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Perceptions of EFL Learners about Using an Online Tool for Vocabulary Learning in EFL Classrooms: A Pilot Project in Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of Quizlet, an online website, on vocabulary development of Turkish EFL learners enrolled in a preparatory program at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants were 43 preparatory students at the pre-intermediate and intermediate levels of proficiency. The study lasted for a whole teaching module consisting of 7 weeks. Within this process, for three weeks students studied and practiced the target words without using the online tool Quizlet. For the last four weeks students were weekly assigned with exercises from the online tool covering the units that they had learnt in the previous weeks. As for the data collection process, vocabulary quizzes were administered to the participants before and after the application of the treatment and the results were compared. Classroom observations, interviews and student records were also used so as to identify students' perceptions of the online tool. The findings of the study revealed that majority of the students considered the online tool to be effective particularly at the initial stages of vocabulary learning considering L2 definitions, synonyms and pronunciation of the target words through repetition.

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1. Literature Review

1.1. The Role of Vocabulary Instruction in Language Learning and Teaching

Vocabulary learning is the heart of second and/or foreign language acquisition as it enables learners to achieve all forms of oral and written communication. It begins in a learning environment which is rich in written and oral language. The environment should provide learners with direct teaching as well as incidental learning opportunities. Therefore, it is teachers' responsibility to assist their students to learn vocabulary and equip them with some learning strategies, too.

In the last few decades century, vocabulary teaching perspective has changed to some extent. Currently, it is considered as a separate field. By Ketabi & Shahraki (2011), two contentious approaches were put forward. The first approach is explicit learning that involves presenting new words, which have previously been decided, and teaching them to students through direct instruction. The second one is based on implicit learning focusing on L2 vocabulary through reading, speaking, listening and writing. In addition, Ma and Kelly (2006) echoed the same categorization, by dividing vocabulary learning in two paradigms. They defined implicit learning as natural and effortless learning whereas regarding explicit learning as something requiring more mental effort.

Drawing on the previous vocabulary approaches, this study highlights vocabulary learning and development though an online tool. Before getting into the details of the study, the recent theories of L2/FL vocabulary learning as well as research on vocabulary learning strategies are summarized briefly.

1.1.1. The Explicit Learning Theory

The explicit learning paradigm named as "mixed approach" by Coady (1993) embodies two approaches including explicit learning and strategy instruction (p.17). In this sense, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has a significant role in vocabulary learning as it includes activities embracing metacognitive issues such as making inferences from a context, using imagery and semantic techniques, etc. As the second approach, strategy building emphasizes that for better vocabulary learning, particular learning strategies should be taught to learners (Cohen, 1998; Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1995; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford & Scarcella, 1994). Atkinson and Raugh (1975) underline that strategy instruction is beneficial mostly for lower level learners since they are assumed to make use of mnemonics and imagery strategies which lead to link the form and the meaning in memory. Explicit learning paradigm does not totally reject the proponents of implicit learning; it rather considers them as a complementary part of vocabulary learning.

1.1.2. Implicit Learning Theory

It is claimed that implicit learning paradigm differs from explicit one by the absence of consciously accessible knowledge (Hulstijn, 2003). Here, the knowledge is gained without awareness of the learner; in other words, no intentional effort to grasp vocabulary is required. When compared, working memory and attention are less active during implicit learning. Also, it is not age-dependent as explicit learning and the variability in gaining knowledge is low from person to person. The process involves receptive skills such as reading and listening, and requires repeated exposures to words in different contexts.

1.1.3. Constructivist Learning Theory

According to this theory, learners must construct their own understanding of what they are being taught. In order to promote student learning, it is necessary for teachers to create learning environments that directly expose them to the materials being studied. Learners are believed to derive meaning from them only by self-experience. This gives rise to the view that constructivist learning must take place within a suitable constructivist learning environment (CLE). Wilson (1996) defines the CLE as a place where "meaningful and authentic activities help the learner construct understandings and develop problem solving skills" (p.3). He classifies these environments into three types: computer micro worlds, classroom-based learning environments and lastly, open virtual learning environments (p. 4.). Firstly, a micro world is basically a conceptual model of partial aspects of the real world. It is a kind of simplified computer-based environment in which learners explore the rules or relationships of the modelled concept. In brief, it is a kind of cognitive tool that can create engaging environments for students based on Constructivist Principles such as