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The Role of Digital Gamification in Enhancing Lexical Competence Among Young EFL Learners

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Abstract: This article examines the role of digital gamification in developing lexical competence among fifth- and sixth-grade EFL learners. Using a literature-based analytical approach, the study explores the pedagogical potential of Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Wordwall in supporting vocabulary acquisition, retention, and learner motivation. The analysis highlights the benefits of interactive tasks, repeated practice, and immediate feedback. The findings suggest that gamified digital tools can support lexical development when integrated with age-appropriate activities, teacher guidance, and meaningful language practice. Further empirical research is recommended to evaluate their effectiveness in developing learners' lexical competence.

Keywords: Digital gamification, lexical competence, vocabulary acquisition, young EFL learners, English language teaching, digital learning tools, vocabulary retention, learner motivation.

Introduction: In recent years, the integration of digital technologies into foreign language education has created new opportunities for improving language teaching and learning. However, vocabulary instruction in many EFL classrooms still relies heavily on memorization and repetitive exercises, which may not always provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful language practice. This challenge is particularly relevant to young learners, as developing lexical competence requires not only learning new words but also understanding their meanings, retaining them, and using them appropriately in different communicative contexts. Therefore, identifying engaging and effective approaches to vocabulary instruction remains an important concern in contemporary English language teaching.

One promising approach is digital gamification, which involves incorporating game-design elements such as points, badges, challenges, leaderboards, and immediate feedback into educational activities. Deterding et al. [1] describe gamification as the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts. In language education, these elements can make vocabulary practice more interactive, encourage learner participation, and provide immediate feedback. Previous research by Zhang and Hasim [2] indicates that gamified EFL/ESL instruction can positively influence learning performance, motivation, and learner engagement. Similarly, Chan and Lo [3], in their review of empirical studies, report that gamification can support English language learning by promoting learner engagement and positive learning experiences.

Digital platforms such as Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Wordwall offer opportunities to practise vocabulary through interactive quizzes, matching exercises, and language challenges. Such activities may help fifth- and sixth-grade learners strengthen vocabulary retention, recognize lexical patterns, and develop greater confidence in using newly learned words. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these tools depends on their pedagogical application. Gamified activities should be carefully designed to support meaningful learning rather than focus exclusively on competition and rewards.

Although digital gamification has received increasing attention in language education, its role in developing different aspects of lexical competence among young EFL learners deserves further consideration. Vocabulary learning should extend beyond memorizing individual words to include understanding, retention, and appropriate usage.

An important methodological issue is how different gamified digital tools can support specific components of lexical competence rather than vocabulary memorisation alone. This article therefore considers the pedagogical functions of Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Wordwall in relation to vocabulary form, meaning, and use, with particular attention to the learning needs of fifth- and sixth-grade EFL learners.

Therefore, this article aims to examine the role of digital gamification in enhancing lexical competence among young EFL learners, particularly fifth- and sixth-grade students in general secondary schools. It focuses on the contribution of digital learning tools to vocabulary acquisition, retention, motivation, and active language use, while also considering the pedagogical opportunities and limitations of gamified instruction.

METHODS

The present study employs a qualitative analytical approach to examine the role of digital gamification in enhancing lexical competence among young EFL learners. The research is based on the analysis of relevant scholarly literature, previous empirical studies, and theoretical perspectives concerning vocabulary acquisition, gamification, and technology-assisted language learning.

The main focus is on fifth- and sixth-grade students in general secondary schools, whose vocabulary development requires regular practice, meaningful interaction, and age-appropriate learning activities. Particular attention is given to three widely used digital platforms: Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Wordwall. These tools are examined in terms of their instructional features, opportunities for vocabulary practice, feedback mechanisms, and potential contribution to learner motivation and vocabulary retention.

The comparative analysis is structured around four pedagogical criteria: vocabulary practice opportunities, feedback mechanisms, learner engagement, and support for meaningful vocabulary use. These criteria provide a basis for examining the instructional potential and limitations of each digital platform in vocabulary teaching.

The study applies descriptive and comparative methods to identify the educational opportunities and limitations of digital gamification. Relevant academic sources are examined and compared to determine how different game-based elements, including points, challenges, rewards, and interactive exercises, may support lexical development. The analysis also considers the importance of teacher guidance, appropriate task selection, and the integration of digital activities into regular classroom instruction. Rather than measuring learning outcomes through a classroom experiment, this study interprets findings from existing research to provide a theoretical and pedagogical understanding of digital gamification in vocabulary teaching. This approach makes it possible to formulate practical recommendations for incorporating gamified digital tools into English language lessons for young learners.

The proposed recommendations are intended to inform the design of vocabulary activities for fifth- and sixth-grade EFL learners.

RESULTS

The analysis of relevant literature and previous research indicates that digital gamification can contribute to the development of lexical competence among young EFL learners in several important ways. Its potential benefits are particularly evident in vocabulary acquisition, retention, learner motivation, and active participation. First, gamified activities provide learners with repeated exposure to new vocabulary through quizzes, matching exercises, and interactive challenges. Platforms such as Quizlet and Wordwall allow students to practise unfamiliar words in different formats, helping them establish connections between lexical items, meanings, and contexts. Repeated practice also creates opportunities to strengthen vocabulary retention.

From a pedagogical perspective, vocabulary activities should address three interconnected aspects of lexical knowledge: form, meaning, and use. Gamified tasks can support the recognition of word forms and meanings, while contextualised exercises and communicative activities can provide opportunities to practise vocabulary use. Therefore, vocabulary learning should

be evaluated not only through word recognition but also through learners' ability to use lexical items appropriately in context.

Second, immediate feedback represents another important feature of digital gamification. Through platforms such as Kahoot!, learners can identify incorrect answers, recognize gaps in their vocabulary knowledge, and receive instant information about their performance. This process may support independent learning and help teachers identify areas requiring additional attention. Third, game-based elements, including points, badges, challenges, and leaderboards, can increase learners' interest and participation in vocabulary activities. Such features create clear learning goals and encourage students to become more actively involved in classroom tasks. However, their effectiveness depends on learners' individual needs and the appropriate balance between competition and cooperation.

Finally, the analysis suggests that digital gamification is most beneficial when combined with teacher-guided activities and meaningful language practice. Although interactive exercises can help learners recognize and remember vocabulary, additional speaking and writing tasks are necessary to encourage the appropriate use of newly acquired words in communication.

The three digital platforms can serve different pedagogical purposes in vocabulary instruction. Quizlet may be used for individual vocabulary practice, including flashcards and retrieval activities. Kahoot! can support classroom-based formative assessment through interactive quizzes and immediate feedback. Wordwall offers opportunities to design varied vocabulary exercises, including matching, categorisation, and word-based activities. These tools should therefore be selected according to specific learning objectives rather than used interchangeably.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital gamification offers valuable opportunities for supporting lexical development among young EFL learners. Its contribution is particularly significant when digital tools are selected according to instructional objectives and integrated into a systematic vocabulary teaching process.

Based on the analysis, a three-stage approach to gamified vocabulary instruction is recommended: vocabulary introduction, gamified practice, and communicative application. In the first stage, learners are introduced to new lexical items and their meanings. In the second stage, digital tools are used to reinforce vocabulary through interactive activities. In the final stage, students apply the target vocabulary in short speaking or writing tasks to develop meaningful language use.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that digital gamification can support vocabulary learning by increasing learner engagement, encouraging repeated practice, and providing immediate feedback. These results are consistent with Zhang and Hasim [2], who reported positive effects of gamification on language learning performance and motivation. Similarly, Chan and Lo [3] emphasised the potential of gamification to promote learner engagement and create more interactive EFL/ESL learning environments.

However, successful vocabulary development requires more than recognizing words in digital exercises. Learners should also be encouraged to use newly acquired vocabulary in speaking and writing activities. Furthermore, teachers should select age-appropriate tasks and maintain a balance between competition and meaningful learning. Therefore, digital gamification is most effective when integrated purposefully into regular classroom instruction.

The proposed approach emphasises that gamified vocabulary activities should be linked to communicative language use. While digital quizzes can support vocabulary recognition and retention, speaking and writing activities provide opportunities to apply newly learned words in meaningful contexts. This distinction is important because successful performance in a vocabulary game does not necessarily demonstrate the ability to use vocabulary independently in communication.

This study is based on theoretical analysis and existing research rather than original classroom experimentation. Consequently, the pedagogical benefits discussed cannot be interpreted as direct evidence of improved lexical competence among the target learners. Future studies should examine the proposed approach through classroom-based interventions and assessments of vocabulary

knowledge, retention, and contextual use.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of digital gamification in enhancing lexical competence among young EFL learners. The analysis indicates that platforms such as Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Wordwall can support vocabulary acquisition, retention, and learner motivation through interactive and engaging activities.

Nevertheless, digital tools alone cannot ensure comprehensive lexical development. Their effectiveness depends on appropriate task design, teacher guidance, and opportunities for meaningful language use. Therefore, digital gamification should be integrated with traditional teaching methods and communicative activities.

The methodological contribution of this article is the proposed integration of digital vocabulary practice with communicative activities through a structured instructional sequence. This approach provides a practical basis for selecting and organising gamified learning tasks according to the lexical development needs of fifth- and sixth-grade EFL learners. Further empirical research is needed to examine its long-term impact on vocabulary retention and practical language use among fifth- and sixth-grade learners.

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