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Use of Mobile Apps in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Learning English has become an important part of schooling. Vocabulary is a very important part of learning a language. Hence having a good vocabulary is important for efficient communication. But it is hard and stressful to learn a foreign language. Also, learning new words in English is often seen as an unexciting activity and students may not be motivated enough to stick their heads around it. This study analyses available mobile game-based English vocabulary practice systems that involve choosing words based on textbook passages. The students are incentivised with badges and certificates for levelling up through higher difficulty ratios and mastering learning portfolios. The goal is to encourage and increase interest in learning English. The system's learning activities change vocabulary learning from a monotonous process of memorising words to a fun game. This helps learners remember words and become more familiar with words that are used in the curriculum. This paper talks about the approaches to enhancing vocabulary using mobile technology and lists out important applications that can be used to teach and learn vocabulary. The interests, needs, and learning goals of students are also kept in mind while choosing these apps. Even though many students know how to use apps, they may need help learning how to use vocabulary apps effectively and strategically. The focus of the paper is to achieve the aforementioned feat of learning more and achieving student goals in a shorter span with enhanced efficiency taking the aid of technology.

Keywords: Mobile Apps for ESL, Mobile Technology, Vocabulary Enchantment

1. Introduction

The essential use of English is significant in both the international business world and the academic community. Many countries that do not have English as a First Language are keen on incorporating English into their curriculum. English has become a major part of education; therefore, it is imperative to enhance language learning in various ways. Learning vocabulary and having a good vocabulary is necessary for good communication[1]. Nation said that a vocabulary of almost 6,000 to 7,000 words is needed to understand more than 90% of what is said or heard. Laufer (2001)[7] says that vocabulary knowledge is strongly linked to writing and reading skills as well. Apparently, it is linked to the academic performance of students. The main reason that people have trouble writing is that they do not know enough words. This simple reason of not knowing enough words makes writing in the right way impossible. Having a good vocabulary is important for academic success and also for learning in general.

Most people who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) find it hard and stressful to learn a new language[2]. Although most people are learning English, they feel learning English vocabulary is an unenthusiastic activity, which is certainly not true. Such perception negatively affects the learning curve overall and their commitment to learning in the very first place. This eventually drains their confidence in their ability to learn English. To address these issues, teaching methods and strategies can step in constructively. Teachers should find more interesting ways to motivate students to learn English[3]. Learning activities that come from instructional strategies affect how learners choose, get, and make sense of more information. The way they think, and act comes to light based on their learning environment. Digital game-based learning can be used to teach English vocabulary. Wireless technology and mobile devices find widespread usage among the masses and most people already have access to mobile devices or would soon be in possession. In recent times a lot of knowledge has been shared on

mobile-assisted language learning in the public forums. Connecting the dots above, it is evident that mobile learning can be leveraged for learning vocabulary effectively and efficiently.

In the past decade, the advent of mobile technology harnessed many possibilities and a great deal of innovative ideas based on them. A case study done by Chang, Tseng, Liang, and Yan (2013)[3] made a learning system for 125 high school students. They examined how the students used the system of mobile technology and the feedback of the same. Their study showed that most students liked the idea of using mobile devices to learn English and realised that the system helped them learn English more effectively. Hsu (2013)[6] looked into how EFL students in different countries felt about MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) and found that most of them thought mobile technology was a useful and practical way to learn a language[6].

Mobile Learning encapsulates learning in the guise of a game thereby attracting people's interest at times even involuntarily. This induced interest motivates them to learn words for fun incentives eventually helping them learn more with augmented interest. A game-based English vocabulary learning system for eBooks was developed by Smith (2013)[8] and his colleagues. They conducted studies demonstrating how their interactive eBook game design increased interest in learning English. The reading skills of students can be improved with the use of real-time learning tools, which boosts the advantages of learning English. The innovations of today will soon become outdated in future, but it is imperative for teachers and students to utilise the innovations of any given day to stay relevant and continue to build on this newfound knowledge. The technological advancements will undoubtedly surge in the future as they have proliferated today and the learners can adapt the same for their betterment through all the weathers.

Smartphones and tablets are the two popular handheld devices available at the disposal of students. With little effort and with the help of freely available mobile apps, these devices can be turned into a powerhouse for learning ESL. For most smartphone and tablet users, it is effortless to get familiarised with the features of their priced gadget and they quickly learn how to use them to serve their purpose. Product manuals and guides are something of the past era and Apple Inc. broke the shackle by introducing their first iPhone without one as early as 2008. Even first-time users do not find themselves at odds with the product tour shipped with these handheld devices, eventually turning into pro users within a few hours of purchase. This paper attempts to suggest and list resources that can help students learn English by putting their mobile devices to more productive use and explores a range of apps with an in-depth analysis of how they shape the outcome of students seeking to use technology for learning English for both classroom and personal learning goals.

2. Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Leading experts like Nation (2008) and Graves (2009) have emphasised the significance of offering students a better, comprehensive and well-balanced vocabulary acquisition curriculum. The model suggests that a successful vocabulary programme should cover these four key competencies (Figure 1).

3. Teaching Words One at a Time

Teaching words one at a time and for the best results, one should teach each word deeply, long, and well-planned[4]. As there are so many words to learn in English, teachers

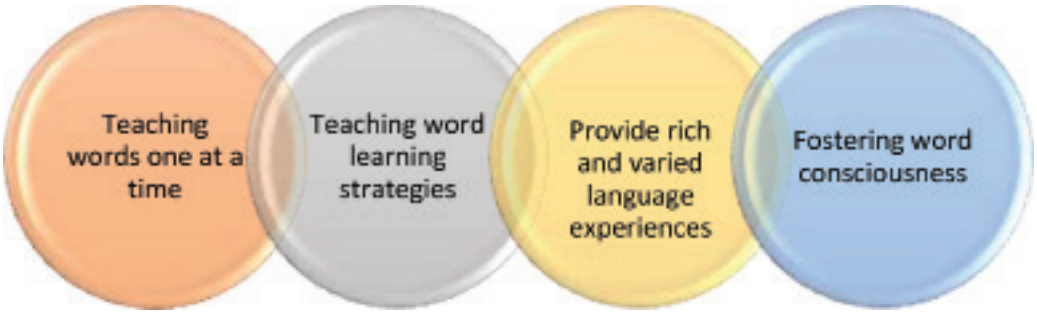


Figure 1. Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction.

must be very strategic about the ways to teach words explicitly in classes.

4. Teaching Strategies for Learning Words

The second part is teaching strategies for learning words. The literature has a lot of information on how important it is to teach people how to learn words. Recognizing the way to use cognate, using the dictionary and also looking for clues in the context are encouraged. It is a good strategy to split words into the parts of speech which can help students to understand what they mean.

5. Rich and Varied Language Experiences

Learners need to be exposed to a wide range of language learning experiences. They must acquire vocabulary not only through one language skill but through all four skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One of the most important additions here is that students must be encouraged to read from a wide range of sources and types of text.

6. Methods to Boost Vocabulary

There are proven and time-tested methodologies that teachers can employ for their students to make them understand words systematically. Some of the methods include encouraging wordplay and original research. Notably, vocabulary is built up over a period of time. This implies that a learner needs to hear a word many times and also in different ways and contexts to know about it[5]. In an ESL classroom, vocabulary must be taught in detail and then practised for a long time in a constructive and progressive fashion. Students need to know how to use strategies for learning words in an ESL classroom. They need to speak, listen, read and write across a wide range of scenarios to earn a holistic grip on the words they want to add to their vocabulary. The benefits one reaps are enormous when they have a huge volume of words at their disposal, particularly if one is aspiring to cater to the ESL realm in his/her career. Even after having discussed learning methodologies at length, the most efficient way of building vocabulary by far has been self-learning and in-bound zeal. For instance, professionals working their way up to get elevated as foreign ambassadors for English-speaking nations naturally command a tremendous vocabulary. The same applies to aspiring translators, tutors, authors, editors and columnists of English dailies. The students should put an effort into building vocabulary to create rich, varied language experiences to best suit their career aspirations.

7. Vocabulary Applications for Tablets and Smartphones

A glance at the app store, albeit occasionally makes one wonder about the advent of new apps and developers mushrooming up by the day. Virtual translators, multi-language voice assistants, whiteboards, interactive tests, flashcards, and books are now showcased in the app stores. These are but a few tools that can assist students in learning new words. It is crucial for ESL students to constantly get familiarised with new resources available to them to aid in their study of a foreign language and the natural accent associated with it. Such apps come as a boon to students and act as personal tutors and a reference library, available round the clock for them to be in consultation. Applications that are highly recommended and can be very helpful for teaching and learning vocabulary are listed in the following sections. These Apps are available for both Android and iOS users to download and use from their respective App stores.

8. Apps for the Dictionary

In the list of Apps for learning vocabulary, first comes the App for the dictionary. Teachers and students of English as a second language are no longer bound to carry around voluminous and heavy dictionaries and other reference material. All those references can be found in a single app. The Dictionary.com app offers 2 million definitions and in addition, helps them find synonyms and antonyms. These apps can replace many reference books; they have examples of sentences and can also be used through audio. This can be very useful for students who need to know not only how to spell and understand the words but also to learn correct pronunciation. There is also another App called the Free Dictionary. This app gives information about words and shows the difference between different words. It has two sections: Dictionary and Idiom. Users can also make their own home pages

with games, a language forum, and also a word of the day, Spelling Bee word games, and so on. But in 2021, the most useful apps for dictionaries were the Advanced English Dictionary and Thesaurus. Even though its name is not very descriptive, it has more than 1.4 million words and a lot of good features that include synonyms and antonyms, hypernyms, hyponyms, and metonyms. This app also works when the user is not connected to the internet, and it has a tool that looks up words when the user copies them from another app. If required that feature can be turned off and it is cost effective.

9. Translation Apps

There are several apps that can perform translation. These apps can help students who don't know English but will help them communicate quickly or look up the words in English. The most widely used among those is Google Translate, which can translate among 17 languages for free. It can also turn speech into text in 30 languages. This app lets users hear translations spoken out loud in 40 different languages and can also write translations of languages that don't use the Latin alphabet. Even though no translation tool is perfect, Google Translate is one of the most accurate apps out there and is constantly improving. There are many translation apps whose primary focus caters to a particular category of target audiences. Teachers and students need to look for the right translation apps to solve their purpose, lest they end up choosing technical translators for literary studies, tourists, etc. At the moment, the Day Translation app is one of the best translation apps for quick and accurate translations. It stands out because it is an app for both machine translation and human translation. The user gets instant translation or they can contact the human translator to get a professional translation that is 100% accurate and makes sense of its context. Students can also have the app talk out loud to learn the word's native pronunciation. This is an important app that can help ESL students improve their vocabulary with an accent closest to that of the native speaker.

10. Launchpad App (English)

The Launchpad app comes next in the line of learning vocabulary Apps. This language-learning app has a wide range of applications and activities. More than 700 images from 20 different categories to choose from, including anatomy, animals, appliances, food and drink, fruits and many other practical items, are included in the programme. 51 flashcards with irregular verbs are also included. Flashcards can be used for instruction, differentiation, or enrichment when learning new words. Other tools include a whiteboard, a quiz maker, and a file that can hold 10 lesson plans. Students can learn new terms with the aid of the flashcard system, and their performance can be assessed using the quiz builder.

11. Clear Speech App

The Clear Speech App released by Cambridge University Press is based on a set of books written by Judy Gilbert. This software is designed to improve students' listening skills and word pronunciation. Students develop their listening and comprehending skills as they learn to distinguish between words, syllables, stress, intonation, and word endings. The capacity to pick up new words through routine listening exercises also develops. For students who want to use computers for learning, the app currently provides 10 levels of difficulty aided with interactive listening activities. Numerous games have also been added to it to keep fatigue at bay.

12. Idioms

Idioms is an app that introduces the top 100 most common idioms to the students along with usage to converse fluently on a wide range of topics including animals, business, clothes, and colours. Students get to learn idioms on topics of their choice through quizzes. There is also an alphabetical list of common idioms available for easy look-up and for improving sentence formation on the go with the inclusion of relevant idioms. This is a fun and interesting app that can help one learn new horizons in English language proficiency and is incidentally very popular among students.

13. TOEFL Prep

TOEFL Prep App is another crucial app for ESL learners. To enrol in a foreign university one must clear the IELTS and TOEFL exams. The TOEFL Prep App, which is accessible to iPhone and iPad users, is designed to aid students in preparing for the EFL exam. It is designed

to aid students in test preparation and contains the most significant TOEFL questions. The software features 50 chapters, each containing lessons, illustrations, and charts. There are 278 audio recordings of spoken language, 135 images and other graphics, and more than 1500 solved questions. Questions regarding speaking, listening, writing, and reading are available, exposing the students to new terms as they progress with learning activities on the app. The students get to increase their vocabulary eventually, without much hard effort. They can use this software as a primary study resource to appear for exams on US English word power. This is yet another crucial app that helps American English learning for students hailing from parts of the world where other variants of English are official or prevalent. The app also enables students to improve their pronunciation by comparing their voices to those of native speakers by reading out words, hearing a native speaker pronounce them and recording their own voice for comparison. Students can create their own audio word bank to use as a reference and take a quiz after learning the words to gauge their progress. The others are completely free, but this app involves a minimal fee.

14. Suggestions on using the App

Teachers are urged to use these resources themselves, familiarize and share them with students to demonstrate effective usage and assist students in determining which applications could be the most suitable for their interests and needs. When selecting these Apps, consideration should be given to individual interests, requirements, and learning objectives. Even though many students are familiar with using mobile apps, they might yet need assistance understanding how to utilise vocabulary apps strategically and efficiently to learn more and accomplish their academic objectives. The following decision workflow can be used by teachers to assess where their students currently stand and what they need to introduce English learning apps of relevance for them (Figure 2) (modified from Chamot and O'Malley, 1994).



Figure 2. Decision Workflow.

15. Conclusion

Lastly, language learning is different in terms of the skills sought, interests and vocabulary. A teacher should position himself/herself to address these needs and help their students to set clear goals for themselves based on these needs. For instance, students might be asked to set goals as a measure of the number of words they want to learn per day or week and keep track of their progress in ways which best suit them with the aid of these apps. Teachers can also encourage the students to pick up an app of their choice and discuss their insights in the classroom. Doing so, will benefit both teachers and students to strike up with more means and room for self-directed learning projects in a collaborative learning environment.

Students face many challenges and learning English as a second language is one of them. More so, it demands learning new words and sentence usage regularly. This may be perceived as a difficult task by students. Such learning apps improve vocabulary, sentence usage, spelling, grammar and pronunciation effortlessly. They are free to make their own timetables, go at their own pace, and pay attention to what they need.

This paper throws light on only a fraction of the resources available out there on the dynamic world of technology resources dedicated to ESL teaching and learning, albeit it can be a good starting point for efficient language teaching and learning.

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