

Utilizing Computer-Assisted Vocabulary Learning Tools in English Language Teaching: Examining In-Service Teachers' Perceptions of the Usability of Digital Flashcards

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ABSTRACT

This study explores five in-service teachers' perceptions with regards to the technical and pedagogical usability of digital flashcards in English language teaching. All the teachers were enrolled in a one-year Masters of Art in English Language Teaching program at Coventry University and had previous teaching experience ranging from elementary to university level. The study adopted a quan→QUAL mixed-method research design, combining elements of surveys and case studies, to examine the factors that affected the teachers' perceptions in addition to how they view three specific websites: Cram, Quizlet, and StudyStack. Participants explored these websites and created sets of flashcards in a computer lab, then completed a survey and participated in a focus group interview. Findings suggest that although the teachers were willing to integrate digital flashcards in their future teaching, it is dependent on several factors, including: learners' age, the quality of graphics in the websites, and the teachers' prior experience as students on their MA program. Nonetheless, the “wow” factor seemed to influence their perceptions of the usability of these websites, which can either be extreme positive or negative initial reactions as a result of the websites' presentational scheme.

KEYWORDS

Affordances, CAVL, Digital Flashcards, English Language Teaching, Usability, Websites

INTRODUCTION

For an extensive period of time during the history of language teaching, the development of grammatical knowledge was believed to be more essential than lexical knowledge, given that many educators thought that the role of vocabulary was simply to provide context for learning grammar (Carter & McCarthy, 2013; Folse, 2004; Klapper, 2006; Laufer & Nation, 2012). However, recently, there has been a consensus among students, teachers, material writers, and researchers that learning vocabulary is a crucial part of mastering a second language (Schmitt, 2008). Furthermore, it is a good indicator and an essential element of success in other areas of language (Maley, 2013).

Vocabulary learning is a cumulative process (Klapper, 2006) and can be acquired incidentally or deliberately. Early research in vocabulary acquisition presumed that the former was more important in expanding learners' vocabulary, where words in the second language (L2) are picked up by students during their exposure to authentic texts and interaction (Klapper, 2006). Conversely, Schmitt (2008) and Nation (2013) specify that research has shown that direct deliberate learning surpasses incidental

learning in terms of the number of words learned and the time taken to learn them. Still, a well-designed L2 vocabulary learning program need to have a balance between these two types (Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008).

L2 learners continually refer to their lack of vocabulary knowledge as an area in which they are deficient in, acknowledging that it is a significant part of their language learning success (Folse, 2004). Teachers need to recognize the vocabulary challenges that their learners might face (Schmitt, 2007), since it is nearly impossible to teach all the words L2 learners will encounter or need to use due to the limited time available in the classroom (Maley, 2013). For L2 learners, a large proportion of their vocabulary learning is acquired through deliberate study (Nation, 2013). Hence, it would be more advantageous for teachers to expend the restricted classroom time they have in teaching their learners strategies that will help them tackle vocabulary independently instead of trying to teach them every word they come across (Schmitt, 2007). One strategy for deliberate vocabulary learning is the use of flashcards, which is advocated by various experts such as Klapper (2006), Nakata (2011), and Nation (2013). Flashcards are usually a set of cards, through which an association between an L2 word form and its meaning is created; usually the L2 word is written on one side of the card and a translation in the student's first language, L2 synonym, or L2 definition is written on the other side (Nation, 2013). Flashcards can be created either manually or digitally using computer-assisted vocabulary learning (CAVL) tools.

CAVL tools can provide a range of vocabulary learning opportunities for students. Nation (2013) asserts that there are several advantageous characteristics that distinguishes CAVL from other ways of learning. For instance, CAVL can provide quick and easy access to a varied range of resources, such as digital flashcard websites, vocabulary lists and exercises, online dictionaries, and video games. CAVL can also be used to monitor and control users' learning conditions, present immediate feedback on success and progress, and adapt to learners' performance by storing it and provide materials that are most suited to the current level of the learner. However, Nation (2013) argues that research regarding CAVL has yet to provide convincing or impressive results, which may be due to the relative newness of it and the need for developing programs that maximally exploit its advantages. This suggests the need to be aware of the affordances of different CAVL tools if teachers want to successfully integrate them in the language classroom.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A number of studies (Chien, 2015; Hung, 2015; McLean, Hogg, & Rush 2013; Nakata, 2011) have focused on using flashcards for learning vocabulary, and researchers are currently shifting their concentration towards the use of digital flashcards, as opposed to paper flashcards. Using digital flashcards can be beneficial, particularly when a learner's performance is tracked and the sequence of the flashcards is controlled to provide more practice in unknown words (Nakata, 2011). Enabling users to create their own flashcards or use sets designed by their teachers or other learners could potentially make learning more effective. In addition, users can access them anywhere and anytime when connected to the Internet, without the need to carry the paper-based ones around (Chien, 2015). The multilingual support to flashcards and enhanced presentation attributable to the option of incorporating multimedia, such as audio and pictures, are also beneficial to learners (Nakata, 2011).

McLean, Hogg, & Rush, (2013) attempted to measure the vocabulary growth of Japanese EFL learners, in their first year at the university level, after one year of weekly digital flashcard website use. Using pre-tests and post-tests, they compared three groups, concluding that the use of Word Engine with the treatment groups contributed to learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge relatively quickly in comparison to the control group. Chien (2015) compared Taiwanese college students' perceptions and attitudes toward three digital flashcard websites and their corresponding apps: Quizlet, StudyStack, and Flashcard Exchange. Findings included that participants had positive attitudes towards the use of these websites to improve their vocabulary, even though they mainly offered form and meaning

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