



**Collaboration Using Flashcards to Improve Vocabulary**

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### **Collaboration Using Flashcards to Improve Vocabulary**

Increasing one's vocabulary is comparable to building a brick wall. Each brick represents a new word, and as terms are linked, they create sentences, and sentences become paragraphs. A paragraph reflects a student's point of view. Ngarofah and Sumarni (2018) called it communication. They consider vocabulary is the basics of good communication. They added grammar and correct pronunciation. In this regard, Wilkins (1972) stated that there is no communication without vocabulary; and, Boyd (2014) pointed out that learning vocabulary is a gradual process that takes time.

Lack of practice with new words becomes a significant challenge early in foreign language acquisition when learners cannot correctly spell the word, remember the meaning of new words, or pronounce such new words. Other limitations reported by teachers are in face-to-face classes, the size of the room, the number of contact hours, and the lack of resources (Hidalgo, 2015). Hasram et al. (2020) reported that EFL students in Malaysia have a limited vocabulary size that results in low proficiency level. Their study was conducted at a primary level institution. However, they mentioned the problem is also observed at higher level institutions where students should demonstrate a knowledge of about 2000 words in English.

Vocabulary is essential for foreign language learning, as it is required for expressing meaning and conveying ideas through both receptive and productive capacities (Carpenter & Olson, 2011, Mehring, 2006, Richards, 2001). Hasram et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of vocabulary knowledge in developing competences and mastering the second language. Authors from China recalled that high school students should evidence knowledge of at least 4000 words (Chang et al., 2021). In addition, Cameron (2001) believed that vocabulary is essential for elementary-level language development since it enriches learners' language. This line of thinking is also

shared by Chang et al. (2021). For them, there should be solid bases of vocabulary knowledge from elementary school. As a result, a method for supporting learners in acquiring vocabulary should be developed.

The improvement of vocabulary using flashcards has been investigated abroad. Ngarofah and Sumarni (2018) concluded that flashcards helped students recall words easily and understand better. Their participants were second-grade students. The design of the research was pre-experimental. Yusrika (2013) also conducted a study with primary school students. Her research was quasi-experimental. The treatment group was taught with flashcards and the control group with a word list. Results indicated that the intervention group was more motivated and improved the retention of new vocabulary with flashcards, unlike the control group, who found word lists to learn language boring.

Local research has been conducted at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Guevara, 2019; Hidalgo, 2015). A study was conducted in Loja with primary school students (Hidalgo, 2015). The researcher reported positive results in students' posttest. Besides, students change their attitude towards learning vocabulary. Guevara (2019) conducted action research at a private language school. The intervention included using pictures to raise students' use and knowledge of words. This study also reported positive results. The researcher used a pre and post-test design and instruments to measure vocabulary improvement. These studies both had a teacher-student interaction. The present proposal adds collaboration.

It has been observed that students in a private school have problems communicating in English either orally or in a written way. That limitation is due to students' lack of vocabulary. Thus, this proposal intends to test the usefulness of flashcards to help students increase their vocabulary depth and breadth. As stated

before, international and local researchers have tested flashcards to extend students' vocabulary knowledge, but no study included collaboration. That is the main reason to include it in this proposal.

### **Literature Review**

This section includes the summary of several authors who have investigated the use of flashcards to improve vocabulary. Definition of vocabulary, type of vocabulary, and how it should be taught are also included. Because this proposal integrates collaboration, it is added in this section.

#### **Vocabulary**

Boyd (2014) and Nation (1990) sustained that there are many aspects to be considered regarding vocabulary: connotation, collocation, grammatical function, register. Connotation refers to knowing the meaning of word in terms of having a positive, neutral or negative interpretation. Collocation is the meaning of a group of words that are placed together. Grammatical function implies the knowledge of the function of the vocabulary in the sentence. Lastly, register involves the level of formality of the words used.

Nation (1990) added other aspects to the previous list. To this author, knowing a word integrates three main fields: meaning, spelling, pronunciation, association, and frequency. For this author, students need to differentiate the several meanings a word may have. Spelling is important because one letter can lead to misunderstandings, for example: plan – plane. If words are not correctly pronounced, there are two issues: First, the listener will not know what the word is. Second, the writer will not know what to jot down. Therefore, there is a problem in communication. Association is the relationship words have with others, and it can also include the use of synonyms. Lastly, frequency implies how often it is used. It refers to the status of the lexis in terms of being new,

rare, or old-fashioned. Lastly, this author sustained that teaching vocabulary means teaching the concept behind a word.

In a more detailed description of “meaning”, Harmer (2007) pointed out that it is a complicated issue. He referred to it as knowledge of polysemy that is solved when words are found in context. He defined meaning as the relationship of each word to the ones used next to it. The relationships can be as being opposite or antonym, synonym, and hyponymy (list of words in a superordinate main one, like fruits and vegetables). Harmer added other meanings like the literal or metaphorical use; and, the connotational implications of a word. It indicates that it does not only describes an object but also feelings or ideas.

Boyd (2014) classified the previous lists into one group called “vocabulary depth”. However, students do not only need to learn the depth, they should also reach a vocabulary breadth which means certain number of words.

### **Types of vocabulary.**

One classification is given by Boyd (2014). She considered receptive and productive vocabulary. The first refers to the vocabulary found in texts or listened to. The second integrates the words that are used in productive skills of the language: speaking and writing. Another classification is active vs. passive vocabulary. Active vocabulary refers to the words people use on a daily basis or very frequently. On the contrary, passive vocabulary includes lexicon that is in the long-term memory but it is used in certain occasions.

### **Teaching vocabulary.**

For Richards and Renandya (2002), learning vocabulary is a complex process. Therefore, Ludvigsen (2015) sustained that vocabulary instruction should aim at being effective because there is a correlation between limited vocabulary and low language

comprehension. However, Harmer (2007) mentioned that there are students that have some prior knowledge and thus, teachers can elicit what students know about the topic. They can brainstorm ideas.

Despite the complexity of vocabulary learning and teaching, there are many approaches to teaching vocabulary. Hasram et al. (2020) tested online games at primary level. They sustained that online teaching is the new trend and is seemed as attractive to the digital natives (current generation). There are not any studies that indicate the register of the vocabulary in online games. Harmer (2007) favored games because they engage students and make students see and hear a range of words in a repetitive way.

Chang et al. (2021) suggested that teachers should consider meta-linguistic cognitive factors as well as awareness of phonology, orthography and morphology. They made a revision of studies and concluded that these elements can change positively English learning. They added that the focus should include vocabulary size, learning strategies, and memory methods.

Being vocabulary knowledge a cognitive skill, Chang and Wu (2013) provided with a list of what this integrates. A cognitive skill is about processing information, problem solving, representing symbolic operations in the mind, and thinking. They added that in order to develop any of the previous activities, there are some related skills like: perception, judgment, imagination, and knowledge of the language. Thus, learning a new language integrates the application of cognitive skills.

Under a communicative approach, Richards (2006) recommended teachers to plan for a variety of tasks and functions, to apply different types of register, to include several text-types, and communicate even though they teach beginning levels. It is undeniable that vocabulary must be integrated in the previous list. Harmer (2007) called this using the language many times. When students see the word in different times, they

think about them and organize them. This repetition helps to store the words in students' long-term memories and they are able to recall the lexis when they need to. Nation (1990) supported the idea of repetition in vocabulary teaching; and integrated the idea of new words that appear when the lesson is being taught. Thus, teachers should be prepared to answer those questions, or have students search for the word, or, as Harmer (2007) recommended, be honest and say they do not know.

There is even a lexical approach which dates back to the 90s. The foundations indicate that language does not refer to grammar and vocabulary in isolation but chunks or lexical phrases (Harmer, 2007). This approach suggested using word-order exercises and exposing students to a variety of input. Nonetheless, Harmer also mentioned some limitations like selecting the words to be ordered; and, knowing the purpose of such phrases for learning and teaching.

### **Flashcards**

Flashcards are teaching and learning aids. Harmer (2007) sustained that visuals can be used to show content. Aulia (2018) pointed out that flashcards can be used to explain the content or extend the information in a different way.

According to Cross (1991), flashcards are pictures pasted on a paper or card. They can contain individual words (Finocchiaro, 1974). Kasihani (2007) contributed with a more technical description. The author included a measurement for the cards and that the picture should not only have the visual but the name. For Halliwell (1992), these cards are used to show instructions. These review of definitions and usages do not come from updated documents, because flashcards have been a teaching resource from the 90s.

Guevara (2019) concluded that the application of visuals had benefits for EFL learning. She mentioned that students participated more. They improved in inferring,

meaning of words, and questioning. Besides, students took less time in classwork. Their comprehensions were more visible in the writing of sentences. Prior to the intervention, students wrote simple sentences whereas at the end, their sentences were longer.

Azabdaftari and Amin (2012) discussed the use of mobile learning and flashcards. They found that mobile learning was more effective. Among the advantages that mobile devices had compared to flashcards, they listed that students can access technology everywhere and any time. Feedback is received immediately in online resources. Interaction is also increased when technology is used. However, flashcards can also be accessible online resulting in the same benefits stated by the authors.

### **Collaboration**

Richards (2006) highlighted that there is learning when students work in pairs or groups. Thus, he listed the following process to optimize collaboration: purposeful interaction among students using the language, creating meaning in collaboration, and negotiating meaning to understand. He added to the previous list that students should pay attention to the language, use the new language introduced in classes, and try to say the same idea in different ways. Lastly, he mentioned that teachers should provide feedback.

Harmer (2007) also recommended group work due to the benefits that it offers to the learning process: increases participation of all students, adds a variety of perspectives that contribute to the task, integrates skills of cooperation and negotiation, empower individual students to participate within the groups, and raises autonomy.

There are some limitations described by Harmer (2007). Group work implies noise, some teachers may lose control of the class, students may have the feeling of not knowing what to do, not all students like to work in groups due to their preference to the teacher-guide sessions, some students may like to work with acquainted peers rather



than randomly assigned peers, some students may dominate the discussion, the time to organize these type of tasks may be longer. Thus, Harmer argued that not all activities should be performed in groups. So, teachers should choose which activities are conducted as a whole-group and which in group work.

According to Laal and Laal (2012), collaboration is an approach in which groups work together. Teachers should set a problem that will be solved by the groups. Students can complete a task or create a product together. To these authors, collaboration aims at positive dependence within the group, reliability of the participation of each student, social and interpersonal skill development, and group processing. Collaboration integrates social and intellectual skills within standards of respect to other's abilities, opinions, and perspectives. There is a sense of shared responsibility and authority. Teachers should monitor that there is consensus when students work in groups avoiding competition or individual predominance.

### **Innovation**

The implementation of collaboration using flashcards to improve vocabulary will take place in a private institution. It will last four weeks and will be part of a unit titled "Routines and Physical Appearance".

The plan is organized using the backwards design model. This means that the teacher must set a goal and from it the teacher plans the activities and assessment. It is expected that all the activities are aligned to the goal.

Because this implementation was introduced in a regular unit, the description here will focus only on the innovation. The beginning activities will engage students to actively participate during the intervention. The teacher will share the benefits of collaborating and the different types of groups that there will be for the next four weeks.

Students are attending regular classes. Thus, resources will be physical and digital. The application that will be used to show and practice with flashcards is Quizziz.

The visuals will aid at activating students' prior knowledge and introducing the tasks students will do in pairs or groups. Visuals will also reinforce three aspects of vocabulary: connotation, grammatical function, and register.

Students will work in collaboration with their peers and it is expected that with the different practices and the frequency students will be exposed to the words, they will internalize the spelling, pronunciation, and function of the words. After introducing the flashcards, students will speak or write and use the words in context.

### **Research Methodology**

This innovation will be implemented under an action research (AR) design. Authors highlight that AR is used to solve problems in education. It can be used by experts and practitioner researchers (Ferrance, 2000; Johnson, 2012). This will start with the application of a pretest and a posttest after the intervention to measure improvement. This AR intends to answer the following research questions:

- What is the effect of collaboration using flashcards to improve students' vocabulary depth and breadth?
- What are students' reactions towards the use of flashcards and their vocabulary improvement?

### **Participants**

Students belong to a private middle-class institution. It is situated to the north of the city of Guayaquil in the Vergeles district. Participants have an age ranging from 11-13 years. They are in seventh grade. Two groups will be chosen for the intervention.

One of them will be randomly chosen for this study. There are 28 students, half of them are male and the other half female. Their English level is A1.

### **Instruments**

In order to answer the two research questions, the following instruments will be applied:

#### **Pretest and posttest.**

This study intends to evidence improvement in vocabulary. The instrument to measure students' use of vocabulary will be a descriptive paragraph. The topics are daily routines and physical appearance. In the pretest, students have to describe their daily routine. They can write about five to ten sentences. They will be given 30 minutes to plan, draft, and revise their paragraphs.

The posttest will be similar to the pretest in terms of time assigned to write it and the extension of words. It will be different in the description. This time, students will write about someone in their families' routine and physical appearance. They will have to use transition or linking words.

To grade the pre and the posttest a checklist will be used. It will have a Likert scale that goes from Excellent (5) to needs improvement (1). The items of the checklist involve: mechanics (punctuation, capitalization, and spelling), vocabulary (depth and breadth), sentence structure, and transition words.

#### **Interview**

A sample of six students will be interviewed. They will be chosen according to their grades (best, mid, and low) to have a better perspective from all students. They will be asked four questions. The interview will be semi-structured. It means that the researcher can ask follow-up questions to clarify or expand students' answers. The questions are related to the benefits and difficulties of collaboration, flashcards, and if

students perceive they improve in vocabulary after their intervention. The questions will be in Spanish due to students' English level.

### **Data Analysis**

Results of the tests will be uploaded in a spreadsheet to generate descriptive statistics. Some of the statistics that will be run are: mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. With this information, a pair *t*-test will be calculated to determine if the results are due to the intervention.

Data from the interview will be transcribed in a word document. Emerging categories will be highlighted and organized to answer the question about students' perspectives. Results will be interpreted and exemplified with some quotes taken from students' answers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All researchers have to guide their work under some principles stated by the academia. Some of them are related to participants' integrity. In this study, a consent letter will be sent to students' parents. Prior to it, there will be a meeting to explain the research process. In the same meeting, the researcher will explain that the participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any moment. Data will not be disclosed. To assure that, there will be a codification process. Names will be replaced by numbers. Data will be anonymous and used only for academic purposes.

In addition, a letter will be sent to the authorities of the school to get their permission to conduct the study. Authorities will be explained of the benefits of the intervention and assured anonymity.

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**Appendix 1**

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

**Appendix 2**

**Checklist**

Available upon request.

**Appendix 3**

**Interview**

Available upon request.