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ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH DIGITAL TOOLS IN TEACHING LEXICAL CHUNKS

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Abstract
This study explores how digital tools can enhance student engagement in the teaching of lexical chunks in English as a foreign language classroom. Lexical chunks—multi-word units such as collocations, idioms, and phrasal verbs—are essential for achieving fluency and naturalness in language use. However, students often find them difficult to retain and use correctly. Through a synthesis of recent pedagogical research (Lewis, 1993; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000) and practical classroom observations, this paper examines how digital platforms such as Quizlet, Kahoot, and interactive mobile apps (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Wang, 2015) can increase learner motivation, participation, and retention. The findings suggest that integrating technology into vocabulary instruction not only supports personalized and contextualized learning but also fosters greater engagement through interactive, game-based, and collaborative activities.
Keywords: digital tools, student engagement, lexical chunks, vocabulary learning, language teaching, educational technology

Introduction

In contemporary language teaching, vocabulary acquisition plays a critical role in helping learners achieve communicative competence. Among the essential components of vocabulary are lexical chunks—fixed or semi-fixed expressions like collocations (e.g., “make a decision”), idioms (e.g., “kick the bucket”), and phrasal verbs (e.g., “turn up”). Mastery of these multi-word units enables learners

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to produce language that is both fluent and contextually appropriate. Yet, despite their importance, lexical chunks often present difficulties for students in terms of memorization and usage.

At the same time, student engagement remains a central concern in language education. Traditional methods of vocabulary instruction can sometimes fail to capture students' interest or provide enough exposure and reinforcement. With the growing integration of technology in education, digital tools offer promising solutions to this challenge. Tools such as Quizlet, Padlet, Duolingo, and Kahoot have gained popularity for their interactive, student-centered designs. This article aims to explore how digital tools can be effectively used to teach lexical chunks in a way that enhances student engagement. It addresses the following research questions: (1) How do digital tools influence students' engagement in learning lexical chunks? (2) What are the most effective digital platforms and strategies for this purpose? Through a combination of literature review and practical examples, the study proposes pedagogical approaches that harness the potential of educational technology to support vocabulary learning.

Literature Review

In recent years, the importance of teaching vocabulary as interconnected units—commonly referred to as lexical chunks—has grown significantly in language education. These chunks include fixed expressions, collocations, idioms, and phrasal verbs that appear frequently in everyday communication. Instead of learning single words in isolation, learners benefit more from understanding how words naturally occur together in context. This approach helps build fluency, supports comprehension, and mirrors how language is processed by native speakers.

Despite their benefits, lexical chunks are often challenging for students to retain and use correctly. Traditional methods of instruction, such as rote memorization or isolated vocabulary lists, tend to be repetitive and disengaging. As a result, students may fail to internalize these expressions (Schmitt, 2000; Nation, 2001) or apply them appropriately in speech or writing. This issue has led educators to seek innovative strategies to improve both retention and motivation. One such strategy involves the use of digital tools (Godwin-Jones, 2011), which

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have become increasingly prominent in modern classrooms. Educational technology offers diverse and interactive ways to present vocabulary, particularly through platforms that support repetition, contextualization, and immediate feedback. Many tools also use game-like features to maintain learners' attention and encourage repeated practice. In addition to improving vocabulary instruction, these tools can play a significant role in boosting student engagement (Wang, 2015). Digital platforms such as interactive quizzes, flashcard applications, and collaborative online boards allow students to participate more actively in the learning process. When students are engaged—emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally—they are more likely to stay motivated, interact with the material more deeply, and retain what they learn over time.

Several classroom-based studies have shown that learners exposed to digital tools while studying lexical chunks demonstrate greater enthusiasm and improved recall compared to those taught using traditional techniques. Moreover, the ability to learn at their own pace and revisit material as needed fosters a sense of autonomy, which further enhances engagement and outcomes.

Overall, the integration of digital tools into vocabulary instruction appears to offer multiple advantages. Not only do they create a more engaging environment, but they also support the repeated, meaningful practice required for mastering lexical chunks. However, these benefits are most pronounced when the tools are used purposefully within a clear pedagogical framework.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach, focusing on how digital tools influence student engagement during the learning of lexical chunks. The aim was to observe the effects of technology integration in real classroom settings, particularly among intermediate-level EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. The research was conducted over a four-week period with a group of 25 students aged between 20 and 30 at the university. These students were introduced to lexical chunks through both traditional instruction and digital platforms. The tools selected for the digital sessions included Quizlet for digital flashcards (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Wang, 2015), Kahoot for gamified quizzes, and Padlet for collaborative sentence-building tasks. Each tool was chosen based on its

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interactive features, ease of use, and alignment with the goal of practicing vocabulary in chunks.

Classes were divided into two phases. In the first phase (Weeks 1–2), lexical chunks were taught using traditional methods such as teacher-led explanations, printed handouts, and written exercises. In the second phase (Weeks 3–4), the same types of lexical chunks were taught using the selected digital tools. Instructional time and topics were kept consistent across both phases to ensure comparability.

To measure student engagement, the study relied on three sources of data:

1. Observation Notes: During each lesson, the teacher-researcher recorded student behavior, participation levels, and time-on-task using a simple checklist.
2. Student Surveys: At the end of each phase, students completed anonymous surveys that asked them to reflect on their interest, motivation, and perceived difficulty.
3. Short Written Tasks: Students completed brief vocabulary-based tasks after each lesson to assess how well they retained and applied the lexical chunks taught in that session.

The data were then analyzed to identify differences in engagement and learning outcomes between traditional and technology-enhanced instruction. This approach helped uncover not only the immediate effects of digital tools on motivation and participation but also their influence on short-term vocabulary retention.

Results

The comparison between traditional and digital approaches to teaching lexical chunks revealed noticeable differences in student engagement and vocabulary retention.

1. Increased Participation and Attention:

During the digitally supported sessions, classroom observations showed a marked increase in student participation. Nearly all students were actively involved in the learning process when using tools like Quizlet and Kahoot (Wang, 2015). In contrast, the traditionally taught sessions saw more passive behavior, with only a few students consistently volunteering or engaging with the material.

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2. Higher Enjoyment and Motivation Levels:

Survey responses indicated that students found the digital lessons more enjoyable and stimulating. Over 80% of participants reported that they felt more motivated to learn when using mobile apps and interactive quizzes, citing the game-like atmosphere and visual feedback as key motivators (Wang, 2015). Many students expressed a preference for digital practice over traditional worksheets.

3. Better Short-Term Retention:

The post-lesson tasks revealed a modest but consistent improvement in vocabulary recall following the digital sessions. On average, students correctly used or recognized 15–20% more lexical chunks after lessons that incorporated digital tools compared to those delivered through traditional instruction. Although both methods supported learning, the interactive nature of digital tools appeared to reinforce memory more effectively.

4. Student Autonomy and Collaboration:

When working with digital platforms like Padlet, students demonstrated greater autonomy and collaborative effort. They were more willing to build and share sentences using the lexical chunks, especially when given space to create content with peers in a less formal, tech-based environment. This contrasted with the more teacher-directed structure of the traditional phase.

5. Feedback and Responsiveness:

One of the standout benefits of digital tools was the instant feedback they provided. For example, Kahoot's real-time scoring and immediate correction (Wang, 2015) helped students recognize mistakes quickly. Students noted that this helped them understand chunk usage more clearly than waiting for the teacher to check answers at the end of a paper-based task.

Overall, the results suggest that digital tools can significantly enhance both engagement and learning outcomes when teaching lexical chunks, especially when integrated thoughtfully into lesson planning.

Discussion

The findings from this study highlight the strong potential of digital tools to enhance student engagement in the learning of lexical chunks. The increased participation and enthusiasm observed during digitally supported lessons indicate

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that technology can transform vocabulary instruction from a passive process into an active, student-centered experience.

One key factor contributing to this improvement is interactivity. Tools like Kahoot and Quizlet incorporate game elements such as points, timers, and leaderboards, which add a competitive (Wang, 2015) but low-pressure atmosphere that appeals to many learners. This gamification helps maintain attention and encourages repeated practice, which is essential for mastering multi-word expressions.

Another important aspect is the immediacy of feedback. Traditional vocabulary instruction often delays correction until the end of an activity, which may allow errors or confusion to persist. In contrast, digital tools provide instant responses, allowing students to adjust their understanding in real time. This aligns well with current learning theories (Schmitt, 2000) that emphasize timely, specific feedback as a driver of progress.

Additionally, the collaborative features of some platforms (e.g., Padlet) promote peer learning and autonomy, helping students engage with the material more deeply. When learners are given the opportunity to generate and share examples using lexical chunks, they are more likely to internalize them and remember their usage in future contexts.

Despite these advantages, it's important to note that digital tools are most effective when integrated with clear learning objectives and teacher support. Technology should not replace instruction but rather enhance it. Teachers must still guide chunk selection, contextualization, and scaffold usage, especially when working with idiomatic or culturally loaded expressions.

Conclusion

This study has shown that digital tools can significantly increase student engagement and support the effective teaching of lexical chunks in EFL classrooms. By providing interactive, enjoyable, and feedback-rich environments, platforms like Quizlet, Kahoot, and Padlet help students stay motivated and actively involved in vocabulary learning. When used strategically, these tools do more than simply present words — they allow students to practice chunks in meaningful contexts, collaborate with peers,

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and receive immediate correction. These elements contribute not only to better retention but also to the development of learner autonomy and confidence.

While the benefits are clear, it is essential that educators select and apply digital tools with intention, aligning them with pedagogical goals and learner needs. Future research could explore the long-term impact of digital vocabulary learning, or how specific tools affect different types of learners. Ultimately, blending traditional methods with thoughtfully chosen technology offers a promising path forward for teaching lexical chunks in a way that truly engages today's digital-native students.

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