

Chapter 11

Closing in on Vocabulary Acquisition: The Use of Mobile Technologies in a Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary acquisition is one of the critical building blocks in acquiring foreign language fluency. While a number of studies have focused on effective vocabulary learning techniques for second language learners, several confounding factors complicate the practical application of this research in a classroom. For instance, faculty, pressed for time and results, frequently find it too cumbersome to explore new variations in their teaching and opt for standard methods of providing students with vocabulary lists which the student are expected to study on their own using their own methods. This tactic falters when the students are unaccustomed to second language learning and have not yet identified effective learning strategies suited to their own learning styles. This chapter will discuss one attempt to resolve this problem through the use of mobile devices as digital flashcards. This technological intervention may address the need to help students study vocabulary more effectively and do so in practical, sustainable ways that do not increase work loads for faculty, students, or academic technical support staff. Based on the results from a small-scale study, the authors make recommendations about this pedagogical approach and the technology used, aiming toward the goal of creating a pedagogically sound and scalable application of mobile devices in foreign language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Carleton College is a small residential liberal arts institution for undergraduates in Northfield, MN. Our institution requires foreign language study, which can be met through study in any of five language departments which offer a total of ten different languages (Department of Asian Languages & Literatures: Chinese, Japanese; Department of Middle Eastern Languages: Arabic, Hebrew; Department of Classical Languages: Greek, Latin; Department of Romance Languages & Literatures: French, Spanish; Department of German & Russian). For instance, a student can complete their foreign-language requirement in the French & Francophone Studies Department by completing four classes—French 101, 102, 103 and 204. Students should achieve intermediate fluency in the target language at the end of the sequence. Classes are conducted five days a week over three 10-week terms for the first academic year of the language sequence. Students are expected to reach an intermediate level of language control by the third term, progressing to a high level proficiency by the end of the required sequence in their second year. To achieve this level of achievement, students are expected to learn a large amount of material very quickly, finishing the entire elementary book in two 10-week terms. Given this time pressure and the pedagogical goals of the sequence, our instructors are constantly exploring new ways to meet the goals of their curriculum, such as new technologies that can help students acquire language basics more quickly. This allows students and instructors to spend more class time on communicative activities designed to increase students' ability to become high-functioning speakers of French.

It goes without saying that a student must acquire a large amount of vocabulary in order to achieve a level of proficiency in the target language. At the college level, vocabulary is not frequently tested discretely, but embedded into grammar, writing, and speaking exercises in which

students must demonstrate the ability to use both the pertinent vocabulary and the grammatical and culturally appropriate knowledge. These activities tend to be part of “an explicit learning/teaching paradigm” (Ma, 2009, p. 114) in which students also study vocabulary separate from other aspects of language, such as grammar forms or syntax. Instructors expect students to learn vocabulary through drilling as well as other, implicit contextual techniques, such as dialogs or short written pieces that include new vocabulary. However, in many cases, faculty shy away from suggesting specific strategies for vocabulary acquisition, instead trusting students to discover methods that work best for themselves.

For students, then, vocabulary study can become a monotonous and time-consuming area of study. Many students attempt to learn new words through a wide variety of methods, including rote memorization or creative mnemonics (Ma, 2009). Even as students struggle to find more effective ways to acquire more vocabulary, instructors strive to provide students with more opportunities to use their new knowledge, hoping that greater opportunities for comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, 1985) and production of the foreign language will lead to a higher rate of achievement (Krashen et al).

It is at this intersection of needs that both faculty and students may turn towards technology. Students hope that technology will make it easier for them to acquire new language skills, while foreign language faculty hope that it can help streamline the content delivery so that class time can be focused on interactive and communicative tasks. One of the most common myths believed by both students and faculty is that the use of technology—any technology—will automatically meet the need to learn more information more rapidly. However, since “technology is theoretically and methodologically neutral” (Blake, 2008, p.11), the mere adoption of the newest language learning package will rarely meet these goals. It becomes critical to examine not only the theoretic-

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