PERCEPTION AND PRACTICE OF TAIWANESE EFL LEARNERS' MAKING VOCABULARY FLASHCARDS ON *QUIZLET*

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ABSTRACT

The new generation is digital natives and they enjoy using the latest technology such as online resources, mobile phones, and applications. Linking technology and English learning can be an alternative to motivate the new generation to learn English. The participants in this study included 76 freshmen in a university in Taiwan. The major data in this study included flashcards, learning records and self-reflection on making vocabulary flashcards. This study examined 76 freshmen's perceptions and practices of making vocabulary flashcards on *Quizlet*. Three major findings were determined. First, participants' word selection was based on not knowing the meanings of the words, rather than by their content or majors. Second, *Space Race* was regarded as the most helpful activity in terms of vocabulary learning. Third, "finding the appropriate definitions for words" was the biggest challenge when making *Quizelt* flashcards. In order to make more effective vocabulary and content words learning through online websites such as *Quizlet*, three suggestions are made: integration of different elements of word knowledge with online word activity designs; direct instruction on specific terms; and learners' awareness of word selection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Freshmen English is one of the requirement courses in universities in Taiwan. College students in Freshmen English classes major in different subjects, such as education, educational psychology, science, physical education, etc. Through the required textbooks, learners not only learn English words, sentence structures, and reading strategies, but also content knowledge. These freshmen read English textbooks and encounter content words in their disciplines. Vocabulary development is strongly related to academic achievement, so systematic and comprehensive vocabulary instruction is necessary for freshmen.

The new generation is digital natives and they enjoy using the latest technology such as online resources, mobile phones, and applications. Linking technology and English learning can be an alternative to motivate the new generation to learn English. Scholars have investigated the integration of computer and technology into vocabulary instruction and its effectiveness on learners' vocabulary learning (Al-Harf, 2007; Kaur & Hegelheimer, 2005; Yip & Kwan, 2006). Basoglu and Akdemir's (2010) study concludes that using vocabulary learning programs on mobile phones is more effective to improve students' vocabulary learning than using flashcards on paper. These sixty college students in Turkey responded that learning English vocabulary on mobile phones was effective and entertaining. The 78 college students in China in Zhang, Song, and Burston's (2011) study had easy access to mobile phones, so they had repeated exposures to and frequent practice of the vocabulary items in a spaced manner on a daily basis. Therefore, the short-term spaced vocabulary learning via mobile phones became more effective than massed vocabulary learning through the paper medium. Moreover, the personalized mobile English vocabulary learning system can enhance fifteen Taiwanese college juniors' English vocabulary abilities and promote their learning interests. More significantly, the personalized mobile English vocabulary learning system provides a ubiquitous learning environment for English learning without constraints of time or place by mobile devices (Chen & Chung, 2008).

Flashcards are sets of cards that bear information. Language teachers often use flashcards when introducing new vocabulary words. Flashcards usually have words on one side and pictures or definitions on the other side. This study aims to integrate online flashcards into vocabulary learning, particularly as regards English content words. The participants in this study included 76 freshmen in a university in Taiwan. The major data in this study included flashcards, learning records and self-reflection on making vocabulary flashcards. This study focuses on how freshmen can learn content words in their specific disciplines and majors through making vocabulary flashcards on website *Quizlet* and review content words through their mobile phones.

2. METHOD

This qualitative case study aims to discuss freshmen's perceptions and practices of making vocabulary flashcards on *Quizlet*. This study aims to discuss the following issues. First, how did college freshmen choose content words? Second, how did the exercises provided by *Quizlet* help them review words? Third, what problems did freshmen encounter when making vocabulary flashcards on *Quizlet*?

2.1 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted for one semester from September to December 2012. The participants included one instructor and two freshmen English classes of 76 students in a university in Taiwan. The class met two hours per week in 2012 fall semester. The majority of the students were Education majors, followed by Chinese majors. Only one student was from the Department of Applied Science.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The major data in this study included flashcards, learning records and self-reflection on making vocabulary flashcards. In the first class, the instructor explained the steps of making vocabulary flashcards and grading rubric as. Freshmen chose one topic covered in the textbook and made words related to that topic. They practiced three learning activities provided on *Quizlet* (Speller "listen and spell," Learn "read the definition and spell out the words," and Test) and two games (Scatter "match words with definitions" and Space Race "speedy spelling"). The instructor created a community on the *Quizlet* and all the participants could read the flashcards made by other students. Participants were asked to visit flashcards created by other students on the same topic and one different topic. Students could review words either on *Quizlet* or through their mobile phones.

Qualitative data were categorized into units of information. Once the data were coded, tables were constructed to summarize the data and allow it to be checked for patterns and themes based on the research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data were analyzed and discussed in terms of word selection, activities on Quizlet, and challenges and problems on making *Quizlet* flashcards, and learning vocabulary via mobile phones and websites.

3.1 Word Selection

In terms of word selection, the top reason why students chose these words was "I did not know the meanings of these words, (27)" followed by "These words were useful (20)," and "These words were important and marked in red in the textbook (9)." Other reasons why students chose these words included "These words looked fun to me (6)," "These words were difficult (5)," "I randomly chose these words (3)."

Learners should be taught how to choose words for making flashcards. They do not have to memorize all words that they do not know from reading an article. Freshmen in specific majors can focus on Tier 2 words. Tier 2 words are those high-utility terms that often change meaning in different contexts, e.g. globe, hemisphere, legend, or region. So they can be familiar with specialized vocabulary in their field.

3.2 Activities on the *Quizlet*

While 37 students found *Space Race* helped them the most in terms of vocabulary learning, 21 students chose *Speller*. Students found that they could not only memorize vocabulary words but also practice typing skills through *Space Race*. Moreover, students liked *Speller*, because they could improve their listening and spelling skills. Twelve students particularly liked *Test*, because they felt that *Test* helped them practice vocabulary through different types of exercises. Only four students liked Scatter and two students felt that they liked all the activities on the *Quizlet* website.

While 37 students found *Space Race* helped them the most in terms of vocabulary learning, on the other hand, 36 students found *Space Race* helped them the least in terms of vocabulary learning. These 36 students complained that they only practiced typing in *Space Race* and the game seemed to have no ending. They disliked Scatter because matching a word and its definition was boring. Moreover, students disliked *Test* because they did not like to be tested as in the traditional paper and pencil test.

Teaching or learning words in isolation or only word meanings is insufficient in building learners' word knowledge, and research demonstrates that building knowledge requires more than accumulating facts about specific elements such as word definitions (Baumann & Kammeenui, 1991; Benjamin & Crow, 2010; Nagy & Scott, 2000; Stahl, 2005). Therefore, teaching vocabulary should go beyond word meanings, and include linguistic, social, and cultural factors of academic language. Teachers should provide definitions, translations, parts of speeches, sentences, word families, synonyms, same word but different meanings, or expression when teaching a word or academic language.

3.3 Challenges and Problems of Making *Quizlet* Flashcards

With regard to the challenges and problems of making *Quizlet* flashcards and playing games, 36 students responded "No problem." One student replied, "It was as easy as eating rice in Chinese (this means it was as easy as pie in English)." The top challenge that students faced while making *Quizlet* flashcards and playing games was "I had difficulties in finding the appropriate definitions for words," followed by "I was too slow at typing words," and "I did not know how to play the games because *Quizlet* was designed in English."

Many words have different meanings (e.g., sage: a wise person; a herb) and serve different functions in different sentences, texts, and even conversations (e.g., "give" in "give a hug," or "give a presentation") (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Stahl, 2005). When creating word sets on *Quizlet*, participants first typed in words and words' related definitions appeared on the screen. They could then choose one definition from among these definitions. Since many words have different meanings, participants found it difficult to choose the appropriate definitions for the words as these words were used in the reading passage.

3.4 Learning Vocabulary via Mobile Phones and Websites

All 76 college freshmen visited the *Quizlet* website only three times during this study and 15 of them visited *Quizlet* website bi-weekly for reviewing words and playing word games. Only eight students used mobile phones to review vocabulary words and did the activities provided by *Quizlet* because they thought *Quizlet* was convenient and fun. The major reason why 57 students did not review vocabulary words through *Quizlet* on their mobile phones was because their mobile phones did not provide Internet access. Seven students did not download this *Quizlet* application. Four other reasons why students did not review vocabulary words through *Quizlet* on their mobile phones included "I liked to write down new words on my notebook," "I was too lazy," "The Internet service was too slow," and "I did not think I can improve my vocabulary by playing games on *Quizlet*."

Compared with traditional book-based vocabulary learning, vocabulary learning through mobile phones is more effective (Nation, 2001), because it allows learners to be exposed to vocabulary items and motivates them to review vocabulary (Basoglu & Akdemir, 2010; Chen & Chung, 2008). Such effectiveness may result from the affordances of the technology such as "immediacy in receiving the learning content, flexibility and portability of learning in time and place and very low cost" (Song, 2008, p. 95). However, without Internet access and the relevant application on mobile phones prevented freshmen in this study from learning and reviewing vocabulary via *Quizlet*.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined 76 freshmen's perceptions and practices of making vocabulary flashcards on *Quizlet*. Three major findings were determined. First, participants' word selection was based on not knowing the meanings of the words, rather than by their content or majors. Second, *Space Race* was regarded as the most helpful activity in terms of vocabulary learning. Third, "finding the appropriate definitions for words" was the biggest challenge when making *Quizelt* flashcards. In order to make more effective vocabulary and content words learning through online websites such as *Quizlet*, three suggestions are made: integration of different elements of word knowledge with online word activity designs; direct instruction on specific terms; and learners' awareness of word selection.

This case study involved only 76 EFL learners and one English teacher. The small number of participants limits the findings, and means that they are not generalizable to larger English learner populations. Based on the learners' learning records, flashcards, and learners' answers on self-reflection, however, the instructional procedure and suggestions for integration of online tool on vocabulary flashcard learning and teaching do provide practical suggestions for EFL classroom practice.

This study focused on making *Quizlet* flashcards as tools to review and practice vocabulary learning. Different websites offer online tools for learners and teachers to make flashcards, such as *Ediscio*, *Study Stack*, *iKnow*, *Study Blue*, ProProfs, and *Word Dynamo*. Different online tools have different functions and features. A further study can focus on comparisons and contrasts of two vocabulary apps on digital natives' vocabulary learning. Such study can discuss the following issues: first, what features can these online tools or mobile phone applications provide in terms of vocabulary learning? Second, what are the strengths and weaknesses of online tools or mobile phone applications in terms of vocabulary learning and instruction? Third, how do these online tools or mobile phone applications improve digital natives' vocabulary learning?

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