

Using Wordwall online tool to Engage HUFLIT first-year students with Learning English Vocabulary

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Abstract: This study examines the application of Wordwall in engaging first-year students at the University of Foreign Languages - Information Technology to learn English vocabulary. Participants included two teachers working at HUFLIT school who have experience with using Wordwall. Both teachers took part in semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Research results show that Wordwall helps students engage in vocabulary learning in terms of emotion, behavior, and cognition engagement. From the teacher's perception, even though Wordwall has some limitations because of its reliance on the Internet and participating devices, it is still a really powerful tool for increasing student engagement in their vocabulary lessons.

Keywords: Wordwall, engagement, English, Vocabulary

1. Introduction

I noticed that my students were more enthusiastic when using online tools to learn vocabulary, which made me wonder whether the use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools in English teaching helps students to be engaged in learning vocabulary, so I want to investigate whether and how online tools - especially Wordwall arouse first-year students' enthusiasm to learn English vocabulary. In this paper, the efficacy of implementing the Wordwall application to engage students to learn vocabulary from the perspectives and observations of the teachers will be explored.

English is now widely acknowledged as having tremendous potential for societies and individuals due to its irrefutable contribution to the growth of human capital in the globalized world (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). According to Chowdhury and Kabir, (2014), in response to the dynamics of a more globally interconnected world, many South East Asian nations where English has been taught as a foreign language for decades now include English in their education system. In general, many EFL students still passively learn vocabulary and adhere to the teacher-centered philosophy (Nguyen, 2014). The results of Luu's (2011) study in a Vietnamese university showed that even had low intrinsic motivation to learn and believed that learning vocabulary was difficult.

To boost the students' interest in learning new

words, as a teacher at a university in Vietnam, I would like to incorporate an online interactive tool into my lessons, especially the vocabulary section. This article aims to evaluate the impact of the Wordwall application on students' interest in vocabulary learning. I also desire to investigate some of the difficulties that may arise with using it in a university setting and suggest ways to use this tool effectively.

2. Aims, objectives and research questions

This study aims to investigate the impact of Wordwall on stimulating students to learn vocabulary. In particular, the objective of this research is to examine whether the application of Wordwall can help first-year students more interested in learning vocabulary and ways to apply the application effectively in the teaching and learning English vocabulary process. The research question is:

What advantages and disadvantages does Wordwall have on first-year students' engagement in learning English vocabulary?

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

In this project, qualitative action research was utilized to address the problem stated about first-year students' interest in learning English vocabulary because action research strives to look at the evidence and improve conditions that the community deems to be unsatisfactory (Curle, 1949). What is more, qualitative action research was suitable because it is

flexible and shows gradual changes in social places such as educational institutions Grady (1998). Action research was carried out with the expectation that it would gradually solve the aforementioned problem since the nature of action research was the process of moving through a spiral of steps that was constituted of preparation, action, and the analysis of the outcome of the action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1990). Moreover, because action research emphasizes the link between those performing the research and those being studied to discover specific issues and recommend solutions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), the findings in this research most critically aided the researcher's professional development and the student's learning process. To bridge the gap in the literature on using Wordwall to promote first-year students' engagement in the Vietnamese setting, the researcher must learn from the participants.

3.2. Sample

The sample of this study included 28 students in one class and two experienced teachers. To preserve the project's objectivity, the students were not notified that they were being observed. There are 28 first-year students and two English teachers at a university in Ho Chi Minh City getting involved in the study. Through the school placement test in June 2023, most students in this class shared the same A2 level (CEFR scale), which best facilitated the evaluation of the effectiveness of the application of ICT tools during the study. Furthermore, the two teachers who were involved in the study's interview and observation process both had experience in using Wordwall and had many years of teaching experience for EFL learners in this school; this best facilitated the collection of crucial data for comprehending the issue under investigation (Efron & Ravid, 2013). After consulting with two of my coworkers, I specifically used self-reflection to answer the interview questions.

3.3. Research Instruments

The data in this study was obtained through the data from the observation notes and the face-to-face interviews of my two colleagues because utilizing more than one method of information gathering made it easier to compare and contrast the data to identify differences (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Specifically, my colleagues observed closely how students respond, their reactions, and non-verbal gestures when using the online tool – Wordwall to learn English vocabulary. I decided to use observation in my study because it could serve as a springboard for the interview

questions through which students' reactions, level of engagement, and interactions are recorded (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

The purpose of the interviews with colleagues was to gather information about the advantages and disadvantages and ways to optimize the potential of this tool. The interview approach was selected to make sure that, despite the time constraints, the most comprehensive data regarding the features of the web tool was gathered. Moreover, the data from the two interviews is very valuable because the interview allows participants to share their in-depth knowledge coming from their first-hand experience (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Importantly, interviews with two coworkers will be conducted entirely in Vietnamese so that they can freely express all of their points of view, and convey their emotions and thoughts.

3.4. Procedure

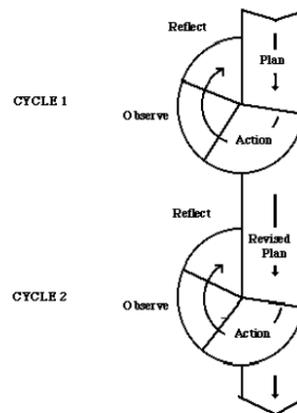


Figure 1 Simple Action Research Model (from MacIsaac, 1995) ^[ii]

This action research follows the research model of MacIsaac (1995), as shown in Figure 1 below. Each cycle includes four steps which are Plan, Action, Observe and Reflect. The third and fourth steps in my plan were integrated.

Phase 1: Plan

I developed my research topic based on my observations of the issues first-year students regularly faced in my classroom and my reflection on my teaching. I selected the issue that, at that time, required the most urgent resolution among the ones I identified to conduct the research. Moreover, I had to study the literature review from research on the same subject as mine to comprehend the issue more thoroughly, and reading the literature review continued until phase 3. I talked with my colleagues about this issue to gain more suggestions at the same time. The idea I

got after the discussion was then analyzed, clarified, and narrowed down to ensure the feasibility of the research. Following the identification of the research problem, the next stage was to seek solutions by reading literature reviews from related studies.

Once I determined the research problem and anticipated the participants of the research, I listed some other aspects which were the sample, data gathering methods, research instruments, and some other factors. The research instrument was one of the most crucial components at that point because it had to be based on the social context and permissible conditions for the participants.

An ethics declaration had to be created to guarantee that the research would be conducted ethically. My colleagues received letters of consent in which the topic was mentioned so that they could imagine the general picture and had enough time to think of ideas relating to the research topic.

The preparation of learning resources for the whole research project, including material used in class and on an online platform, had to be planned extremely carefully in advance. Although the majority of the material was from textbooks, it was crucial to think of adjusting materials to the online platform wisely. Moreover, the decision relating to which content would be taught in class and which content would be converted into a digital format using online technology also had to be carefully considered.

More importantly, a hallmark of the research was the usage of an online tool to aid in students' engagement in learning vocabulary. Therefore, it was crucial to carefully anticipate how the tool was used and to ensure that all students had adequate devices to have equal access to the tool. I thoroughly explored the features of this online tool by reading prior research articles and other relevant information before employing it in the classroom. Additionally, I created a teacher account to verify the tool's functionality and a student account. By this way, I could see the tool's interface as it would appear to students during the tool was used and could play the role of a student to learn the challenges they encountered while learning. There was a demo session to make sure all students were competent with the tool before it was really used to support students in their studies. Furthermore, I set up email or Facebook, Zalo problem-solving channels so that students could receive timely support should they run into technical problems while utilizing the application.

Phase 2: Action

This stage involved carrying out the plan. In addition to interviewing two colleagues, the students in my class were observed. The duration of the observation process was anticipated to be between four and six days. Interviews with coworkers were conducted in person depending on their schedules and the two interviews were recorded. The interviews were expected to take one to two days. Data was then collected for coding before being analyzed to find the general themes or subthemes.

Phase 3 and 4: Observe and Reflect

To properly understand the teaching process as well as how students engaged in the learning process using online tools, ongoing observation and reflection were done in this step. At this stage, I could see how frequently students engaged in online vocabulary learning activities. In addition, I could see if students attempted to self-correct their mistakes on the vocabulary tasks. I also used this tool in class and assigned homework to examine students' attitudes, reactions, and participation in the vocabulary-learning process. To make sure that no information was missed and that crucial information was meticulously refined, the coding data from two interviews with colleagues were done at least two times.

All data was reanalyzed to reflect on and identify the advantages and disadvantages of the project implementation before starting the new research cycle. The drawbacks were pointed out in detail so that solutions could be found and the quality of the subsequent cycle was ensured.

The following is a list of the interview questions I used to ask my colleagues regarding their opinions on using Wordwall to increase student involvement in the vocabulary learning process. During the actual interview process, there would inevitably be additional questions, or the questions would be modified based on the actual situation, the interviewee's attitude, and the participants' enthusiasm.

Here is a list of the interview questions I utilized for my research. To create the most comfortable environment for the participants, all questions are asked and responded to in Vietnamese.

1. *Why did you choose Wordwall as a tool for teaching vocabulary?*

2. *Before utilizing Wordwall, what method do you typically employ to teach vocabulary?*

3. *What distinguishes Wordwall from other vocabulary teaching support platforms that you have*

used?

4. How frequently do you employ this practice in the classroom, and how do you organize it? What effects does it have on student engagement? How did you evaluate the learners' responses to the technological tool?

5. What is the most useful feature of Wordwall, especially for engaging learners during vocabulary sessions?

6. Do you have any problems regarding the use of Wordwall to teach vocabulary? What disadvantages do you observe while using Wordwall?

7. Do you believe that using this tool in conjunction with another tool or method will help kids learn new words the most effectively? If so, what tools/methods do you recommend?

8. Would you recommend this online tool to other teachers to increase students' engagement in vocabulary learning?

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Advantages of Wordwall

4.1.1. Interface

The website of Wordwall utilizes simple, harmonious color schemes to create a relaxing atmosphere for visitors. The website's design is straightforward, scientific, and user-friendly. The use of appropriate, quality images will bring high efficiency. Wordwall supports a large number of images for users, which is extremely useful for teachers who wish to create flashcards without downloading additional images. Moreover, similar to Hasram et al. (2021)'s discovery, students' excitement is heightened by different sound effects in each suitable game interface.

4.1.2. Interactive platform and printable materials.

Teachers assumed that by using Wordwall to create both interactive and printable activities, they had flexibility in planning activities like using interactive games in class and printable materials for homework assignments. Teachers could download printables as PDF files or print them out immediately, this is consistent with Jannah and Syafryadin's findings in 2022 about the features of Wordwall. These materials could be used as stand-alone activities or in conjunction with interactive activities. On any web-enabled device, including a computer, tablet, phone, or interactive whiteboard, Wordwall interactive games can be played. Wordwall performs excellently in terms of cross-device support for interactivity. Students could play them by themselves or with the

teacher while taking turns to give responses in the class.

4.1.3. Templates and Themes

In addition to many well-known templates like quizzes and crosswords, Wordwall also offers a variety of brand-new templates. In line with Muslem, Yusuf, and Juliana (2018)'s research about the challenges teachers might face when using Wordwall, the results show that first-time teachers can take advantage of this greatly by starting with games with familiar interfaces if they lack the time to study all of them ("It took me 1 week to learn all the rules of the games" – Participant 1). Despite having to pay a small fee to use them all, teachers are delighted with this extensive collection of templates (Mohinakhon, 2022). The two teachers are also interested in the capacity to change the theme of each game, as each theme supports different colors, effects, and fonts to provide students with a fresh experience ("There are many templates" – Participant 2).

4.1.4. Homework

One teacher also assigns homework via Wordwall. This teacher also confirms that observing the data of students completing homework over the weekend enables them to determine which students are making good progress in learning English (Dunkel, 1991), because Wordwall allows students to select their preferred template to ensure assignment completion (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011).

4.1.5. Saving time and sharing

In line with the discovery of Bueno, Perez, Valerio, and Areola in 2022, teachers only need to enter data into the Wordwall once; the rest of the system will operate autonomously to provide multiple game interfaces. This saves teachers a significant amount of time when creating game activities, as they previously had to create each effect using PowerPoint presentation software. In addition, teachers can share their game designs with the teacher community, thereby saving time for many individuals and fostering growth.

Participant 1: *The interface for Wordwall is simple, and the images are very intuitive. Particularly numerous interfaces when compared to previous applications used. I believe that the multiple interfaces will make it difficult for students to lose interest in learning. Teachers only have to put data once, and teachers in the same grade can save time by sharing documents. I don't need to spend a lot of time designing Powerpoint slides.*

Participant 2: *Students can participate using various devices such as laptops or mobile phones. I can change many templates, and the music of each template is very lively, creating excitement for students. I also use Wordwall to assign assignments, but because students only use their phones on weekends, I often print them out and the templates of Wordwall are also very diverse.*

4.1.4. Wordwall increases students' engagement in Vocabulary learning

The three components of engagement, according to Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), are behavioral (the actions), emotional (how they feel about doing the work), and cognitive (how much attempt they make to learn)

Emotional engagement

All teachers agree that students' attitudes are extremely positive when using Wordwall to learn vocabulary and this is similar to the finding of Felszeghy et al., (2019). Students can alter their preferred assignment templates on their own devices. This creates a relaxed environment because students do not feel compelled to conform to the group's pace and structure (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). Moreover, when the vocabulary review exercises are integrated into the Wordwall platform, as opposed to doing the exercises in the textbook, almost all students participate and have a favorable view when doing the exercises (Lee & Hammer, 2011).

Behavioral engagement

In addition, after completing the task, students can view the leaderboard to see their scores and enjoy the feeling of competition. Similar to Cahyani (2016)'s research, this is evident when students who perform well want the teacher to play the game repeatedly to "get even" with their classmates. Moreover, for lower-level students, the fact that they do not lose face when selecting answers boosts their confidence because each student has their own input device (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011).

Cognitive engagement

Similar to Zarzyńska-Piskorz (2016)'s research, cognitive engagement is also demonstrated by the improvement of scores each time a student redoes an assignment that is evident on the leading board. These two teachers recognize that students are trying to improve their grades and that many students want to get the most out of them by doing the same thing over and over again. This result, in the same vein with Urh (2015)'s study, shows that students get the

opportunity to recall and demonstrate what they have studied, so they are very interested in participating to test their learning

Participant 1: *"While observing, I see your students are very excited and many students ask to reorganize the game to compete. Some students use nicknames to avoid losing face on the leaderboard. Almost 100% of students participate in activities"*

Participant 2: *"Most of the students have a very positive attitude, especially excited to see their name ranked high on the leader board"*

4.2. Disadvantages of applying Wordwall

The first drawback is that using online learning tools necessitates a steady Internet connection speed. Some students find it difficult to play the game when there are too many devices trying to access the network and there are noticeable signs of lag. As more students rely on the Internet to complete their assignments, it becomes more difficult to control disruptive behavior in the classroom.

A major disadvantage of Wordwall compared to other applications is the lack of audio reading vocabulary. Compared to Quizlet with integrated audio in flashcards, Wordwall has not developed this feature.

Additionally, when playing the game, some students are crucial to the outcome and tend to memorize the answers; as a result, when the teacher clarifies the answer once more after the game, students show signs of negligence.

Participant 1: *It is extremely difficult for all students to have mobile devices. The Internet at school when there are too many students access is quite slow. Sometimes teachers have to manually distribute wifi for students to use. In addition, when observing students, when working in groups due to sharing equipment, they tend not to participate in activities*

Participant 2: *Another disadvantage of Wordwall is that it does not support audio. Compared to Quizlet, when using the flashcard feature, sound effects are already built in. Therefore, teachers need to use other software to support Wordwall if they want to have the sound of words.*

5. Conclusion

The study has highlighted many advantages and disadvantages in the context of a university to understand how Wordwall can help first-year students engage in learning vocabulary. The results of this study show that, despite a few drawbacks in

the feature application, Wordwall generally offers huge benefits to support students' engagement in learning such as (1) Students review vocabulary with a positive attitude; (2) Students pay more attention to the lessons, and (3) Students at relatively same levels are more comfortable engaging in learning. Teachers taking part in the observational studies and interview sessions concur that Wordwall has the potential to involve students in the learning process. The results of this study are consistent with many studies on the Wordwall application conducted in primary and secondary high schools, even though no research has been done in Vietnam about increasing engagement for first-year students. These results suggest that Wordwall is suitable to use in classes of all ages and sizes. Teachers can also easily use many game templates that Wordwall offers in reviews and warm-up activities. However, there are still certain objective factors that students must deal with, such as the Internet's dependability or devices to participate. In general, the study was carried out on a small scale, with few teachers participating. This is what might lead to biased research. A larger sample size and more classes could be used in future research to determine the most efficient ways to incorporate Wordwall into the teaching process and to teach all four English language skills.

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