3 Vocabulary Kingdom: gamified EAP vocabulary acquisition using blended learning

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Abstract

Students in higher education should work on acquiring academic vocabulary as this is essential to skilfully communicating with other members of the academic community. Vocabulary acquisition is an essential but frequently neglected process due to the intensity, time pressure, and high stakes of short, assessment-based English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses designed to prepare students for their postgraduate academic programme. Thus, in this experiment, student motivation to engage with vocabulary acquisition is considered in the context of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which provides a framework for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In particular, intrinsic motivation is engendered by feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness; extrinsic motivation is rooted in quantifiable outcomes. With these theories in mind, Vocabulary Kingdom is a game that was created for an EAP, higher education classroom context, with the rationale of motivating students to spend more time engaged in vocabulary acquisition. This game features blended learning, with activities occurring in the classroom context and online.

Keywords: EAP, vocabulary acquisition, blended learning, gamification, motivation, self-determination theory.

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1.   Introduction

Vocabulary Kingdom is a game that was conceived and designed by the author of this paper, who is a tutor of EAP. The purpose of this game is to support non-native speakers in a higher education context to acquire academic vocabulary, particularly during a foundation year course or a 12-week, pre-sessional, EAP course. In such intensive, assessment-based programmes, students may struggle to prioritise studying vocabulary despite its pervasive impact on their academic success. Moreover, studies have suggested that new vocabulary should be acquired incrementally on a daily basis; review and consolidation should occur continuously and consistently (Nagy & Townsend, 2012). Therefore, the intention is that Vocabulary Kingdom is motivational and specific to the course (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Motivation engendered by the game is framed by the principles of SDT. The relevant framework relates to students' intrinsic motivation, elicited through feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as the extrinsic motivation of winning points for one's team.

2.   Method

2.1.   Game description

Students are divided into small groups consisting of three or four students; each group represents a tribe. Creating groups in the class is intended to foster a feeling of positive relatedness, which contributes to students' intrinsic motivation (Lombardi, in press). Group members decide on a tribe name and a group avatar.

Padlet was chosen as the suitable game platform for several reasons. First, it is user-friendly and easily accessed, as students can download and use the application on their mobile phone. Second, Padlet allows for the creation of a shared digital artefact which can be accessed and modified by several individuals simultaneously. Finally, Padlet was the most familiar platform to the tutor; according to Egenfeldt-Nielsen (2007), it is important that the facilitator is comfortable with the technology.

2.2.　Game objective

Students endeavour to acquire as many points as possible for their tribe in order to win the game and become the rulers of the Vocabulary Kingdom. This is achieved through daily and weekly activities, which are designed to support the vocabulary acquisition process. The points system is intended to augment students' extrinsic motivation to participate.

2.3.　Game rules

At the beginning of the game, the teacher ensures that students have access to the relevant academic word list. In addition, students may draw new vocabulary from class material.

Each student in the class, acting on behalf of their tribe, must enter a specified number of new academic words onto the Padlet each week. In addition to the word, each entry must include at least two of the following: other parts of speech, an example sentence, a synonym, and/or a relevant collocation.

2.4.　How the game is played

2.4.1.　Awarding points

The points system is ascertained by the tutor, in terms of how many points students will earn for their weekly entries of new words onto the Padlet; this system is shared with the students.

2.4.2.　Punitive measures

Punitive measures may be included in the game in order to impel participation and add intrigue to the game. In the pilot version, points were deducted for failure to participate by any tribe member, or if only one person did all the work. Creating punitive measures for non-participation ensures that complacency is kept to a minimum. Participation can be monitored through Padlet by the tutor/administrator.

2.4.3. Weekly challenge

The weekly challenge involves a competition during which students are shown pictures associated with the academic words on the Padlet; the tribe that gives the correct answer wins points, as predetermined by the teacher. Points may be deducted for incorrect answers, in order to deter students from randomly guessing. The method of using an image has been chosen because images are more likely to encapsulate the "abstract, technical, and nuanced ideas and phenomena" that are conveyed by academic vocabulary (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92). Associating an academic word with an image may enhance students' ability to recall it in another context, for example while reading a text.

At the end, the points are tallied up and the winner is determined. The tutor may ascertain a prize. During the pilot version, the other tribes were obligated to entertain the winning tribe at the farewell class party, by singing, dancing, or telling a story in English. Points are consequently associated with extrinsic rewards and become a motivating factor (Werbach & Hunter, 2012).

3.   Results and discussion

Player attachment to outcome is an essential feature and has an element of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, according to SDT (Juul, 2011; for SDT see Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006). Moreover, the design of the game creates the conditions and contextual factors that enhance a sense of autonomy and competence, consequently augmenting the feeling of intrinsic motivation, an essential aspect of cognitive evaluation theory, a sub-theory of SDT (Ryan et al., 2006).

Several factors related to the points system contribute to students' extrinsic motivations to participate in the game. First, points serve as feedback and support students in assessing their own progress in learning new vocabulary (Werbach & Hunter, 2015). Students also feel motivated to create positive self-images in relation to classmates. Second, the points system provides each

tribe with a variable, quantifiable outcome of gain or loss, which is an essential feature of game design (Juul, 2011). This means that students feel motivated to win points for their tribe and advance its progress within Vocabulary Kingdom. Furthermore, the points system enables tribes lagging behind to get ahead unexpectedly, which is a variable outcome that provides an element of surprise and further stimulates students' motivations (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Finally, extrinsic motivation is created by the possibility of winning the game overall. In the pilot version, obligating classmates to provide entertainment at the final party proved to be an effective motivating factor.

The intrinsic motivation is derived from the feeling of competence and autonomy in making entries on the Padlet and the understanding that one's contribution has improved the tribe's overall performance. In addition, the relatedness of working together motivates students to contribute, not only for their own benefit, but for their group (Lombardi, in press). Moreover, students may begin to feel more competent on an academic level; they undoubtedly benefit from this acquired knowledge, as having a more expansive vocabulary will help them perform better academically (Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

The author observed that several academic words from Vocabulary Kingdom repeatedly appeared in several students' output during summative assessments, particularly writing tasks that were performed under time pressure. This suggests that Vocabulary Kingdom enhanced students' ability to actively draw on newly-acquired academic vocabulary. However, more research is needed and participant interviews may provide a greater insight into the process.

4.   Conclusions

The purpose of Vocabulary Kingdom is to motivate students to engage with the process of acquiring academic vocabulary, an often neglected aspect of learning. The game is designed to ensure that students have a structured weekly format for learning vocabulary, a kind of 'check-point' every week, where they are reminded of their progress. The points system provides the feeling of extrinsic

reward throughout the game. Intrinsic motivation is elicited through working individually and in tribes, which provides a feeling of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In conclusion, this game is intended to motivate students to engage in an aspect of learning that is usually arduous, and to help them enjoy the process.

Acknowledgements

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New educational landscapes: innovative perspectives in language learning and technology
Edited by Alessia Plutino, Kate Borthwick, and Erika Corradini