

The effect of using Wordwall as a primary digital tool to increase seventh-grade EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge

El efecto de usar Wordwall como herramienta digital principal para aumentar el conocimiento de vocabulario en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera de séptimo grado

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Abstract

In today's educational context, where technology and innovation serve as fundamental elements in educational practices and considering that digital tools have become more popular, teachers must learn to use them and offer new ways of learning. For instance, one resource that has emerged to facilitate learning is Wordwall, which contains a wide range of templates through which teachers can promote vocabulary activities that facilitate the acquisition of new words and concepts specific to the target language. The current research was made to analyze the impact of employing Wordwall as a primary digital tool to foster seventh-grade EFL learners' vocabulary through a quantitative method using print questionnaires such as pre-test, post-test, and Likert surveys as instruments. The study was conducted in a public institution with students from low-income families who have always received a traditional education. The results showed an improvement in vocabulary acquisition after receiving instruction using Wordwall. It was also found that students' oral communication skills improved after an intervention, thus demonstrating that the use of Wordwall aligns with new current pedagogies that promote active learning and the personalization of educational activities.

Keywords: English language learning; vocabulary; Word wall

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Resumen

En el contexto educativo actual, donde la tecnología y la innovación son elementos fundamentales en las prácticas educativas, considerando que la creciente popularidad de las herramientas digitales, los docentes deben aprender a usarlas y ofrecer nuevas formas de aprendizaje. Por ejemplo, un recurso que ha surgido para facilitar el aprendizaje es Wordwall, que contiene una amplia gama de plantillas con las que los docentes pueden promover actividades de vocabulario que facilitan la adquisición de nuevas palabras y conceptos específicos de la lengua meta. La presente investigación analiza el impacto de emplear Wordwall como herramienta digital principal para fomentar el vocabulario de estudiantes de inglés de séptimo grado mediante un método cuantitativo que utilizó pre-test, post-test y encuestas Likert. El estudio se realizó en una institución pública con estudiantes de familias de bajos recursos que siempre han recibido educación tradicional. Los resultados mostraron una mejora en la adquisición de vocabulario tras recibir instrucción con Wordwall. También se observó que las habilidades de comunicación oral de los estudiantes mejoraron después de la intervención, lo que demostró que el uso de Wordwall se alinea con las actuales pedagogías que promueven el aprendizaje activo y la personalización de las actividades educativas.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje del idioma inglés; vocabulario; muro de palabras.

Introduction

Vocabulary learning is an essential component in the EFL teaching acquisition process as it allows students to develop key skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and oral communication. For EFL learners, vocabulary acquisition can be a challenge due to the limited use of the language outside of the EFL context and the limitations of traditional teaching methods (Ramadhan & Zaharani, 2021). According to Imas et al. (2024), most students have trouble communicating effectively in oral or written form due to a lack of vocabulary. Thus, the lack of vocabulary in EFLs is a widely studied aspect that has called the need to implement or develop various teaching methods or strategies that complement or replace traditional teaching (Weran et al., 2024).

In this context, digital tools have become more relevant, providing new opportunities to enrich learning through interactive activities, immediate feedback, and opportunities to practice language and vocabulary in various situations (Afzal, 2019). Thus, the interest in studying the implementation of digital resources in EFL teaching has been growing. It has been shown that digital tools have numerous benefits, including making the learning process more interesting and interactive, reducing teaching-learning time, improving learning quality, and encouraging autonomous learning (Suwartono & Aniuranti, 2018). Likewise, Amiryousefi (2015), proposes that methodologies and strategies should be implemented that encourage students to learn according to their level and learning styles.

While past studies have found Wordwall to be effective in improving word memory and motivation in EFL learners (Ramadhan & Zaharani, 2021), others have found mixed results due to lack of knowledge and pronunciation skills of learners (Herawati & Sutisna, 2024). Similarly, research conducted in Ecuador demonstrates that Quizzis and Wordwall effectively improve

the vocabulary and oral and grammatical skills (Pesántez & Naranjo, 2023). While Auquilla et al. (2024) found that it encouraged teamwork, the main disadvantage was that using Wordwall alone was insufficient to ensure that all students participated orally. Although the benefits and drawbacks of Wordwall have been documented, studies have not focused sufficiently on younger learners. Therefore, the following study was conducted at Bracamoros Institution Loja, Ecuador, with 13 seventh-grade EFL students with the aim to determine the effectiveness of using WordWall in fostering vocabulary. This study used pre-test, post-test, and surveys as instruments to answer the following research questions:

- What is the effect of using Word Wall as the main digital tool in improving EFL learners' vocabulary?
- What are the benefits and challenges of using word wall as a medium to teach vocabulary?
- How do students perceive the effect of WordWall on their vocabulary learning?

Theoretical Framework

Vocabulary Acquisition in Language Learning

According to Cameron (2001), vocabulary acquisition is the most essential aspect of language learning, and the number of words learned in a given time is the best indicator of how well a language has been learned. In this regard, Wang et al. (2024), state that vocabulary is the basic knowledge that must be mastered in linguistic skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, whether incidentally or intentionally. Incidental learning is defined as learning that occurs as a byproduct of another type of learning. In contrast, intentional learning is planned by students or teachers. What matters most is how well they learn words in different ways (Kweon and Kim, 2008).

Regarding challenges in the acquisition of EFL vocabulary, Yulia and Fazaki (2023), mention that the traditional approach to vocabulary acquisition in EFL teaching involves assigning students a certain number of new words to learn each day and completing set learning tasks under the supervision of teachers to consolidate the new vocabulary through exercises and verbal expressions. However, this process of intentionally memorizing a large number of new words can result in an overwhelming memory load for students, making it difficult to maintain long-term memory and, eventually, study fatigue. In this regard, Amiryousefi (2015), mentions that relying on rote vocabulary learning for an extended period can lead to fatigue, affecting learners' long-term motivation, and causing them to find the process tedious, lose interest, and thus reduce their vocabulary level.

Consequently, to ensure that students adequately learn the target vocabulary, teachers must apply strategies and methods with timely feedback on their learning outcomes and guarantee that students acquire the target vocabulary.

Active learning

Constructivist theories have formed the basis of popular educational theory as it is an educational approach that holds that people learn about and understand the world through their own experiences and by thinking about those experiences. For the constructivist, learning essentially stores information for later recall (Lin, 2015). This theory emphasizes what the learner does in any learning situation as an active creator of meaning and problem solver. Thus, students are the ones who construct their own knowledge when active learning is promoted. It adheres to the theory of constructivism, and students can acquire knowledge through exploration (Hartikainen et al., 2019). Through active learning, students can acquire or improve their vocabulary by exploring traditional and digital resources. Traditional resources are textbooks, dictionaries, and flashcards, while digital resources are presented in a wide variety on the internet. One of them is Wordwall, a technological resource that can be used to encourage active student learning.

Word Wall

Zaharani (2022), mentions that in traditional teaching most English teachers use dictionaries to teach new words, which can quickly tire students and slow their vocabulary learning process. Recognizing this problem, English teachers need to find new ways to teach students to learn words, which is a fun activity that motivates them to learn words. In this regard, Herawati and Sutisna (2024), mention that nowadays, students are digital natives, and teachers must integrate technology according to the student's goals and needs. In this way, Word wall strategy is the best ways to teach vocabulary because it is an interactive learning tool that lets students make and use the vocabulary wall. For Sari (2024), Word wall allows educators to create interactive activities and facilitate teaching in various formats, such as games, quizzes, and association exercises. Along the same lines, Weran et al. (2024), describe the Wordwall application as an online platform that allows users to create various games such as quizzes, matching, anagrams, word scrambling, word search, grouping, etc. Using the Wordwall students search and find the meaning of words directly.

Implementing Wordwall as a Teaching Strategy to Improve Vocabulary

The primary goal of a word wall in EFL teaching is to help students become visually aware of words so they can quickly identify them. This engages students and reinforces their understanding

of key vocabulary and phrases, allowing them to connect words and achieve fluency (Herawati & Sutisna, 2024). According to Imas et al. (2024), the use of Wordwall is an effective approach to improve students' vocabulary mastery and reading ability because it allows students to organize, remember, spell, and identify patterns and relationships between words. Amaliyah and Mastuti (2023), express that word wall provides students with a rich environment of diverse and interesting words which improves vocabulary memory and oral communication skills. It also gives students a reference tool they can use while they are learning English as a foreign language.

A study conducting by Chong and Kee (2019), showed that students couldn't remember vocabulary in the target language. For example, in Malaysia, it was found that students did not remember the vocabulary of four new words they had learned the day, other students recognized the spoken or written form of the words but could not determine their meaning without teacher assistance. Similarly, Afzal (2019), states that ineffective teaching practices adopted in teaching and learning vocabulary are one of the causes of students do not master vocabulary because some teachers do not know how to use the technological well, and traditional ways of teaching are not attractive to students when learning the subject. Thus, researchers suggest teachers use technological resources to make teaching a positive linguistic experience. In this regard, Kessler (2018), remarks a growing need for independent learning through online platforms and e-learning in Malaysia and other countries that teach English as a foreign language.

Along the same lines, Triariani (2020), carried out a study to evaluate Wordwall's efficacy in teaching EFL vocabulary. The participants were 55 seventh grade students divided into control and experimental groups. The control group was taught new vocabulary through traditional teaching, whereas the experimental group was introduced to new vocabulary using Wordwall as the main strategy. Both groups were given pre-test and post-test. The results showed that the students who learned new words through Wordwall did better on the post-test than the students who were in the control group and the use of Wordwall was effective in increasing the students' quantitative performance compared to traditional teaching. Similarly, Ramadhan and Zaharani (2021), investigated the effects of Wordwall on students' vocabulary comprehension and motivation. It was found that the use of Wordwall significantly improved students' ability to recall words and increased their motivation to learn vocabulary. Research conducted by Imas et al. (2024), focused on investigating the use of Wordwall as a tool to help EFL learners learn vocabulary. It was found through observations and interviews that using Wordwall increased students' enthusiasm, enjoyment, and interest in learning EFL vocabulary. Likewise, it was discovered that Wordwall enhanced vocabulary recall and encourage the classroom more participatory. Visual aids helped students better grasp new vocabulary, which improved their participation and engagement in class discussions.

Herawati and Sutisna (2024), investigated the learning experience in vocabulary acquisition and found that using word walls helped students understand vocabulary learning better, particularly in word classes and understanding of new vocabulary terms. Wordwall also presented di-

sadvantages for students who, due to their lack of vocabulary, struggled to acquire new words, mispronunciation of unfamiliar terms, limited vocabulary usage, and limited input.

Since the poor vocabulary of young learners is a problem affecting most EFL learners in Ecuador, Pesántez and Naranjo (2023), conducted research to analyze the impact of Quizzes and Wordwall on the vocabulary acquisition of EFL learners. Using a mixed methodology with instruments such as diagnostic tests, checklists, and observations, it was found that students who used Wordwall and Quizzes developed a communicative and natural approach, allowing them to spontaneously acquire skills and new vocabulary words and remain active and motivated in class. Based on this, researchers inferred that because games positively impact the teaching-learning process, they can also improve their speaking and grammar abilities.

Regarding the different investigations that have been carried out, Sari (2024), has asserted that for Wordwall to produce positive results, it is important that teachers must have teaching and technological competence and carefully select the activities that they will conduct to improve their students' vocabulary. For learning to be more effective, students must also be continuously encouraged to use Wordwall both inside and outside of the classroom. In order to determine whether the learning objectives are being met or if students require additional assistance in using Wordwall effectively, teachers must lastly provide sufficient feedback.

Methodology

Study Design

In order to better understand the phenomenon under study and the relationships between the variables, this research employed a quantitative explanatory non-experimental methodology. Considering that the independent variable is the teaching of vocabulary through word wall to know its effectiveness, motivation, and the perception of the students when using this tool. This research lasted two weeks and data was gathered through a pre and post test and Likert scale survey.

Participants

Thirteen students of seventh grade basic education from the Bacamoros Educational Unit participated in this study; they were chosen through a non-probability intentional sampling technique. This educational institution has around 80 students, and the Ministry of Education administered an English Proficiency Index test in 2021. The results showed that their proficiency in the language was low. The Ministry of Education's curriculum states that seventh-grade pupils should speak English at an A2.2 level. However, elementary school students achieved an A1 level

in 2021, indicating a lack of vocabulary and linguistic understanding of the target language (De Angelis, 2022). Seventh-grade students between 10 and 12 years old with an A1 level of language proficiency were the participants. They received three hours of English class per week. All were under the researcher's supervision for two months. The students' language skills were evaluated through diagnostic tests, demonstrating that students had a low level of English. Then, the instruments were applied.

Instruments

The first stage of the research was quantitative, in which a pre-test and a post-test were the instruments applied to measure the vocabulary level of students before and after implementing Wordwall. The researcher designed these instruments based on the needs of the students, and they were applied with print questionnaires. Both were printed tests with 10 questions to measure the four language skills, and each activity evaluated the student's level of knowledge. The test was followed by a survey using a Likert scale with 10 questions focused on two dimensions about the benefits and challenges of using word wall and Students' perceptions of word wall usage.

Procedure

The first step involved requesting permission from school authorities. To reduce bias in the responses, all tests were administered anonymously by the students. The data were collected throughout six English classes during two weeks. Each English class lasted 45 minutes.

A pre-test was administered during the first class to identify students' vocabulary difficulties. Next, the lesson plan's activities using Wordwall as the primary tool, were developed in the second, third, and fourth classes in the computer center. This center had 20 computers with Internet access, which meant that each student completed the activities individually. In the fifth class, the post-test was applied, and in the sixth class, students were interviewed to find out how they felt about the Wordwall activities they completed.

A comparative table in Excel was used to examine the data and answer the first research question. Subsequently, the average scores of the 13 students were analyzed to found the differences between pre and post test. These findings were compared with observation and interview evidence. A two-dimensional Likert scale was then applied to answer the second and third questions. The first dimension was related to benefits and challenges and consisted of six questions, while the second dimension consisted of four statements related to students' perceptions of this digital tool.

Development

The study began with the application of a pre-test and post-test to determine the effectiveness of using Word Wall on EFL learners' vocabulary. Thirteen students took the pre-test, which evaluated vocabulary, grammar, and understanding of context and semantics in the first class. Then, in the fifth class, the post-test was conducted to compare the average and answer the first research question.

Table 1 shows the scores of the students' pre and post tests quantitative information on the effects of using WordWall as the main digital tool for teaching vocabulary. First, the pre-test results are detailed, and then the post-test applied in the third week.

Table 1. Pre test and post test results.

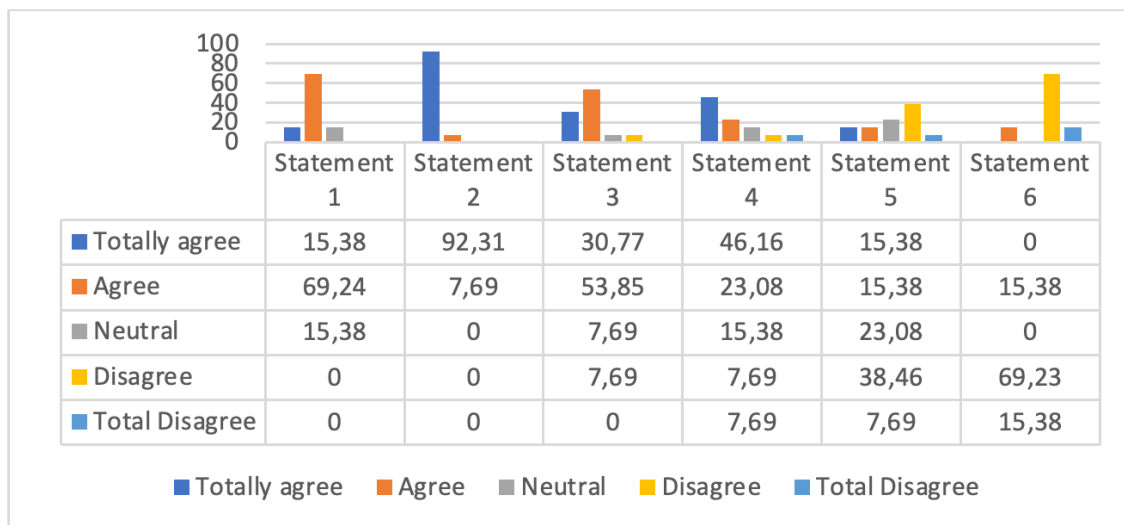
Pre test (average score)	Post test (average score)	Standard deviation (pre test)	Standard deviation (post test)
6.69	8.15	0.69	0.23

Source: own elaboration

When comparing the pre test and post test results, this shows an increase in the average score of all students after receiving instruction with Wordwall. Similarly, the standard deviation indicates that in the pre-test the scores were more dispersed, while in the post-test, a standard deviation decreased.

This study also applied a survey to understand the benefits and challenges that the use of Wordwall in class implied for the students. This instrument was applied at the end of the third week. Figure 1 shows the students' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of Wordwall.

Figure 1. Benefits and challenges of using Wordwall platform.

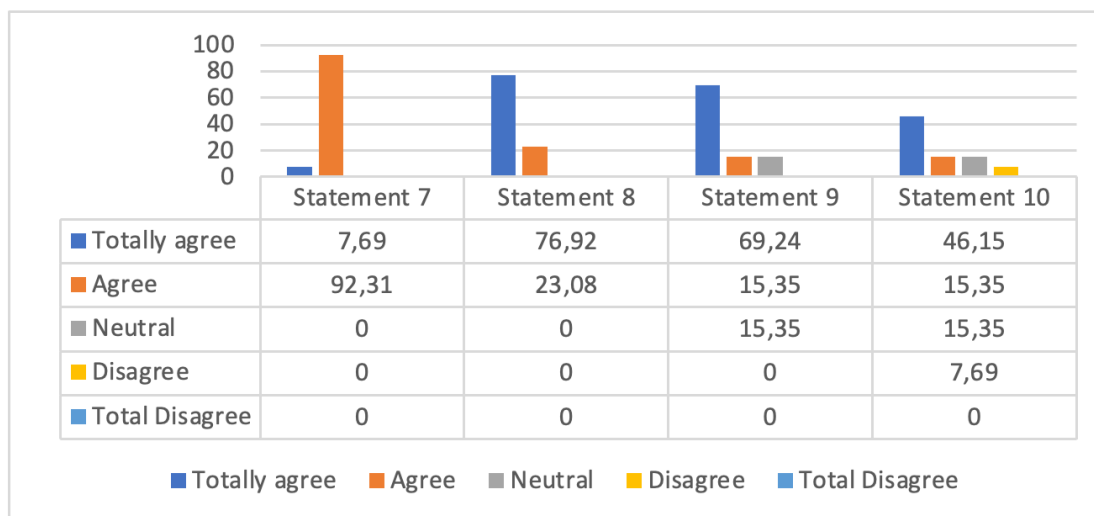


Source: own elaboration

According to the results of the first statement (S1) related to the benefits, most of the students totally agree that Wordwall was beneficial for learning new words and a small percentage had a neutral stance. In second question (S2), all students considered that WordWall was beneficial for everyone to understand complex words and sentences. Similarly, most students consider that their oral communication skills improved in the third question. In the fourth question (S4), most students strongly agree that the implementation of Word Wall was very beneficial in understanding grammatical structures.

Regarding the challenges, in the question 5 (S5) the majority of students did not consider that Wordwall could cause distractions in classes and in the last question related to the existence of technical problems or difficulties in using Wordwall more than 70% disagree with this idea. The results mean that most students felt there were no challenges when using Wordwall for learning. Along the same lines, Figure 2 shows the results of a survey containing a Likert scale probing students' perceptions of Wordwall.

Figure 2. Students' perceptions of Wordwall usage.



Source: own elaboration

In the seventh statement (S7) all participants perceived that Wordwall motivated them to learn new vocabulary and it is an easy tool to use in and out of class. Regarding the fact that Wordwall activities encourage group work most of students believe that Wordwall, was effective to work in groups.

Finally, in statement 10, students perceived that Wordwall adapted to their needs and learning styles. On the other hand, 15.38% do not have a clear position, and 7.69% disagree with this notion.

Discussion

Students' vocabulary acquisition was found to be useful and positive. Comparing the pre-test and post-test results, it is evident that the interactive and playful WordWall activities helped students acquire new vocabulary and understand and retain new words. These results coincide with the research carried out by Triariani (2020), who found that WordWall is effective for teaching vocabulary after the post-test results of seventh-grade students indicated a significant improvement compared to the pre-test because Wordwall organizes keywords related to a specific topic in a visual format that allows students to associate the words with their context. Similarly, Pesántez and Naranjo (2023), found that using Wordwall was beneficial in helping students learn new words and increasing participation.

Along the same lines, the findings show that most students consider that the implementation of Wordwall had more benefits than challenges. For example, the majority of students indicated that this tool was beneficial for learning new English words and complex sentences and, at the

same time, understanding the context of the English language. Similarly, they point out that another benefit of using Wordwall in class was that they improved their oral skills and deepened their knowledge regarding grammatical structures. In this regard, Amaliyah and Mastuti (2023), found that an interactive learning environment was encouraged by Wordwall because students improved their vocabulary and oral skills through game templates, quizzes and personalized exercises

About challenges, the use of Wordwall did not represent significant challenges for students. For this reason, in some cases most of students considered that Wordwall did not cause them distraction because they learned adequately. However, a small percentage indicates they were distracted, especially when they finished the activities on Wordwall and looked for similar ones. Consequently, this aspect is not entirely negative since it indicates that some students, in their free time in class, used Wordwall to carry out activities focused on learning English. In this way, it is proven that Wordwall increases students' enthusiasm, enjoyment, and interest in learning EFL vocabulary (Imas et al., 2024).

Considering that students today are digital natives, English classes should have internet access, and technologies appropriate to the needs of the students are applied. This includes having the necessary resources and the teacher being technologically trained to use digital tools in class (Herawati & Sutisna, 2024). In the intervention carried out with the students, it was observed that they had computers with an internet connection, which facilitated the development of this research. Likewise, the students did not have technical problems or difficulties in using Wordwall due to the teacher's adequate guidance.

Regarding students' perceptions of Wordwall, the findings indicate that it helped increase students' motivation, and excitement at the prospect of learning new vocabulary. Wordwall significantly improved students' ability to recall words and increased their motivation to learn vocabulary (Ramadhan & Zaharani, 2021). For learning to be more effective, students must also be continuously encouraged to use Wordwall both inside and outside of the classroom (Sari, 2024). In class, all the students perceived Wordwall to be easy to use in these contexts and group work was also encouraged, where students received immediate feedback on their answers, allowing them to discuss and learn together.

Also, Wordwall improves vocabulary acquisition and encourages class participation. Visual aids helped students better understand new vocabulary, which improved their participation and engagement in class discussions (Imas et al., 2024). Considering the features of Wordwall, students of this study perceived that thanks to Wordwall they learned English according to their needs and learning styles.

Conclusions

This study was conducted at a public institution that had a computer center, and the research results provided administrators and other educators with valuable information on how to integrate Wordwall and other digital tools in resource-limited settings. For example, may decide to implement Wordwall or propose another type of technology to improve students' vocabulary. Consequently, other colleagues may also be interested in researching technological tools other than Wordwall that also enhance learners' vocabulary. Lastly, the current research could expand knowledge about the application of educational technology in language instruction in comparable settings, like public schools. The results could serve as a model for the use of digital tools in English as a foreign language instruction at other institutions dealing with comparable issues.

Regarding study limitations, the small number of students made it difficult to generalize the results because the sample was not representative and did not reflect the diversity necessary to obtain valid results. Thus, these results may be biased toward the specific characteristics of the few participants. Therefore, future research should include a larger number of students and, if possible, from different educational backgrounds. Similar studies should be conducted with a larger group of students and over a longer period of time to also measure retention, which is a common issue in vocabulary learning.

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Declaration

Conflict of interest

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