

## The Effects of Explicit Instruction on Online Acronym Recognition

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The present study presents an experiment in which online acronyms, formed from common fixed phrases or formulaic expressions, and in common usage in English medium computer-based communication, were presented to Korean university-level learners placed into either a control group or treatment group which was given instruction into the expansions and meanings of the acronyms. Their knowledge of the target vocabulary was measured using the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) test in a pre-, post-, delayed post-test format. The pre-test results showed relatively little awareness or familiarity with the target online acronyms for either group. Repeated measures ANOVA analysis did not show differences between pre-test and immediate post-test scores for the control group, although the delayed post-test did show a significant improvement. The treatment group showed significant and robust gains in both immediate and delayed post-tests. Comparison between the groups was done by one-way ANOVA. This showed significant differences in gains between control and treatment groups, with a large effect, suggesting that brief explicit instruction sessions could result in large gains. Implications of the study findings for educators and learners are discussed.

**Key words:** computer-mediated communication, online English use, explicit vocabulary instruction, vocabulary acquisition

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners go online, they are likely to encounter novel vocabulary, whether it be low frequency words, specialized terminology, figurative or idiomatic language, or slang and neologisms that are not taught in courses and textbooks. These may impede comprehension and communication when encountered. Additionally, simple everyday formulaic expressions in English that learners may be familiar with often appear as initializations or acronyms in online text, and sometimes even in spoken English (AbuSa'aleek, 2013; Ferrando-Rocher, 2023; Moehkardi, 2016). These are expressions that learners may know in their extended form such as *in my opinion* (IMO) and *by the way* (BTW), but the acronym form may be opaque even to native speakers.

Most previous studies of online acronyms (e.g. Dykes, 2021; Ertekin & Pryor, 2022; Moehkardi, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2015) have identified, catalogued, and analyzed frequencies of occurrence for online acronyms, but few studies have looked at how to integrate instruction of these novel forms of vocabulary into English education contexts. Greater exposure to and awareness of novel vocabulary which arises in the online sphere may be necessary for EFL learners to improve their digital literacy and ability to communicate online in English. If these neologisms do not appear in instructional materials, learners are unlikely to comprehend them, leading to a breakdown in communication.

In order to foster greater digital literacy among EFL learners (Kim, 2019; Meurant, 2009) and expand on communicative competence of EFL learners (Tso, 2019), more attention should be paid to the integration of online acronyms into English language instruction (Ferrando-Rocher, 2023). Explicit vocabulary instruction of these terms may be the most effective method to achieve this, rather than assuming that learners will eventually pick up these phrases through exposure (Wang, 2000). Learning through exposure requires input that the learners can understand as well as multiple exposures to the new vocabulary over time (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021; Nation, 2013; Sökmen, 1997). This type of exposure might occur frequently enough in ESL environments, but exposure is likely to be very infrequent in EFL environments. Online acronyms are contractions of phrases that should be comprehensible input, but in a form that may make them incomprehensible, thus making vocabulary gains from infrequent exposure much less likely.

This study reports on an experiment which gave explicit instruction of online acronyms to a group of Korean university level EFL learners to gauge gains in familiarity against a control group which received no instruction into the meanings or extensions of the acronyms. The author believes that the study findings detailed here will be of assistance to EFL learners and instructors of English who wish to find a simple, direct way to expand EFL learners' communicative competence in the online sphere.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Proponents of incidental vocabulary acquisition in communicative language teaching approaches suggest that after a learner has reached a baseline level of vocabulary knowledge in a target language, explicit instruction in vocabulary is often a waste of a teacher's time and effort. There are too many words, there is too much lexical complexity to each word, and enough repeat exposures to a word in context will result in the learner picking up that information on their own, eventually (Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021; Nation, 2013; Sökmen, 1997). Some suggest that vocabulary learning strategies should be taught, but then learners should be left to employ those strategies without further vocabulary instruction (Nyikos & Fan, 2007). However, many experts seem to agree that explicit vocabulary instruction is superior to implicit learning through repeated exposures in context both in efficiency and in effect (Rodgers & Webb, 2019; Tahir, Shah, Shak, Albakri, & Adnan, 2021).

Incidental vocabulary acquisition requires the learner to not only encounter a word multiple times in context, but to notice that word and then be able to infer or correctly guess the meaning from that context (Kuppens, 2010; Rodgers & Webb, 2019; Webb, 2007). Each time the word is encountered and noticed, there is a chance that some information about the word will be acquired, eventually leading to the stage where the learner can be said to know the word (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Waring & Takaki, 2003). This process is more practical for learners in an environment where the second language (L2) is dominant, as inputs and opportunities to encounter new vocabulary are greater than those in which the L2 is a foreign language (Rodgers & Webb, 2019). This process is similar to how L1 vocabulary is acquired. It is effective, but it is a slow and haphazard process, dependent upon a wide range of variables (Webb, Uchihara, & Yanagisawa, 2023).

Explicit vocabulary learning happens when either a teacher instructs learners in L2 vocabulary, or else when the learner purposefully attempts to add vocabulary to their language repertoire on their own. This requires time and effort both for the learner and the instructor, and has the drawback of only being able to introduce a limited amount of vocabulary at a time. As noted above, explicit instruction allows learners to gain vocabulary knowledge more efficiently than relying on incidental acquisition (Boroughani, Xodabande, & Karimpour, 2023; Tahir, Albakri, Adnan, & Karim, 2020; Tahir et al., 2021). After a certain baseline of vocabulary has been acquired by learners, many instructors using a Communicative Approach would rather engage in tasks and activities than spend valuable classroom time instructing learners in new vocabulary, relying on implicit acquisition through exposure (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020) due to explicit instruction requiring more time and effort. However, the explicit instruction may lead to rapid gains in vocabulary knowledge, so the time

spent on vocabulary instruction is not likely to be wasted (Rodgers & Webb, 2019).

## 2.2. Online Acronyms and Vocabulary Acquisition

Acronyms and initializations refer to a type of abbreviation in which the initial or at least prominent letters of a phrase or name are used to represent the expanded phrase. Most often, this is done with difficult scientific terminology such as *chlorofluorocarbons* becoming *CFCs* and *deoxyribonucleic acid* becoming *DNA*, or with names of corporate, governmental or non-governmental organizations (*NGOs*) such as the *Central Intelligence Agency* becoming the *CIA*, or *Kentucky Fried Chicken* becoming *KFC*. If the letters are read out when spoken, the contraction is an initialization, such as the *NBA*, while if they are pronounced like a word they are an acronym, such as *NASA* (Moehkardi, 2016; Tagliamonte, 2015). Over time, acronyms and initializations become so commonplace that the average person may not even consider the expanded form. The term may even become a word in its own right rather than an acronym, such as *laser* or *scuba*. Popular parlance considers both acronyms and initializations to be “acronyms” and for simplicity, this paper will refer to all of the target vocabulary in this study as online acronyms, even though there is a mix of acronyms and initializations within them.

The internet has facilitated a rise in a new type of communication: computer-mediated communication (CMC), which refers to any communications happening between two people online via computer, smartphone, or other computer-assisted text or speech (Tagliamonte, 2015). CMC has given rise to a wealth of neologisms. These include technical terminology used to refer to the technology itself, slang expressions, compounding, blending, and abbreviations such as online acronyms (Dykes, 2021; Hamilton, Leskovec, & Jurafsky, 2016; Moehkardi, 2016). What sets online acronyms apart from traditional acronyms and initializations is that rather than shortening long, cumbersome, or difficult to remember extended forms, they replace common everyday expressions, discourse markers, and fixed phrases (AbuSa’aleek, 2013; Ertekin & Pryor, 2022). Intermediate and higher proficiency EFL learners may be familiar with many traditional acronyms and initializations, but might not be familiar with their expansions (Ferrando-Rocher, 2023). With online acronyms, the opposite is more likely to be the case, with the EFL learners being unfamiliar with the online acronym while perfectly comfortable using the expansion in normal communication (Ertekin & Pryor, 2022; Ferrando-Rocher, 2023).

Previous studies of online acronyms have shown that there is a high level of interest among EFL learners to understand and use all sorts of online neologisms, including online acronyms (Caliboso, 2021; Ferrando-Rocher, 2023; Tso, 2019). Many studies of online acronyms have served the purpose of cataloging and classifying these neologisms (AbuSa’aleek, 2013; Dykes, 2021; Ertekin & Pryor, 2022; Tagliamonte, 2015). Few studies

have investigated questions of vocabulary acquisition related to online acronyms specifically, but there are studies of both implicit learning from online media and explicit instruction of or via CMC. In a meta-analysis of digital vocabulary learning using computer games, Zou, Huang, and Xie (2021) found that both implicit learning through games and explicit instruction through educational gamified learning apps were effective for learners across Asia, and that learners tended to have better retention compared to traditional vocabulary instruction methods. Bergstrom, Norberg, and Nordlund (2022) found that Swedish teachers rely on incidental vocabulary learning among their students, but suggest that more explicit vocabulary instruction is needed. Peters (2007) found that announcement of a vocabulary test led to more intentional learning compared to a control group with only incidental exposure to the target vocabulary among Flemish learners. Boroughani et al. (2023) found that digital flashcards on mobile devices were an effective means of increasing learner vocabulary. Ferrando-Rocher (2023) gave explicit instruction of technical acronyms which are common in online STEM circles to students, finding that weekly inverted classroom activities focused on the target vocabulary increased learners' knowledge of and ability to use the target language.

Due to the shortage of studies investigating online acronyms from a vocabulary acquisition perspective, the researcher conducted an exploratory study to collect data on this (Laffey, 2024). That previous study suggested that this is a segment of vocabulary that is of high interest to learners, and one in which explicit instruction may be especially useful. However, the non-experimental nature of the study leaves it incomplete. This current study seeks to rectify that gap by replicating the previous study but with the addition of a control group to compare how much of the gain detected in the previous study was due to explicit instruction.

### 2.3. Research Questions

In order to investigate the extent of familiarity that university-level Korean EFL learners have with English online acronyms and to look at the effectiveness of explicit instruction on improving familiarity with these terms, the current study seeks to answer these questions. The hypothesis going into the research is that on the whole, Korean EFL learners are not overly familiar with online acronyms, but that explicit instruction in an area of English that is useful and of high-interest will show a positive effect on the EFL learners' knowledge of the terms. However, it is also possible that the high-interest nature of the online acronyms may lead the control group to self-study, or may increase noticing of these acronyms and lead to more incidental gains. The questions for this study are:

- 1) How familiar are English learners with online acronyms and which acronyms are most familiar?
- 2) How effective is explicit instruction of the meaning of online acronyms compared to a

control group with no explicit instruction?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Target Vocabulary

The thirty target online acronyms used in this study were taken from Laffey (2024) without any changes. The previous study collected this list from acronyms found in Dykes (2021), Ertekin and Pryor (2022), Feil, (2023), Moehkardi (2016), and Tagliamonte (2015). Each acronym can be found, with its expansion, in Table 3, below.

#### 3.2. Participants

A group of 100 undergraduate students studying English at a public university in Korea were recruited for this study. All are native speakers of Korean, with one exception being a Taiwanese native who has lived most of their life in Korea and speaks Korean fluently. There were 23 male and 77 female students. These participants were divided randomly into a control group of 50 participants and a treatment group of 50 participants. All participants took part in all three Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996) tests.

To ensure equivalency between the control and treatment groups in this study, the Vocabulary Size Test (VST; Nation & Beglar, 2007) was given to all participants, together with the same questionnaire on the internet and social media use used in Laffey (2024). This questionnaire collected basic demographic data, and asked participants to estimate their online usage, the percent of time online interacting in English, as well as questions about which social media platforms are employed, and use of stationary or mobile computing devices. Social media use was measured by self-report data in estimated hours, from 1 to 5+ hours. Percentage of time spent using English on social media was estimated by self-report data, with choices of 10, 25, 50, 75, and 90%. A list of 12 social media networks or adjacent online services such as MMO games were listed, with room for additional services to be noted. Participants were asked to mark if they used each service *never* (0 points), *occasionally* (1 point) or *often* (2 points) in order to gain a measure of platform variety. The lowest response was 5 and the highest 17. Participants were also asked to list the means by which they access social media, with three forms of stationary access (home, campus/library, or internet café) and three types of mobile access (smartphone, tablet, laptop). Participants were asked to rate each of these as *never* (0 points), *occasionally* (1 point) or *often* (2 points) in order to gain measures of fixed and mobile access, with scores of 0 to 6 in each category: stationary and mobile. The results of this questionnaire can be seen in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Participant Demographic Data**

	Control ( <i>N</i> = 50)		Treatment ( <i>N</i> = 50)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Grade Year	1.06	.314	1.44	.760
Hours/Day on Social Media	3.70	1.093	3.94	1.096
Percent of Social Media Use in English	34.00	25.010	38.20	24.406
Variety of Social Media Use	9.36	2.464	9.24	2.707
Stationary Internet Access	1.14	1.278	0.90	.909
Mobile Internet Access	4.22	1.093	4.26	.922

### 3.3. Study Instruments

Measuring true gains in vocabulary knowledge is difficult, due to the wide variety of lexical information that can be gained. This includes a word's pronunciation, spelling, meaning, word class, conjugations or other grammatical transformations, conjunctions, synonyms and antonyms, etc. (Hwang, Mancilla-Martinez, McClain, Oh, & Flores, 2020; Nation, 2013; Nation & Beglar, 2007). One method to test vocabulary size is the VST (Nation & Beglar, 2007). This test measures semantic knowledge of a fraction of words from each frequency band of 1000 word families, and uses the score to extrapolate an approximate vocabulary size of the EFL learner. Demographic and social media usage data were collected using the questionnaire and VST test, as described above.

Another test which is more sensitive to partial vocabulary gains is the VKS, which measures basic familiarity, semantic knowledge, and productive capability with the target vocabulary. The main study data on online acronym familiarity was gathered using the VKS test. The VKS is useful because it allows for some measurement of partial knowledge of vocabulary. It has also been widely adopted in many studies, making the results easy to understand and compare across studies. While both of these instruments have their limitations, their use in a variety of studies over the years render the results easy to comprehend and compare.

The VKS, used for the pre-test and immediate and delayed post-tests, was scored using the following typical method. If the word was unfamiliar, 0 points. If it was familiar but the meaning was unknown, the item scored 1 point. If the word was familiar and the meaning was unsure or the meaning provided was incorrect, the item scored 3 points. If the word was familiar and the meaning provided, it scored 4 points. If the word was familiar, the meaning was provided, and it was used productively in a sentence, it scored 5 points. Responses for meaning were accepted in both Korean and English, and the expansion of the acronym, a synonym, or an equivalent phrase were all accepted. Alternate acronym usage, such as *LOL* being reported as meaning the game *League of Legends*, were considered a 3-point response.

### 3.4. Data Collection

All of the participants were assembled and the purpose of the study, its method, and what was expected of them were explained. Consent forms were collected from all participants. The VST and questionnaire were then administered, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The participants were split at random into two groups, one treatment and one control, and asked to return the next day at different times. On the second day, each group was given the VKS pre-test with the online acronyms. This took around 20 minutes for each group. After the VKS, the control group was dismissed without being given any explanation of the online acronyms' meanings or usage. The treatment group was then presented with an explanation of each online acronym used in the VKS. The expansions, meanings, and usage of each online acronym were described, and participants were allowed to ask questions for clarification. The explanation lesson lasted around 20 minutes. Members of the treatment group were given a printed worksheet with each acronym and its expansion, then dismissed.

One week later, both groups were assembled for the VKS post-test. The control group took around 30 minutes to complete the test while the treatment group completed it in under 25 minutes. Ten weeks after the post-test, all participants were again assembled to take the delayed post-test. This time, both groups finished in under 15 minutes.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

Scores for each of the target words, and a total score, were tabulated for each participant on each VKS test, and this information was entered into a spreadsheet, along with the demographic information, VST results, and information from the social media use questionnaire. Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26. Repeated measures ANOVA was used to measure differences within groups on the pre-, post-, and delayed post-test VKS data. A one-way ANOVA compared the pre-, post-, and delayed post-test VKS data between the control and treatment groups.

## 4. RESULTS

The VST was scored with 1 point per correct answer, and the total score multiplied by 100 to get an approximation of each participant's vocabulary size. The control group had scores ranging from 3000 to 10,200 word families while the treatment group had scores ranging from 3000 to 10,300 word families. An independent samples *t*-test showed no significant difference in means,  $t(98) = .89, p = .375$ . This suggests that the groups were equivalent in their vocabulary sizes. The VST results are presented in Table 2.



**TABLE 2**  
**The VST Results**

Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Control	7232	1120.758
Treatment	6990	1561.037

The results of the VKS pre-tests suggest that undergraduate English majors, despite their familiarity with on average around 7000 word families in English, had a low level of familiarity with the online acronyms presented in the study. With thirty items on the VKS, each test had a maximum possible score of 150 points. The pre-test means for both the control and treatment groups combined was  $M = 16.68$ ,  $SD = 11.72$ . While a few EFL learners were familiar with some of the online acronyms, the majority were only passing familiar, and many acronyms were unknown by all of the participants.

Examining the combined data of the VKS pre-test for both the control and treatment groups, two of the thirty target online acronyms were somewhat familiar to the participants of the study. These were *WTF* ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.766$ ) and *LOL* ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.604$ ). With a maximum score of 5 on the VKS, scores of around 3.5 show a fairly broad familiarity with these two online acronyms. However, only two other acronyms had combined mean scores over 1, those being *BTW* ( $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 2.110$ ) and *LMAO* ( $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 1.656$ ). There was a discrepancy in the means of the acronym *BTW* between the control ( $M = 0.76$ ,  $SD = 1.733$ ) and treatment ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 2.246$ ) groups. The other more-widely recognized online acronyms had similar means for both the control and treatment groups. The least recognized online acronyms in the combined data were *ELI5* ( $M = 0.02$ ,  $SD = .141$ ), *OTOH* ( $M = 0.02$ ,  $SD = .141$ ), and *TTFN* ( $M = 0.02$ ,  $SD = .141$ ). Descriptive data of each online acronym for both groups, control and treatment, are displayed in Table 3. The data suggests that while most of the online acronyms used in the study are not well known by the Korean EFL learner participants, a few of them are encountered frequently enough that they are noticed by some learners, and a small number are understood and may even be used in the learners' English-medium communication.

**TABLE 3**  
**The VKS Pre-Test Scores Descriptive Data**

Online Acronym (Expansion)	Control Group ( $N = 50$ )		Treatment Group ( $N = 50$ )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
AFAIK (as far as I know)	.14	.729	.10	.303
AFK (away from keyboard)	.56	1.181	.34	1.022
BRB (be right back)	.22	.764	.72	1.578
BTW (by the way)	.76	1.733	2.12	2.246
ELI5 (explain it like I'm 5)	.00	.000	.04	.198
F2F (face to face)	.28	.904	.58	1.401
FTW (for the win)	.18	.388	.36	.802

FWIW (for what it's worth)	.00	.000	.08	.274
ICYMI (in case you missed it)	.02	.141	.04	.198
IIRC (if I remember correctly)	.04	.198	.06	.240
IMNSHO (in my not so humble opinion)	.00	.000	.08	.274
IOW (in other words)	.02	.141	.10	.303
JK (joke)	.84	1.517	1.04	1.737
KISS (keep it simple, stupid)	1.14	1.088	.78	1.016
LMAO (laughing my ass off)	1.04	1.702	1.12	1.624
LOL (laugh out loud)	3.44	1.606	3.48	1.619
NBD (no big deal)	.26	.664	.30	.763
NOYB (none of your business)	.40	1.309	.20	.756
NP (no problem)	.18	.523	.76	1.479
OP (original poster, or overpowered)	1.04	1.603	.90	1.474
OTOH (on the other hand)	.00	.000	.04	.198
PAW (parents are watching)	.18	.523	.16	.370
ROFL (rolling on the floor laughing)	.06	.240	.26	.828
SMH (shake my head)	.12	.480	.44	1.198
TIA (thanks in advance)	.02	.141	.08	.274
TL;DR (too long; didn't read)	.10	.580	.12	.480
TTFN (ta-ta for now)	.00	.000	.04	.198
TTYL (talk to you later)	.28	1.011	.56	1.373
WTF (what the fuck)	3.56	1.853	3.52	1.693
YMMV (your mileage may vary)	.02	.141	.04	.198

The mean scores of each VKS test (pre-, post-, delayed post-) were calculated, and are presented in Table 4. The minimum and maximum scores show relative consistency within the control group, but some fluctuations in the treatment group. However, means for the control group are within a similar range, and those for the treatment group show improvement for the post-test and the maintenance of familiarity in the delayed post-test.

**TABLE 4**  
**The VKS Mean Scores Descriptive Data**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Control Group ( <i>N</i> = 50)				
Pre-Test	14.90	8.830	3	48
Post-Test	15.78	10.852	3	52
Delayed Post-Test	17.18	9.963	5	51
Treatment Group ( <i>N</i> = 50)				
Pre-Test	18.46	13.889	1	73
Post-Test	33.44	16.320	0	69
Delayed Post-Test	35.88	16.695	4	85

In order to examine any gains within each group, repeated measures ANOVA were performed for the three times the VKS was administered, both within the control group and within the treatment group. For the analysis, time was used as the independent variable, and VKS results from the three test instances were used as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 5.

**TABLE 5**  
**Repeated Measures ANOVA Results**

	<i>F</i> (2, 98)	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$	Mean Difference (Bonferroni Adjustment)	<i>p</i>
Control Group ( <i>N</i> = 50)					
ANOVA	3.906	.023	.074		
Pre-Test to Immediate Post-Test				-.88	.853
Pre-Test to Delayed Post-Test				-2.28	.019
Immediate to Delayed Post-Test				-1.40	.324
Treatment Group ( <i>N</i> = 50)					
ANOVA	52.95	.000	.519		
Pre-Test to Immediate Post-Test				-14.98	.000
Pre-Test to Delayed Post-Test				-17.42	.000
Immediate to Delayed Post-Test				-2.44	.599

For the control group, the repeated measures ANOVA showed a significant difference. A Bonferroni adjustment, used for post-hoc analysis, showed that VKS scores were not significantly improved between pre-test and immediate post-test, but that there was significant improvement in VKS scores between pre-test and delayed post-test. This suggests that while there was not an immediate effect of presenting the online acronyms to the control group, there was a medium effect by the time of the delayed post-test, as interpreted by the partial eta squared result. Interest in the vocabulary may have been piqued and intentional self-study may possibly have been initiated by the presentation of the online acronyms in the test itself, potentially accounting for the gains seen in the delayed post-test.

The same repeated measures ANOVA was performed for the treatment group. The analysis found a statistically significant difference. A Bonferroni adjustment was again used for post-hoc analysis. This showed that there was a significant increase in VKS scores by the time of the immediate post-test, as well as significant difference between the pre-test and delayed post-test results. No significant difference was found between the immediate and delayed post-tests. The effect size, measured in partial eta squared, shows a quite large effect of the treatment. This shows an immediate and sustained effect of the explicit instruction session, and is similar to the results of Laffey (2024).

**TABLE 6**  
**Between-Groups One-Way ANOVA Results**

Test	<i>F</i> (1, 98)	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Pre-Test	2.34	.129	
Immediate Post-Test	40.60	.000	.29
Delayed Post-Test	46.26	.000	.32

To compare differences in the treatment and control groups, a one-way ANOVA analyzed each test using treatment type as the independent variable and VKS score as the dependent

variable. For the pre-test, the ANOVA showed no significant difference between the control and treatment groups. The immediate post-test showed a significant difference, with the treatment group showing significantly higher results than the control group. The effect size,  $\eta^2 = .29$ , is considered a large effect. The delayed post-test also indicated a significant difference, with the treatment group still showing significantly higher results than the control group. The effect size,  $\eta^2 = .32$ , is also a large effect. This suggests that the treatment condition was very effective compared to the control condition, and that there was a definite and robust effect on vocabulary knowledge from the explicit instruction.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study attempted to investigate both learners' familiarity with online English acronyms and to compare gains in vocabulary knowledge from an explicit instruction session compared to a control group without explicit instruction. Regarding familiarity, the learners were not highly familiar with the online acronyms at the start of the study. Despite reporting that they are often on social media where these acronyms are common for several hours a day, most of the online acronyms were unknown, with only a few very common ones being known relatively well by some of the participants. Webb, Uchihara, and Yanagisawa (2023) point out that incidental exposures rely upon a variety of factors. This makes it hard to predict what vocabulary items a particular learner may have been exposed to, and which ones they may have picked up from that exposure. An EFL environment, such as South Korea, may also make incidental exposures, and hence familiarity, much less likely (Rodgers & Webb, 2019). Based on the findings of Laffey (2024), this general unfamiliarity of the EFL learners with online acronyms was the expected result.

Examining the means of the three VKS tests within the control group and the treatment group respectively by means of repeated measures ANOVA provided some insight into gains from explicit instruction within the treatment group, but also revealed unexpected gains within the control group. The treatment group had large gains on the immediate post-test VKS compared to the pre-test VKS based on effect size, and these gains remained into the delayed post-test, suggesting their robustness. This was the expected result, and is in line with earlier findings (Boroughani et al., 2023; Laffey, 2024; Tahir et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2021). The surprising finding was in the significant difference found in the control group's pre-test and delayed post-test means. There was a medium size effect based on partial eta squared effect size which was not expected, which supports earlier findings suggesting that online neologisms such as the online acronyms being investigated are of high interest to EFL learners (Tagliamonte, 2015; Tso, 2019). It is unclear whether this gain in familiarity was

due to incidental gains from exposure, or if the exposure from the experiment created motivation to self-study among the control group. This is a question that should be investigated in a future study.

The one-way ANOVA compared the means between the control and treatment groups, on all three measures. The pre-test results were not significantly different, but significant differences were detected between the control and treatment groups on both the post-test and delayed post-test, with a large effect size for both post-tests. This finding supports other studies which found explicit instruction to be of greater benefit to learners than relying on incremental gains from exposures over time (Boroughani et al., 2023; Tahir et al., 2020; Tahir et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2021). When these findings are combined with the findings from within each study group, which showed large gains for the treatment group and modest gains for the control group in knowledge and awareness of the target vocabulary, it suggests that there is a high interest in online acronyms among learners. It also suggests that while gains in vocabulary can happen without the presence of explicit instruction, the explicit intervention has greater efficacy. High interest and high frequency vocabulary, especially that used in CMC, should become a greater focus of English language instruction. Studies such as Brevik (2019) and Caliboso (2021) have shown that exposure to online English does lead to improvements, but the pace may be too slow. This study's findings argue for small, focused interventions to expose learners to online acronyms, and by extension other online neologisms, which seem to provide large benefits for a small investment in teaching time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

An experimental study into the effectiveness of an explicit vocabulary instruction session of thirty common online acronyms on vocabulary knowledge among university students studying in Korea has been presented by this paper. The study presented the target vocabulary using the VKS in a pre/post/delayed post-test format to both a control group and a treatment group receiving explicit instruction into the extensions, meanings, and usage of the online acronyms after the pre-test. Neither group demonstrated much familiarity with the online acronyms, aside from a few that were somewhat familiar (*WTF*, *LOL*, *BTW*, *LMAO*), on the pre-test. The results found evidence of significant gains in vocabulary familiarity among the control group, but far greater significant gains in vocabulary familiarity within the treatment group.

This study originally intended to compare explicit vocabulary instruction against implicit learning through exposure, but due to practical constraints, it was not possible to provide the control group with material containing the online acronyms which would provide incidental exposures to them. Instead, a comparison of learners with explicit instruction of vocabulary

and learners with no explicit vocabulary instruction was carried out. Future studies should attempt to address this limitation by finding ways to present learners with materials containing the online acronyms between the pre-test and delayed post-test. Another limitation of this experiment is that a few of the target vocabulary items had alternate extensions, of which some of the participants were aware. For example, most participants that recognized *LOL* (*laugh out loud*) on the pre-test knew it meant laugh out loud, or at least had some connection to laughing or humor, but a few recognized it as the computer game *League of Legends*. Similarly, the acronym *KISS* (*keep it simple, stupid*) was mistaken for a common *kiss*. A third example was *OP* (*original poster*, or *overpowered*), both meanings of which are common in CMC. Further experiments in a similar vein may wish to eliminate these items and replace them with others, or present the target vocabulary in context to help eliminate the ambiguity.

This study shows evidence of large gains in vocabulary familiarity from explicit instruction. This suggests that there should be a greater emphasis on dedicated vocabulary instruction in English classrooms, even at the tertiary level. Learners are using social media, text messages, and other forms of CMC for communication. They take part in content sharing on various platforms. The online acronyms that are the focus of this study, and other online neologisms, need to become a part of the curriculum, as this is an area of vocabulary that learners need to know for effective online English language communication. It is also an area in which they seem keen to learn. Small, focused interventions to introduce such terms appears to bear large results.

Applicable levels: Tertiary

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