Chapter 11
Bridging Traditional and Digital Pedagogies in Blended ESL Vocabulary Learning:
Learner Perception and Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is a vital component in language learning, yet second language (L2) learners often find it challenging and uninteresting. This study explores the effectiveness of blended learning in enhancing vocabulary knowledge among 76 primary school pupils in Johor Bahru. Using a mixed-method approach, data were gathered through pre-tests, post-tests, questionnaires, and interviews. An independent t-test revealed that pupils in the blended learning group outperformed those in the traditional group. Questionnaire results showed high levels of positive perception and intrinsic motivation toward blended learning. Interview data further supported these findings. The study concludes that blended learning improves vocabulary performance and motivation, highlighting its potential as a valuable instructional strategy in L2 education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English is a complex language with an extensive lexicon, comprising approximately 171,476 words (Djiwandono, 2013). A limited vocabulary range can significantly hinder an individual's ability to comprehend texts and communicate effectively, underscoring the fundamental role of vocabulary in language acquisition. As the backbone of language proficiency, vocabulary is essential for mastering reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, and it has been positively correlated with academic performance, including Grade Point Average (GPA) (Hong & Stapa, 2023; Cao, 2023; Daniel & Villanueva, 2023). Despite its importance, vocabulary learning is often perceived by learners as monotonous and boring (Katemba, 2022), necessitating pedagogical strategies that can engage and support students more effectively.

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language from preschool through tertiary education, guided by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as a standardized benchmark for proficiency. However, many learners, particularly at the primary level, continue to demonstrate limited vocabulary mastery, which negatively affects their overall language competence. Moreover, national reports and CEFR-aligned assessments reveal that a significant proportion of students fail to reach the expected A2 or B1 levels. Traditional methods emphasizing word lists and rote memorization have proven ineffective, especially among digital-native learners who crave interactivity and relevance. Effective vocabulary instruction, therefore, requires both repeated exposure and meaningful context, both of which can be enhanced through blended learning models. This persistent gap highlights the need for more dynamic and inclusive instructional models.

According to recent CEFR-aligned national assessments, over 40% of Malaysian Year 6 (12 years old) ESL learners fail to meet the A2 benchmark, reflecting persistent lexical underachievement (Hong & Stapa, 2023). These deficits are particularly pronounced in rural and underserved schools, where instructional approaches remain predominantly teacher-centered and textbook-based. The traditional emphasis on rote memorization and decontextualized word lists has not yielded substantial improvements in vocabulary acquisition. Compounding this issue is a lack of differentiated instructional strategies that accommodate learner diversity, especially in vocabulary development. Without sufficient lexical knowledge, learners struggle to comprehend texts, construct meaningful sentences, and participate in communicative tasks, skills that are foundational to language mastery and broader academic success.

In light of these challenges, blended learning emerges as a promising pedagogical alternative. However, its implementation is not without complications. Structural inequities such as inconsistent internet access, limited device availability, and significant variability in teacher digital literacy present formidable obstacles, particularly in rural school settings. Additionally, overreliance on digital tools without pedagog-

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