

Learning Technology Review

Vocabulary.com

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type	Online vocabulary quiz application
Language(s)	English
Level	Intermediate or above
Activity	Creating personalized online quizzes and testing lexical knowledge
Media Format	Online
Operating Systems	Requires iOS 6.1 or later Requires Android 4.1 or later
Supplementary Software	None
Documentation	Vocabulary.com illustrates the principles of the application design and the benefits of using the application for vocabulary learning at https://www.vocabulary.com/howitworks/ The application also includes descriptions for the 'Educator Edition' at https://www.vocabulary.com/educator-edition/
Price	Educator Edition The subscription fee for the Educator Edition is from free (up to two students per teacher) to US\$576 annually (up to 200 students per teacher). A price list can be found at https://www.vocabulary.com/educator-edition/pricing/ Mobile application (Student Edition) US\$2.29 for iPhone US\$3.19 for Android

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General Description

Vocabulary.com (<https://www.vocabulary.com/>) is an application (hereafter app) designed to promote English vocabulary learning. The primary learning activities users can engage in with the app include: (1) taking short personalized online quizzes; and (2) learning or consolidating vocabulary by accessing immediate feedback. The website describes the strengths of learning vocabulary using the app by stating it is “the quickest, most intelligent way to improve vocabulary”. Readers can find details of the design principle and benefits of using the application for vocabulary learning at <https://www.vocabulary.com/howitworks/>

To help users to learn vocabulary efficiently, Vocabulary.com adopts “sophisticated algorithms” to choose essential words for each user from over 14,000 words. Based on the results, the app then creates personalized quizzes for each user. In addition to the quizzes, Vocabulary.com provides multiple functions for promoting vocabulary learning including: (1) online dictionaries; (2) vocabulary lists; (3) vocabulary games; (4) spelling practice while listening to the pronunciation; and (5) progress reports. The app provides both computer- and smartphone-based platforms (both iPhone and Android). The computer-based platform is free, whereas users are required to purchase the smartphone-based platform. However, accessing the app via a smartphone allows users to use their downtime efficiently to learn English vocabulary anytime and anywhere. The Educator Edition provides educators with useful functions for promoting online and blended learning courses, including the capability to monitor the progress of each learner on the platform. Details of the Educator Edition can be accessed at <https://www.vocabulary.com/educator-edition/>.

Evaluation

Technological Features

The registration process for Vocabulary.com is easy. Potential users can create an account by clicking either the green “sign up” icon at the top right of the home page, or the green “sign up free” icon or “start learning/teaching” icon located in the middle of the home page. The app then prompts the user to create an account either by using an existing Google or Facebook account or by registering their user information. Users can easily start to take online quizzes as the app displays a page for taking the quizzes once the users log in.

Despite the straightforward registration process, users need to carefully explore the platform to use the app correctly due to the poor design of the

website. The first problem is the poor readability of the navigation page. To read the navigation directions, users need to highlight each navigation word by moving the cursor to the top of each word. The web designer could enhance readability by using high contrast colours in the background as well as font types which easily stand out.

Secondly, the terminology used in the navigation system may confuse first-timer users. For example, the app uses “Play” to direct users to the quiz page. However, first-time users may not associate “Play” with an icon navigating them to a quiz page. Therefore, web designers need to replace such confusing terminology with more simple and explicit terminology so that users can easily navigate the platform.

Finally, complicated navigation paths make it hard for first-time users to navigate the system efficiently. For example, users need to first go to “Assignments & Activities” in order to do spelling dictation activities as well as to play the vocabulary quizzes with friends. However, the web designer could simplify the navigation path by providing direct entry to all learning activities such as “taking online quizzes”, “practising spelling” and “playing online games”.

Pedagogical Features

Each English word has a different “word learnability”; that is, the ease or difficulty level to learn a certain word (Laufer, 1990, p. 147). Each user is learning or has learned vocabulary with different levels of “word learnability”. Vocabulary.com guides users’ vocabulary learning like a “tutor” (e.g., Jonassen, Carr, and Yueh, 1998) by asking vocabulary questions based on their vocabulary size and providing immediate feedback. To promote efficient vocabulary learning, Vocabulary.com selects essential words for each user by comparing the user’s test performance with the test performances of other users, covering more than 14,000 words. The app then generates personalized quizzes for each user by including these words in the quizzes.

Types of online quizzes users can take include: (1) quizzes automatically generated by the app for each user; (2) custom-made quizzes produced by each user by pasting words or reading materials into the app; and (3) quizzes created by other users such as English teachers. Each user has certain words for different learning stages: (1) new words for the user; (2) words the user has seen or heard but is unsure about; (3) words users know but need to consolidate; and (4) words users have mastered. To help users to learn words during the different learning stages, the app asks different categories of questions: (1) words the user is ready to learn; (2) words the user is still learning; (3) words

the user has learned recently but needs to consolidate; and (4) words the user has mastered but would like to review.

Immediately after the user selects a response to a question, Vocabulary.com gives feedback (see Figure 1). Using the feedback, users can see the correct response for the question as well as the lexical meaning by reading the in-depth explanation of the word.



Figure 1. A screenshot of responses provided by Vocabulary.com.

In addition to online quizzes, Vocabulary.com provides multiple functions to promote user vocabulary learning. Using the “Look Up” function, users can search the lexical meaning of words they wish to learn. For example, Figure 2 below shows the search result for “landscape” using this function. As seen in the image, the function provides an in-depth lexical meaning of the word. Users can learn how to pronounce the word by clicking a speaker icon as shown in Figure 2. They can also add the word to their vocabulary lists and review it later by clicking “Add to List”.

Vocabulary.com also provides a visual thesaurus function. Clicking the “Thesaurus” icon, shown in Figure 2, users can further explore words with similar meaning by looking at the visual representation using the mind-map format. Vocabulary.com incorporates several gamification elements in the platform to help users learning vocabulary in an enjoyable way. “Vocabulary Jam” is a function to create online games based on the user’s vocabulary lists. Users can invite a friend to play the game and compete to demonstrate their vocabulary knowledge by playing the game together (see Figure 3). Creating an online game is easy; users just need to click one of their vocabulary lists in “My List” in the navigation page. By playing the game with a friend, users can apply and consolidate their lexical knowledge.

“Spelling Bee” is another useful function for learning the spelling of English words, and their meaning, in an enjoyable way. Users can practice how to spell words they have added to their word lists by listening to the pronunciation

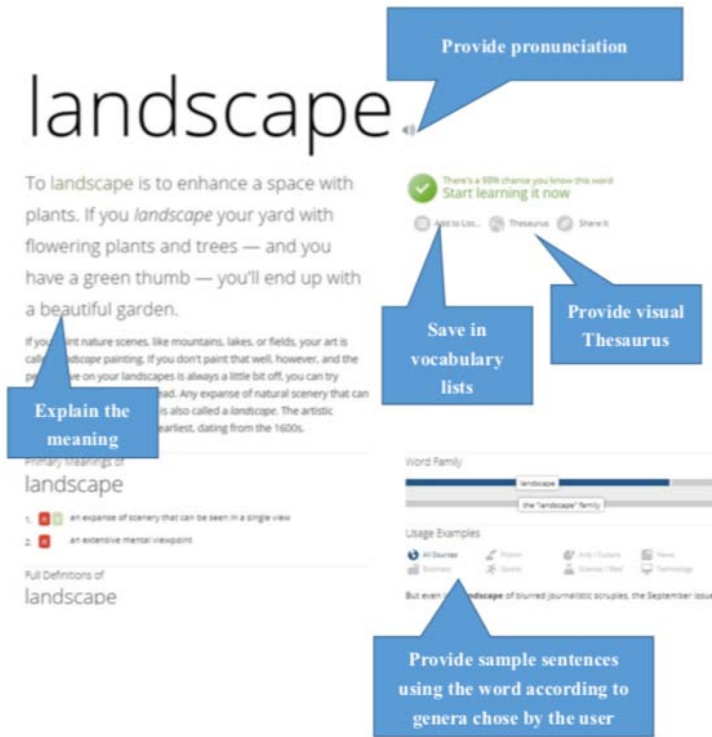


Figure 2. A search result for the word *landscape*.

and reading the descriptions of the word. To motivate users to work hard on the exercises, Vocabulary.com shows the number of words that users have completed, the percentage of correct responses per question, and the length of time they spent on completing the activity.

Vocabulary.com also integrates elements of gamification to show the users' learning achievement and motivate them to learn vocabulary using the app. "My Progress" (Figure 4) shows the number of words that the user answered in the quiz, the words mastered in the word list, and the time spent answering the questions. Users can increase their ranking among users by collecting more points and badges in the quizzes.

Vocabulary.com promotes personalized vocabulary learning for each user by employing sophisticated algorithms and offering a custom-made quiz function. In particular, this app is useful for engaging learners in vocabulary learning using their downtime efficiently. Despite the benefits however, learning activities provided by the app are limited to passive vocabulary learning: (1)



Figure 3. A screenshot of “Vocabulary Jam”.



Figure 4. A screenshot of “My Progress”.

identifying the correct response to the question; and (2) understanding the lexical meaning of words by reading the descriptions. Vocabulary.com could enhance the efficiency of vocabulary learning on the platform by adopting functions to promote active vocabulary use such as uploading short sentences the user has constructed and by offering feedback from native speakers. Interactions with native speakers not only informs users of appropriate expressions for erroneous attempts but also motivates them to learn the target language (e.g., Cho, 2015).

Teacher Fit

Vocabulary.com is a useful app for language educators who are motivated to enhance vocabulary teaching both in online and blended courses. Using the app, educators can create custom-made vocabulary quizzes based on their teaching materials. The link to the quiz can be shared with students through the learning management system used in the course so that learners can complete the quizzes as homework or at a convenient time to them. The Educator Edition provides more advanced functions to promote online and blended teaching, such as: (1) creating classes and assigning quizzes to learners in a certain class; (2) monitoring the progress of each learner; and (3) receiving suggested words to include in the quizzes based on the students' quiz performances. The pricing for the Educator Edition varies according to the number of students. Some educators therefore may be reluctant to use the advanced functions unless their institute covers the subscription fee.

Learner Fit

Vocabulary.com fits well with learners preparing to take English proficiency exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS. They can practice English vocabulary tested in these exams by creating custom-made quizzes for the exam and by pasting vocabulary lists and reading materials prepared for the exam takers. The application format, taking short vocabulary quizzes, is also suitable for learners who want to learn words using their downtime efficiently.

Despite the benefits, Vocabulary.com is not suitable for all English learners. First, low language proficiency learners may find it difficult to navigate the site due to the English interface, as well as to understand the feedback written in English. Low language proficiency learners can learn vocabulary more efficiently by using apps produced in their first languages. For example, Japanese learners with low proficiency English language skills can use websites such as '天才英単語' (genius English vocabulary) <http://www.tentan.jp/>, which provide a Japanese interface and feedback in Japanese. In addition, some learners may feel unmotivated by the routine quiz design. However, they can get around this by using the app to complete short learning activities. For example, learners can adopt Vocabulary.com as a supplementary and regular learning activity to engage in for 10 minutes each day. They can also use the app to learn vocabulary while they are commuting.

Summary

Vocabulary.com promotes learners' vocabulary learning by providing short online vocabulary quizzes, explanations of answers, and online dictionaries.

In particular, the sophisticated algorithm and custom-made quiz function allow users to learn essential vocabulary at their level of proficiency efficiently. Educators can adopt the app to promote vocabulary teaching in online and blended online courses. However, the website designers could enhance vocabulary learning on the platform by improving the readability of the webpages, using explicit navigation words, and providing a simplified navigation path. It would also be worthwhile for the website designers to integrate functions to upload short sentences written by users and to offer feedback from native speakers. Such app design improvements may optimize vocabulary learning using Vocabulary.com.

References

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