

Quizlet: what the students think – a qualitative data analysis

Bruce Lander¹

Abstract. The immediate area of interest in this study is the primary building block of all foreign languages: vocabulary acquisition. Due to recent updates and innovations in educational software, foreign language educators now have a huge supply of ever improving tools to help enhance, transform and completely modify learning. Despite this surge in interest of recent times, there is very little physical evidence that indicates an overall sign of approval from learners. This empirical study used the now well-known digital flashcard tool Quizlet to help a large group of lower intermediate students to improve their vocabulary and ultimately raise their English comprehension levels at a medium sized private university in Japan. They were encouraged to use the said tool throughout the duration of the year-long course and were asked for their feedback about it in the final class. This study helps to reinvigorate the notion that technology can and does help the modern day language learner and can be approved in a positive manner by the majority stakeholder; the student.

Keywords: Quizlet, digital flashcards, blended learning, qualitative data analysis.

1. Introduction

This paper will provide empirical evidence of what students think about using Quizlet. This tool was first released in 2007 and provided a contemporary alternative to traditional, paper flashcards. Quizlet has since undergone considerable changes and now provides near perfect text-to-speech pronunciation of words entered, has an in-built dictionary, and allows users to add visual aids in the form of all jpeg or gif files publicly available on flickr ([flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com)). These functions provide users with a tool far superior to their analogue paper flashcard counterparts. There are

1. Matsuyama University, Matsuyama, Japan; bruce.w.lander@gmail.com

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now several competitors. However, the widespread use of Quizlet with its clever, interactive interface remains in language learning.

Many emerging educational software programmes are now providing links to Quizlet and its user-friendly interface thanks to its increasing popularity the past two years in Japan and abroad. Ashcroft and Imrie (2014) gave a practical account of Quizlet and its full functionality at that time. They focused their account of Quizlet on the Puentedura's (2013) Substitution Augmentation Modification Redefinition (SAMR) model. Although their account provided a highly practical outlook on the various functions available, it did not provide any factual data to disclose its approval with students. Barr (2016) classified users of Quizlet into three types, non-users who only use in class, visual and kinesthetic users. However, no evidence was given on student opinion on the tool.

This begs the following questions: (1) what do students think of Quizlet and its digital flashcard format?; (2) do they prefer it to more traditional methods of learning vocabulary?; and perhaps more importantly, (3) is it effective? This study will introduce two sets of qualitative data obtained over a two-year time span in a test-based English language class and aims to answer these three questions.

2. Method

Quizlet was introduced to two sets of lower intermediate students in an introductory Test Of English for International Communication (TOEIC) course at a university in Japan. The first set comprised of 450 students varying in age and gender from ages 19-21 years old. This group was instructed from April 2013 to January 2014 over the course of two 15-week semesters. The second set comprised of a smaller group of 380 students from April 2014 to January 2015, bringing the total sample size of this study to 830 subjects. No student within this group had any prior experience with Quizlet or any other digital flashcard tool to date.

Although Quizlet was not the entire focus of this course, it played a large part in the internal and external running of the class. Each student within both groups was required to create their own word list in class and to review words out of class. All classes were conducted in computer classrooms with one computer per student. Students were encouraged and expected to review words autonomously at home either by computer or through the freely available smartphone application.

All lists were accessible by members of each class, creating a profoundly collaborative nature of learning.

In the final class of the second term, students were required to answer two simple questions. The first question involved students giving their opinion in a 6-point Likert scale format, (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=agree, 6=strongly agree) on the following construct: “I think smartphone apps can be effective for learning English” (Construct 1).

Students were also asked to give their opinion on Quizlet through the following question: “Do you think Quizlet is a useful learning tool? If so why?” (Question 1).

Both the construct and the question² were conducted online using *surveymonkey*. Questions were written in Japanese and English. Data was analysed with a text-mining tool called ‘*Wordminer*’, version 1.5 by Fujitsu.

3. Discussion and results

Table 1. Qualitative data obtained

	Phase 1 (n=432)	Phase 2 (n=371)
Total Japanese characters	8,990	11,325
Average length of answer	20.8	30.5
Retrieved	676	1,029
Repeated	50	86
No. of clusters	7	9

Table 1 shows the volume of data obtained from both data collection phases. Altogether, 803 students responded. Of this total there were 788 respondents who answered in Japanese, while 15 answered in English. All English answers were translated into Japanese. This gave an average length of almost 21 characters per answer in Phase 1 and about 30 for Phase 2. Designed specifically for Japanese, *Wordminer* analyses repeatedly used phrases or text within a qualitative dataset. All redundant phrases are omitted by this tool, giving researchers the choice to choose between the number of repetitions in each dataset. This number was set at five or more for this study. Construct 1 and Question 1 above were compared and collated.

2. The author carried out a similar study to this one in 2014 (Lander, 2015). However, that study analysed a different, and smaller set of data.

Figure 1. Distribution graphs for phase 1 (Lander, 2015)³

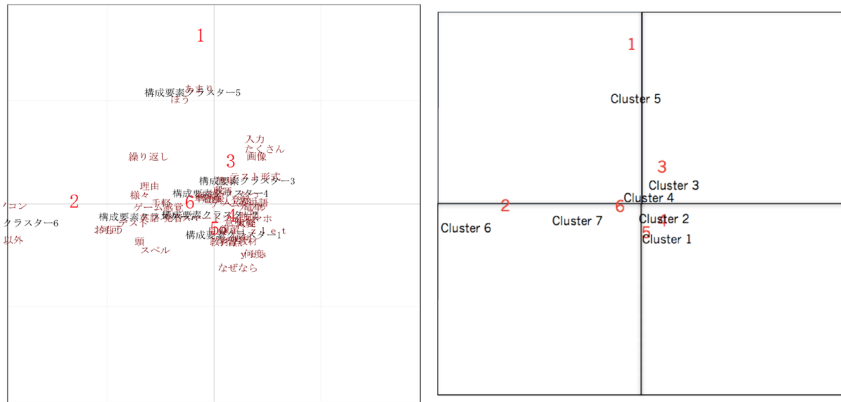
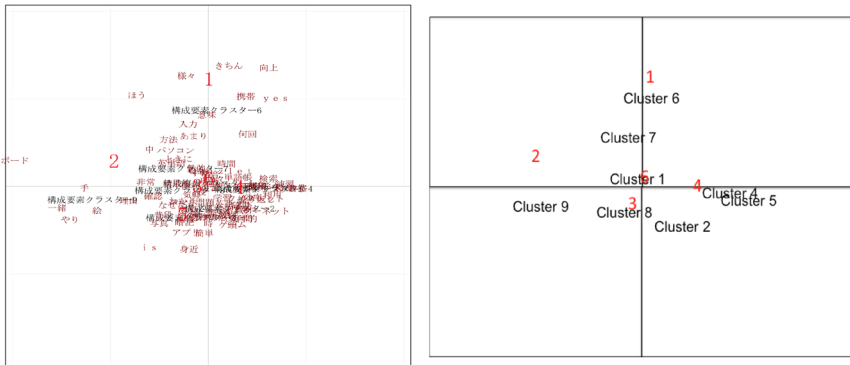


Figure 1 shows all 50 of the phrases that were repeated five times or more on the left and then in a more comprehensible manner on the right. Figure 2 shows all of the 86 repeated phrases for Phase 2. The bold red numbers indicate the Likert-scale choice subjects chose for Construct 1. The cluster number demonstrates the typical pattern of text choice to describe Question 1.

Figure 2. Distribution graphs for Phase 2



These distribution graphs indicate that the majority of subjects in this study gave positive comments. This point is demonstrated by the relative position of clusters in the central zone, which is true of both figures, but accentuated in Figure 2. Three

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student answers to Question 1 are highlighted below. All comments were translated into English from their original for this paper.

“I think Quizlet is a very useful learning tool. With Quizlet we can upload our own word list, review words and take tests as many times as we want. It also provides us with the correct pronunciation of words which is very helpful when having trouble reading” (Student 1).

“I think it is useful, it provides many more ways to learn words than normal. Quizlet helps us to keep focused and not lose interest” (Student 2).

“No, I don’t. I think using a regular dictionary for learning new words is more efficient” (Student 3).

Students 1 and 2 give a clear indication that Quizlet provided a novel and enjoyable way to learn vocabulary. Critical comments although in the minority, were evident as is revealed by the comment made by student 3. By analysing qualitative, empirical data in this way, repeated words can be highlighted and easily identified. Table 2 shows a selection of words and phrases that were repeated five times or more. It is again possible to draw further conclusions through closer observation of the words obtained in this table.

Table 2. Repeated words and phrases obtained

Words, phrases	No. of repetitions
Our own pace	12
Correct spelling	18
Pronunciation	13
Countless times	15
Simple and easy to use	11
Various ways	8
Test function	9
Effective	8
Simple and convenient	7
Not really	5

4. Conclusions

By using highlighted phrases and word items selected by a text-mining tool like *Wordminer*, it is much easier to see overall opinion of a blended learning tool such as Quizlet. Students in this study have shown a resounding approval of

digital flashcards, but clearly some students prefer more traditional methods of learning vocabulary. Lander (2015) conducted a more detailed study to this one, and discovered that test scores in students who extensively used Quizlet can be boosted by 6% compared to those who did not. New additions to Quizlet and further improvements from competitors are inevitable. It is our duty as educational researchers to make use of such tools, to enhance and redefine the way our students learn vocabulary with technology such as this.

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