GAMIFIED VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN EFL CLASSROOMS: ENHANCING RETENTION AND LEARNER MOTIVATION

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition remains a cornerstone of second language proficiency, yet conventional memorization techniques frequently fail to ensure long-term retention or maintain learner engagement. This paper examines the efficacy of gamified learning tools in expanding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lexical competence. Using a quasi-experimental design involving 48 intermediate EFL learners divided into an experimental group (utilizing digital gamified tools) and a control group (following traditional rote-learning methods), the study assessed vocabulary retention over a four-week intervention. Pre-test and post-test scores revealed statistically significant gains in lexical retrieval and delayed retention among participants exposed to gamified elements such as immediate feedback, point systems, and spaced repetition. The findings suggest that gamification transforms passive memorization into active linguistic engagement, offering practical implications for contemporary language pedagogy.

Keywords: Gamification, vocabulary acquisition, EFL pedagogy, digital learning, spaced repetition, student motivation.

Introduction

Acquiring an adequate lexical repertoire is critical for mastering a foreign language, serving as the foundation for reading comprehension, oral fluency, and communicative confidence. Traditionally, EFL learners have relied on mechanical repetition and decontextualized word lists, approaches that often result in cognitive fatigue and rapid attrition. With the digitalization of education, gamification—the

integration of game design elements such as points, leaderboards, and leveling mechanisms into non-game contexts—has emerged as a compelling pedagogical alternative. By fostering intrinsic motivation and lowering affective filters, gamified environments facilitate sustained cognitive engagement, making vocabulary learning both effective and durable.

Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test and post-test research design conducted over a four-week period. Participants comprised 48 intermediate-level (CEFR B1) secondary school EFL students, randomly assigned to an experimental group ($n = 24$) and a control group ($n = 24$).

Both cohorts targeted the same set of 120 academic English target words. The control group utilized conventional flashcards, textbook glossaries, and paper-based gap-fill exercises. The experimental group utilized digital gamification platforms (such as Quizlet and Kahoot) integrating spaced retrieval schedules, competitive leaderboards, and instant progress tracking. Quantitative data were gathered through a baseline pre-test, an immediate post-test, and a two-week delayed post-test to measure long-term retention.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis demonstrated notable disparities in lexical retention between the two groups:

Immediate Recall: The experimental group achieved a post-test mean score increase of 32.4%, compared to a 19.1% increase in the control cohort.

Delayed Retention: In the delayed post-test administered two weeks post-intervention, the experimental group retained 84% of target words, whereas the control group experienced a sharp decline, retaining only 61%.

These outcomes align with cognitive load theory and self-determination theory. Gamified mechanics provide immediate reinforcement and scaffolded repetition,

which reduces retrieval effort and reinforces memory traces in long-term storage. Furthermore, the competitive yet low-stakes nature of gamified tasks sustained learner motivation without inducing performance anxiety.

Conclusion

Gamification serves as a robust pedagogical framework for overcoming the limitations of rote lexical memorization in EFL settings. Integrating game mechanics enhances both immediate lexical acquisition and sustained retention while promoting active learner participation. Educators are encouraged to blend gamified platforms systematically into language curricula rather than employing them merely as sporadic warm-up activities.

References

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