement in tasks such as generative sentence formation increases the likelihood of long-term retention (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Moreover, empirical studies demonstrate that such active participation cultivates intrinsic motivation and a sense of personal investment, enabling learners to

transcend passive memorization (Guthrie et al., 2004; Sahnun & Daulay, 2025).

Although prior research has examined diverse vocabulary interventions, including digital games and mnemonic devices (Korkmaz & Oz, 2021; Lin & Lin, 2019), there remains a notable empirical gap regarding the application of sentence-building approaches within the distinctive sociocultural context of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). In these residential institutions, students navigate a demanding linguistic environment in which English facilitates everyday survival, yet they frequently experience speaking apprehension and syntactic challenges (Al-Zahrani, 2008; Tanveer, 2007). While some researchers have investigated educators' and students' views on this method, highlighting its role in promoting deeper cognitive processing, there are some limitations for students who experience it within a 24-hour immersive setting, such as a boarding school.

This study thus investigates tenth-grade students' perspectives on the Build-A-Sentence strategy at MAS Nur Asri Abadan. By examining the first-hand accounts of these learners, the research seeks to underscore how the shift from word recognition to sentence construction operates in a "living laboratory" where classroom instruction must be promptly transferred to dormitory interactions (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Sarem & Shirzadi, 2013). Gaining insight into these viewpoints is crucial for crafting vocabulary pedagogy that is both theoretically robust and practically adaptable to the rigorous communicative requirements of boarding school life (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gardner, 2010).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' perspectives on implementing the Build-A-Sentence strategy for vocabulary development. This approach was selected as it allows for an authentic representation of participants' experiences in their natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of ten tenth-grade students from MAS Nur Asri Abadan were recruited via cluster sampling. These participants were specifically selected because they reside in a boarding school environment where English is mandated for daily communication, providing a robust context for language acquisition research. The participants represented a diverse range of cultural and demographic backgrounds.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews held on the school premises, with each session lasting 10-20 minutes. Using open-ended questions, the interviews elicited in-depth insights into the perceived effectiveness, strengths, and weaknesses of the Build-A-Sentence strategy. With the participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim-transcribed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Patton (2015), which emphasizes identifying core meanings and patterns in qualitative data. To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the researcher employed member checking, rigorous transcript review, and reflexivity throughout the analytical process.

This qualitative descriptive study offers profound insights into students' perspectives on implementing the Build-A-Sentence strategy. The findings serve as a valuable reference for broader pedagogical applications aimed at enhancing students' lexical mastery, which is fundamental to their overall literacy development.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the interviews with ten participants from MAS Nur Asri Abadan revealed several key themes regarding their experiences with the Build-A-Sentence strategy.

Comparative Experience: Meaningful Engagement vs. Rote Memorization

Most students expressed a strong preference for "building" sentences over the traditional method of memorizing word lists.

"I prefer this because it's not boring. Before, I just memorized that 'house' is 'rumah'. However, in Build-A-Sentence, I have to think, 'The big house is mine.' It stays in my head longer because I know how to use it for talking in the dormitory." (AR)

"Memorizing lists is easy to forget. When I build a sentence, I feel like I am actually practicing speaking. It makes me feel more comfortable than just looking at a dictionary." (AZZ)

Perceived Mastery in Daily Communication

The participants emphasized that the strategy helped bridge the gap between knowing a word and using it in their daily lives at the boarding school.

"At the boarding school, we must speak English. This strategy helps me because when I want to talk to my friends, I already have the 'formula' in my head from the class practice. It makes me less confused when I want to say something." (MRZ)

"It helps me remember. Because I used the word to make a story about my friend, I didn't forget the meaning. It's like the word becomes mine." (SAD)

Cognitive Strengths: The Joy of Expression

When asked about the most interesting part of the process, students highlighted the ability to express personal ideas rather than just following a textbook.

"The best part is expressing my ideas. I can make sentences about my hobbies or my family. It's interesting to see how a small word can become a long thought." (KR)

"I like arranging the words. It's like a puzzle. When the sentence is finished and correct, I feel proud of myself." (LB)

Identified Challenges: Grammar and Structural Complexity

Despite the benefits, the students identified technical hurdles, particularly regarding grammatical rules and word functions.

"The hardest part is grammar. I have the words, but I am confused about the tenses. Should I use 'is' or 'are'? That makes me take a long time to build just one sentence." (YHK)

"Sometimes I have a big idea in my head, but I don't have enough words yet to build a complex sentence. So, I only make simple ones because I am afraid of making mistakes." (RS)

Students' Suggestions for Future Implementation

The students provided constructive feedback to make the strategy more engaging, with a focus on social interaction and visual aids.

"Maybe we can do this in groups or games? Like a competition to see who can build the longest or funniest sentence. That would be more fun." (FA)

The findings of this study underscore a pivotal shift in learner perception within the unique sociocultural landscape of a boarding school. Unlike students in general schools, participants at MAS Nur Asri Abadan face a full-day linguistic obligation. The preference for *Build-A-Sentence* over rote memorization, as voiced by AR and AZZ, highlights that in a residential setting, vocabulary is not merely for tests but for daily survival. This aligns with Nation's (2001) theory on contextual engagement, yet it transcends the classroom; the "sentences" built become immediate social currency in the dormitory. This finding fills a crucial gap in the literature by demonstrating how a strategy usually confined to 2-hour English periods becomes a continuous cognitive tool in an immersive boarding environment.

Furthermore, the "formulas" mentioned by MRZ and SAD reflect the intense need for communicative competence in a community where English is mandated. In the boarding school context, the transition from word recognition to sentence production is accelerated because the students must immediately "test" their sentences with peers after class. This supports Richards and Rodgers (2014) on communicative teaching but adds a new dimension: the boarding school serves as a "living laboratory." The strategy reduces the "speaking anxiety" often found in Islamic boarding schools, where students frequently struggle to bridge the gap between their deep religious knowledge and their ability to articulate it in English.

The "cognitive joy" expressed by KR and LB through their "puzzle-like" sentences also highlights a psychological breakthrough. In a structured and disciplined boarding environment, the creative freedom to craft personal, sometimes humorous sentences about dormitory life serves as a vital motivational spark (Dörnyei, 2001). This suggests that *Build-A-Sentence* empowers students in a restricted residential setting to reclaim their individual identities through language. It moves the strategy from a mere academic exercise to a form of personal expression that is often stifled by traditional, repetitive memorization tasks common in many religious education contexts.

In addition, the challenges of grammar, as stated by YHK, and the suggestions for group games by FA reflect the social constructivist nature of boarding life (Vygotsky, 1978). Because students live together, their vocabulary development is a collective journey. The struggle is not just individual, but shared. Therefore, the findings suggest that for boarding schools, *Build-A-Sentence* should not be a solitary task but a social game that mirrors the collaborative spirit of the *pesantren* culture. Ultimately, this study urges educators to move beyond "classroom-only" strategies and adopt methods like *Build-A-Sentence* that specifically cater to the high-frequency, high-pressure communication demands of an English-mandated boarding environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Build-A-Sentence* strategy transcends its role as a simple instructional technique, acting instead as an essential communicative conduit for learners immersed in the demanding linguistic milieu of an Islamic boarding school. This shift from inert memorization to dynamic sentence formation enables students to embed vocabulary more profoundly in their cognitive frameworks, converting intangible words into practical "social capital" for dormitory interactions. Although grammatical barriers and syntactic intricacies

remain persistent challenges, the learners' capacity to assert their personal narratives via inventive expression indicates that the approach alleviates the pervasive "speaking anxiety" characteristic of religiously oriented immersive environments. By reorienting emphasis from decontextualized word identification to situated production, the method cultivates autonomy and communicative preparedness that rote dictionary methods cannot achieve.

Vocabulary enhancement within a residential setting is intrinsically linked to principles of social constructivism and communal pedagogy. The informants' advocacy for group-based activities and competitive sentence-construction exercises reveals an aspiration to harmonize formal lessons with the collective ethos of boarding school life. Consequently, this research highlights the imperative for instructors to extend beyond traditional classroom confines and adopt methods responsive to the urgent, frequent communicative needs of a round-the-clock English-centric milieu. Prospective educational models must emphasize incorporating interpersonal dynamics and individual significance into lexical exercises, reframing language learning not as an isolated scholarly pursuit but as a pivotal mechanism for empowerment and social integration in the boarding school context.

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