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Word's Up with WhatsApp: The Use of Instant Messaging in Consciousness-raising of Academic Vocabulary

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Abstract

Learning academic vocabulary is often regarded as difficult by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners due to its lower frequency of use in daily discourse. Although usually confined to the context of academic writing, academic words are still important in enhancing one's progression in mastering the language. Thus, consciousness-raising of such words is seen as beneficial in encouraging ESL learners to pay extra attention to its usage. In this study, the learners' consciousness on the academic words is raised through the use instant messaging (IM) application known as WhatsApp. Being the most popular IM application, it serves as a platform for the instructor to highlight the use of academic words to the learners on a daily basis. A WhatsApp group of 35 participants was created for the purpose of this study and the students were given a pre-test prior to the implementation of the consciousness-raising steps. For 10 weeks an academic word was shared on the group every day and learners were encouraged to discuss its use with the instructor's participation. Those words were not specifically taught in face-to-face teaching. Then, a post-test was administered and the findings revealed a large increase in the participants' scores. The interview data also revealed participants' appreciation on the use of IM in helping them to be more aware of academic words. Despite its small sample size, this study has outlined several affordances and constraints of using WhatsApp for consciousness-raising of vocabulary for future replication of similar study in different contexts.

Introduction

In the area of second and foreign language studies, the important role of vocabulary in language acquisition is widely acknowledged. Researchers have revealed how extensive repertoire of vocabulary is capable of expanding learners' language competence or mastery (Waring & Nation, 2004). It is accepted that vocabulary development depends on the exposure to specific sets of words, in which learners need to learn prior to progressing further in mastering the language. However, vocabulary teaching in the second and foreign language classrooms does not seem to be effectively executed with on-going debate as to whether it should be taught explicitly at the expense of communicative competence. This is largely contributed by the multifaceted dimensions of lexical learning with various factors playing their parts (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008).

Though explicit attention to vocabulary has been accepted to positively affect second language vocabulary acquisition, it remains a method which is not preferred by the teachers especially in the context of higher education due to the limited number of contact hours.