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Enhancing ESL Vocabulary Development Through the Use of Mobile Technology

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Abstract

Applications, or apps, that are available for both smart phones and tablets can be an effective tool for promoting vocabulary development among adult learners in English as a second language programs. An app is a software program for a mobile phone or computer operating system. Examples of such apps are provided along with practical recommendations for their use by teachers and students.

Introduction

Adult learners in English as a second language (ESL) programs across the United States range in age from 19 to well into their retirement years. They have varied interests, abilities, goals and aspirations. They come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and possess a wide range of educational, work, and life experiences (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2002). Although they are learning to speak, listen, read, and write English, these adult students bring a wealth of background knowledge and experience to the ESL classroom.

In most cases, adult students attend ESL classes with the aim of improving their lives as employees, family members, and individuals (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 2003). As they interact daily in work, family, and social settings, they must be able to communicate effectively in spoken and written English.

Increasingly, much of that interaction takes place via technology. Employers, schools, neighborhood associations, and even family members now routinely communicate critical, time-sensitive information first electronically—with other forms of correspondence taking more of a back seat.

Like native speakers of English, today's adult ESL students must learn to navigate new technologies in order to fully participate in the prevalent technological discourse community (Fox & Fleischer, 2002). To this end, Ball (2011), Larsen-Freeman and Andersen (2011), and others (e.g., Hohey, 1999; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000) recommend that ESL teachers incorporate current technology into ESL teaching and learning. Ball (2011), drawing on a thorough review of the literature, describes a number of benefits of technology use in adult ESL teaching and learning. Examples include (a) opportunities for increased learner autonomy and student choice, (b) transferability of skills to other areas of life (including work), (c) increased student engage-

ment/motivation, (d) immediate, precise feed-back, and (e) ease of tracking progress toward the individual's self-selected goals.

Technology is rapidly changing with today's innovations soon becoming outdated; however, it is clear that teachers and students must begin with current technology and continue to build upon their knowledge



as technological advances unfold. Two popular forms of current technology which can be highly beneficial for ESL students are smart phones (such as the *iPhone* by Apple or the android *Samsung Galaxy*) and tablets (such as the Google *Nexus* or Apple's *iPad*).

Many students already own or have access to one (or more) of these mobile devices, and those who do not may find it a worthwhile investment.

A key feature of both smart phones and tablets is the availability of *applications*, or *apps*, many of which can be downloaded for free or at little cost. Simply put, an app is a software program for a mobile phone or computer operating system (American Dialect Society, 2011). Most users of smart phones and tablets quickly learn how to use apps – sometimes even receiving instruction on how to do so at the time of purchase.



A second important feature of smart phones and tablets is their portability, which makes it possible for users to access apps while “on the go” or while engaged in a specific learning task. Because of these features, mobile devices can be highly effective tools for use in language teaching and learning. One domain of ESL teaching and learning where the use of mobile devices can be particularly powerful is the area of vocabulary development.

This article provides practical recommendations and resources for promoting vocabulary development

among adult ESL students who have access to mobile devices. We begin with a review of the literature on vocabulary teaching and learning in an adult ESL context and then present a compilation of recommended apps that can be utilized on smart phones and/or tablets as tools for promoting vocabulary growth. We conclude the article with a brief look at some practical considerations and recommendations for teachers.

ESL Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

The vocabulary learning task for adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) is an enormous undertaking. Upon graduation from high school, the average native speaker knows approximately 40,000 to 50,000 words (Graves, 2009; Stahl & Nagy, 2006). By implication, adult learners of English need to quickly acquire a vast amount of vocabulary knowledge in order to be able to effectively and fluidly communicate with native speakers in professional, educational, and social settings. The sheer volume of words to be mastered can be overwhelming. Clearly, only a small percentage of the words to be learned can be directly taught in the ESL classroom.

This fact often leaves ESL teachers wondering how to maximize in-class instruction and at the same time equip their students to acquire and practice needed vocabulary outside of the classroom. Researchers and practitioners agree that vocabulary instruction must be multi-faceted, systematic, and rigorous in order to make a significant impact and yield long-term results (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, & Watts-Taffe, 2006; Graves, 2006, 2009; Nation, 2008; Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

Components of Effective Vocabulary Instruction

Nation (2008), Graves (2009), and other prominent researchers and scholars (e.g., Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Stahl & Nagy, 2006) have highlighted the importance of providing learners with a comprehensive, well-balanced vocabulary-learning program. According

to Graves' (2009) model, an effective vocabulary program contains four major components: (a) teaching individual words, (b) teaching word-learning strategies, (c) providing rich and varied language experiences, and (d) fostering word consciousness.

Teaching individual words. Instruction of individual words must be rich, extended, and carefully orchestrated in order to yield optimum results (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Graves, 2006, 2009; Nation, 2008). Due to the large volume of words to be learned, teachers must be highly strategic in selecting words for explicit instruction during class time.

Teaching word-learning strategies. The importance of teaching word-learning strategies is well-documented in the vocabulary literature (e.g., Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Nation, 2001, 2008). Examples of these strategies include recognizing and using cognates, using the dictionary, drawing on context clues, and analyzing word parts to unlock meaning.

Providing rich and varied language experiences. Learners need to be immersed in a wide variety of language experiences so that they learn vocabulary through listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Graves, 2009). A key recommendation here is that learners be encouraged to engage in wide reading with exposure to a variety of different sources and types of text (for example, Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Graves, 2009; Nation, 2008).

Fostering word consciousness. *Word consciousness* is "an awareness of and interest in words and their meanings" (Graves, 2006, p. 7). Some specific examples of ways in which teachers can promote word consciousness include modeling adept diction, promoting word play, involving students in original investigations, and teaching students *about* words (Graves, 2009).

Each of the above components plays a unique and critical role in the learner's development of comprehensive vocabulary knowledge. A key over-arching premise is that vocabulary knowledge is built incrementally; thus, a learner needs multiple and varied exposures to a given word in order to truly "know" it (Nagy & Scott, 2000). Rich, explicit instruction of

words in the ESL classroom must be followed by extended, meaningful practice. Students need to be equipped to implement word-learning strategies both inside and outside of the ESL classroom. They need to engage in a wide variety of language experiences in which they speak, listen, read, and write in English; and they benefit tremendously from an increased awareness of and interest in words.

One means of engaging students in extensive vocabulary practice and self-directed study is to encourage them to utilize vocabulary applications (or apps), which are readily available for smart phones and tablets. Vocabulary apps can be used to address each of Graves' (2009) four recommended components; however, they are particularly useful for building word consciousness and creating rich, varied language experiences when used independently by students.

Vocabulary Applications for Tablets and Smart Phones

Applications, or apps, that contain dictionaries, thesauruses, translators, whiteboards, interactive quizzes, flashcards, and books are just a few of the available offerings that can enhance vocabulary learning. For an ESL student, having tools readily available at all times to help learn a new language and culture is of paramount importance. It is akin to having a library and private tutor in one hand.

Presented below is a compilation of recommended applications that can be of high utility for vocabulary teaching and learning. Included are options for both android and iOS-based mobile devices; and all of the apps can be downloaded quickly and easily through popular online stores such as Apple's *The App Store* or Amazon's *Appstore for Androids*.

Dictionary Apps

It is no longer necessary for ESL teachers and students to carry large, cumbersome dictionaries, thesauruses, and/or other reference books because the app stores now offer numerous alternatives. Two popular

apps which can take the place of many reference books are *Dictionary.com–Dictionary & Thesaurus* and *TheFreeDictionary*.



The *Dictionary.com* app offers two million definitions as well as a thesaurus for identifying synonyms and antonyms. It provides sample sentences, audio pronunciation, and a voice search option. This can be a

great help to students who not only need to know the spelling and meaning of a word but also its pronunciation.

One of the most comprehensive dictionary apps is *TheFreeDictionary*. It contains not only a dictionary and thesaurus but also has acronyms, abbreviations, idioms, an encyclopedia, and a literature reference library. Users also have the option of creating a customized homepage that provides games, a language forum, word of the day, spelling bees, word games, and much more.

Translation Apps

There are several applications that offer translation. These apps can be useful for students who have limited English proficiency and need to quickly communicate or find the English word for a native one. Single words or complete sentences can be translated at the touch of a few buttons. Some popular translation apps are *Google Translate* and *Translator with Speech*.



Google Translate offers free text translation for 70 languages and speech-to-text in 17 languages. This app affords users the opportunity to listen to translations spoken aloud in 40 languages, and it will spell out the translation of non-Latin script

languages such as Chinese and Japanese in Latin characters that can be read phonetically. While no translation tool is 100% accurate, *Google Translate* is a top-rated app for accuracy.

Translator with Speech is an app that translates text into 72 languages and pronounces the translation. It contains an optional speech-to-text feature that allows

students to record text in 16 languages and to convert it to many other languages.



These translations are useful because students can write or speak words, phrases, and sentences in their native language and see and hear the English translation immediately. These translations can be stored and played back for use in listening and speaking practice.

There are many translation apps available, with varying capabilities. Teachers and students need only explore the possibilities to find the translation app(s) to fit their unique needs.

English LaunchPad App



This multipurpose language app has numerous capabilities, and it offers a host of activities. The app contains over 700 flash cards with pictures in 20 categories covering topics such as the alphabet, anatomy, animals, appliances, food and drink, fruits, household words, and many other useful topics. There are also flashcards for 51 irregular verbs. The flashcards can be used for enrichment, instruction, or differentiated learning when studying vocabulary. There are additional tools such as a whiteboard, quiz generator, an electronic file for storing and sending lesson plans, and a grammar quiz containing 900 questions on grammar structures. The flashcard system can be a useful tool as students learn new vocabulary words, and the quiz generator can be used to measure progress.

Clear Speech App

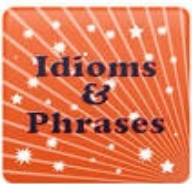


The *Clear Speech* app is based on the Cambridge University Press series by the same name, written by Judy Gilbert. This app is designed to help students improve their listening skills, and it can aid students in refining pronunciation of the vocabulary that they are learning. As students “train

their ears” to hear significant differences in regard to aspects such as word and syllable stress, intonation, and word endings, they also build their capacity for acquiring new vocabulary through everyday listening activities.

The app contains interactive listening games with 10 levels of difficulty designed for students who enjoy using the computer for education. One game is *Ball Toss*. It helps students identify ending sounds. The *Basketball* game teaches students to practice listening for syllables. *Push the Blob* teaches stress patterns, and the *Stop or Flow* game teaches word sounds. The app can be used in conjunction with the *Clear Speech* series or used independently to give listening practice.

Idioms App



Idioms is an app designed to introduce students to the top 100 most frequently-used idioms and idioms used in conversation topics about animals, business, clothes and colors, food, legalities and negotiations. Students learn by taking self-administered quizzes covering topics of their choice. There is also a handy alphabetical listing of common idioms for easy reference. This is an engaging, fun app that can be used in vocabulary building. Due to the appeal of idioms, this app is a highly popular one for students.

iTooch TOEFL Prep App



The *iTooch TOEFL Prep* app is available for iPhone and iPad users and is designed to help students prepare for the *Test of English as a Foreign Language* (TOEFL). It contains the largest pool of TOEFL questions based on US National Standards and is designed to aid in exam preparation. The app has 50 chapters that offer lessons, examples, and figures. There are over 1,500 questions with explanations, 135 images and visuals, and 278 spoken sound files. Questions address

speaking, listening, writing, and reading. The app is useful in fostering vocabulary growth because students are introduced to new words as they read questions and take part in the learning activities offered. This app is a comprehensive tool that can be used by students to prepare independently for the exam.

Learn American English-Free Word Power App



Learn American English-Free Word Power is a comprehensive study program designed to engage students in learning vocabulary and speaking English correctly. The free version helps students master 100 of the most commonly used words in the English language in a format that is easy to use. The student can view the words, hear a native speaker pronounce them, and record his or her own voice in order to compare this pronunciation with that of the native speaker. Students can take a quiz after learning the words to track progress and create their own unique audio word bank for reference and review. Additional words can be purchased for a nominal fee.

Recommendations for Use of Apps

The applications presented above were chosen based on their high utility for promoting vocabulary development as well as their affordability, overall quality, and ease of use. They are all suitable for classroom use and/or independent exploration on the part of learners. Students who regularly incorporate these resources into their learning repertoires can dramatically expand their access and depth of exposure to vocabulary in speaking, listening, reading, and writing contexts. In addition, the high interest level typically generated by app-based materials can be an aid in fostering enthusiasm for words and the vocabulary learning process itself.

Teachers are encouraged to explore and experiment with these resources, share them with students, model effective use, and help students determine which apps

might be best suited to their interests, needs, and learning goals. It is important to note that while many students already know how to use apps, they may need some guidance on how to effectively and strategically utilize *vocabulary apps* to maximize their learning and reach their own goals. When introducing a new app in class, teachers can utilize the following instructional sequence (adapted from Chamot & O'Malley, 1994): (a) elicit and draw on students' background knowledge; (b) show (rather than just *tell*) students how to use the app; (c) point out multiple benefits, features, and uses; (d) engage students in meaningful practice using the app; (e) have students complete an independent task using the app; and (f) provide an opportunity for students to report on the experience afterwards.

Finally, because each learner's abilities, interests, and vocabulary learning needs are unique, teachers do well to help students identify specific goals for themselves. For example, students might be challenged to set goals pertaining to the number of words to be learned per day or per week and to track their progress using a measure of their choice. Alternatively, students could use an app of their choice for a designated amount of time per day, week, or month, and then they could report on their experience either orally or in writing. Through close collaboration, teachers and students can identify many other options for self-directed learning "projects" which can be implemented both inside and outside of the formal classroom setting.

Conclusion

Adult ESL students face unique challenges as they attempt to master English vocabulary while at the same time balancing work, social, and family obligations. An increased use of mobile technology for vocabulary learning offers these learners the opportunity to set their own schedules, set their own pace for practice, and focus on their individual needs and goals. It can also serve as a non-threatening means of expanding their current technological knowledge base in our rapidly-evolving society.

The resources presented in this article represent only

a small sampling of the high quality apps that are presently available for enhancing vocabulary development. Teachers and students alike are encouraged not only to begin with these apps but also to use these tools as a launching pad for their own exploration into the vast, ever-evolving realm of technology resources for ESL teaching and learning.

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