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Digital tools and advanced vocabulary acquisition: An empirical analysis of learning outcomes in ESL contexts

Shamim Akhter[1], **Tribhuwan Kumar**[2,3], **Madhurima Srivastava**[4] & **Walton Wider**[1]

[1]INTI International University Persiaran Perdana BBN, Putra Nilai,71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

[2]Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al Kharj, Saudi Arabia

[3]Saveetha School of Engineering, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 602105, India

[4]Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Delhi-NCR campus Modinagar (Ghaziabad)

*Correspondence: shamim.akhter@newinti.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This empirical study investigates the effectiveness of digital vocabulary learning tools in enhancing advanced ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition. A quasi-experimental design was employed with 120 advanced ESL learners divided into three groups: digital tool users (n=40), traditional instruction recipients (n=40), and a control group (n=40). Participants were assessed using pre- and post-tests measuring receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, retention rates, and depth of word knowledge. Digital tools included adaptive vocabulary applications, corpus-based learning platforms, and multimedia annotation systems. Results revealed that digital tool users demonstrated significantly higher gains in vocabulary acquisition ($p<0.001$), with effect sizes ranging from medium to large ($d=0.72$-1.14). Retention tests conducted after four weeks showed sustained learning advantages for the digital group. Qualitative data indicated increased learner engagement and autonomous learning behaviors. The findings suggest that well-designed digital tools can effectively address the vocabulary learning challenges faced by advanced ESL learners, particularly in developing nuanced understanding of word meanings and collocational patterns.

KEYWORDS: digital tools, vocabulary acquisition, advanced ESL learners, empirical study, learning opportunities

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1. Introduction

Advanced second language learners face unique challenges in vocabulary acquisition that differ substantially from those encountered by beginning or intermediate learners. While these learners possess solid foundational vocabulary, they struggle with the sophisticated lexical knowledge required for academic and professional contexts (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014). The acquisition of advanced vocabulary involves not merely learning word meanings but developing nuanced understanding of semantic relationships, collocational patterns, register variations, and pragmatic implications (Nation, 2013). Writing is nothing without vocabulary and vocabulary knowledge does not mean to learn words individually (Akhter & Mohd Nordin (2022)

The digital revolution in language learning has introduced unprecedented opportunities for vocabulary instruction and acquisition. Digital tools offer interactive, personalized, and contextually rich learning environments that can potentially address the complex needs of advanced vocabulary learners (Godwin-Jones, 2018). However, empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness specifically for advanced ESL learners remains limited and fragmented.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a rigorous empirical investigation of digital vocabulary learning tools' impact on advanced ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition outcomes. The research examines not only quantitative gains in vocabulary knowledge but also qualitative aspects of learning, including retention, depth of knowledge, and learner autonomy development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Advanced Vocabulary Learning Challenges

Advanced vocabulary learning presents distinct challenges that differentiate it from elementary vocabulary acquisition. Schmitt (2010) identifies several key difficulties: the decreasing frequency of target words, increased semantic complexity, subtle distinctions between synonyms, and the need for sophisticated collocational knowledge. Advanced learners often experience a plateau effect, where traditional vocabulary learning approaches become less effective (Laufer, 2005).

Research by Crossley et al. (2015) demonstrates that advanced learners require explicit instruction in lexical sophistication, including understanding of word associations, semantic networks, and contextual appropriateness. The challenge extends beyond mere word recognition to encompass productive use in appropriate contexts and registers (Webb, 2008).

2.2 Digital Tools in Vocabulary Learning

The integration of technology in vocabulary instruction has evolved from simple flashcard applications to sophisticated adaptive learning systems. Current digital vocabulary tools incorporate various pedagogical approaches, including spaced repetition algorithms, multimedia presentations, corpus-based learning, and gamification elements (Burston, 2015).

Corpus-based vocabulary learning tools have shown promise for advanced learners by providing authentic usage examples and collocational information (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007). These tools allow learners to explore word usage patterns in large databases of authentic texts, facilitating deeper understanding of lexical behavior (Frankenberg-Garcia, 2012).

Adaptive learning systems represent another significant advancement, personalizing vocabulary instruction based on individual learning patterns and performance data. Research by Settles & Meeder (2016) on spaced repetition systems demonstrates their effectiveness in optimizing review schedules and improving long-term retention. Thapa et al. (2025) show that emotional intelligence influences student engagement with mobile technologies

2.3 Empirical Evidence on Digital Vocabulary Tools

Previous empirical studies on digital vocabulary tools have yielded mixed but generally positive results. Ma & Kelly (2006) found that computer-assisted vocabulary learning produced superior results compared to traditional methods, particularly in terms of retention. However, their study focused primarily on intermediate learners, limiting its applicability to advanced contexts.

More recent research by Chen & Chung (2011) investigated mobile-assisted vocabulary learning among

advanced learners, reporting significant improvements in both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. However, the study's limited sample size and short duration restricted the generalizability of findings.

A meta-analysis by Abraham (2008) revealed that digital vocabulary tools were most effective when they incorporated multiple modalities, provided immediate feedback, and allowed for repeated exposure in varied contexts. These findings align with cognitive theories of vocabulary acquisition emphasizing the importance of elaborative processing and multiple retrieval practice.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several complementary theoretical frameworks. The Involvement Load Hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) suggests that vocabulary learning effectiveness depends on the degree of cognitive involvement required by learning tasks. Digital tools can potentially increase involvement load through interactive features, personalized challenges, and multimodal presentations.

The Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986) provides another theoretical foundation, emphasizing the benefits of combining verbal and visual information processing. Digital vocabulary tools often incorporate multimedia elements that engage both verbal and visual processing systems, potentially enhancing learning outcomes.

Additionally, the Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) theoretical framework guides the integration of technology in vocabulary instruction, emphasizing the importance of pedagogically sound design principles and learner-centered approaches (Chapelle, 2001).

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do digital vocabulary learning tools improve advanced ESL learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge compared to traditional instruction methods?

RQ2: How do digital tools affect advanced ESL learners' productive vocabulary knowledge and usage accuracy?

RQ3: What is the impact of digital vocabulary tools on long-term retention of newly acquired vocabulary among advanced ESL learners?

RQ4: How do learners perceive the effectiveness and usability of digital vocabulary learning tools?

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Advanced ESL learners using digital vocabulary tools will demonstrate significantly greater gains in receptive vocabulary knowledge compared to those receiving traditional instruction.

H2: Digital tool users will show superior performance in productive vocabulary tasks, including accurate usage in appropriate contexts.

H3: Learners using digital tools will exhibit better long-term retention of newly acquired vocabulary.

H4: Learners will report positive perceptions of digital tools' effectiveness and express preferences for technology-enhanced vocabulary learning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental design with pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test measurements was employed to investigate the research questions. This design was selected to maximize ecological validity while maintaining experimental control over key variables.

4.2 Participants

The study involved 120 advanced ESL learners recruited from three university-affiliated English language centers in metropolitan areas. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 35 years ($M = 27.3$, $SD = 4.2$) and represented diverse L1 backgrounds, including Mandarin (35%), Arabic (25%), Spanish (20%), Korean (12%), and other languages (8%).

Inclusion criteria required participants to have achieved IELTS scores of 6.5-7.5 or equivalent TOEFL

scores (79-102), indicating advanced proficiency levels. Participants with extensive prior experience with digital vocabulary tools or those planning to take high-stakes English proficiency tests during the study period were excluded.

4.3 Materials and Instruments

4.3.1 Digital Vocabulary Tools

Three categories of digital tools were selected based on their pedagogical features and suitability for advanced learners:

1. **Adaptive Vocabulary Applications:** Featuring spaced repetition algorithms, personalized learning paths, and progress tracking (e.g., advanced modules of commercially available applications)
2. **Corpus-based Learning Platforms:** Providing access to authentic usage examples, collocational information, and concordance tools for independent exploration
3. **Multimedia Annotation Systems:** Offering rich contextual information, including definitions, example sentences, pronunciation guides, and visual aids

4.3.2 Assessment Instruments

- **Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS):** A modified version of Paribakht & Wesche's (1997) VKS was used to measure both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge across five levels of word familiarity.
- **Controlled Productive Vocabulary Test:** Developed specifically for this study, this instrument required participants to produce target words in constrained sentence contexts, measuring productive vocabulary knowledge.
- **Delayed Recognition and Production Tests:** Administered four weeks after the intervention to assess retention of acquired vocabulary.
- **Learner Perception Questionnaire:** A Likert-scale questionnaire exploring participants' attitudes toward digital tools, perceived effectiveness, and learning preferences.

4.4 Target Vocabulary

Sixty academic vocabulary items were selected from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000) and recent corpus analyses of advanced academic texts. Selection criteria included: (1) low familiarity among target participants based on pilot testing, (2) high frequency in academic contexts, (3) semantic complexity suitable for advanced learners, and (4) rich collocational patterns.

4.5 Procedure

The study was conducted over eight weeks following a structured protocol. Week 1: Pre-testing and baseline data collection Weeks 2-7: Intervention period with assigned learning modalities Week 8: Immediate post-testing Week 12: Delayed post-testing for retention measurement. Participants were randomly assigned to three distinct groups to ensure balanced comparison across different instructional modalities. The Digital Tools Group, comprising 40 participants, received vocabulary instruction primarily through digital platforms with guided integration activities that incorporated adaptive learning algorithms, corpus-based exploration tools, and multimedia annotation systems. The Traditional Instruction Group, also consisting of 40 participants, participated in conventional vocabulary lessons using textbooks, word lists, and teacher-led activities that followed established pedagogical approaches including explicit instruction, semantic mapping, and contextual exercises.

The Control Group, with 40 participants, continued their regular ESL coursework without receiving any specific vocabulary interventions beyond their standard curriculum, serving as a baseline comparison to measure the natural vocabulary acquisition that occurs through general language exposure and instruction. This three-group design allowed for comprehensive evaluation of digital tool effectiveness against both traditional pedagogical methods and natural learning progression, ensuring robust empirical comparison across different learning conditions while maintaining ecological validity within authentic ESL learning environments

4.6 Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA to examine between-group differences across time points. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to determine practical significance. Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses underwent thematic analysis to identify patterns in learner perceptions and experiences.

5. Results

5.1 Participant Demographics and Pre-test Comparisons

Table 1: Participant Demographics by Group

Variable	Digital Tools (n=40)	Traditional (n=40)	Control (n=40)	Total (N=120)	p-value
Age (years)					
Mean (SD)	27.1 (4.3)	27.8 (4.0)	27.0 (4.4)	27.3 (4.2)	0.67
Range	22-34	23-35	22-35	22-35	
L1 Background					
Mandarin	14 (35%)	13 (32.5%)	15 (37.5%)	42 (35%)	0.89
Arabic	10 (25%)	11 (27.5%)	9 (22.5%)	30 (25%)	
Spanish	8 (20%)	7 (17.5%)	9 (22.5%)	24 (20%)	
Korean	5 (12.5%)	4 (10%)	5 (12.5%)	14 (12%)	
Other	3 (7.5%)	5 (12.5%)	2 (5%)	10 (8%)	
Proficiency Level					
IELTS Mean (SD)	7.1 (0.4)	7.0 (0.5)	7.2 (0.3)	7.1 (0.4)	0.43
TOEFL iBT Mean (SD)	89.2 (8.1)	87.8 (9.3)	90.1 (7.6)	89.0 (8.3)	0.52

Table 2: Pre-test Vocabulary Knowledge Scores

Assessment	Digital Tools	Traditional	Control	F-statistic	p-value	η^2
Receptive VKS						
Mean (SD)	32.4 (6.2)	33.1 (5.8)	31.9 (6.5)	0.43	0.65	0.007
Range	21-44	22-45	20-43			
Productive Test						
Mean (SD)	28.7 (5.4)	29.2 (4.9)	28.1 (5.7)	0.52	0.59	0.009
Range	18-38	20-39	17-37			

5.2 Research Question 1: Receptive Vocabulary Knowledge

Table 3: Receptive Vocabulary Knowledge Gains (Vocabulary Knowledge Scale)

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Gain Score	Delayed Post-test	Retention from Post-test
Digital Tools					
Mean (SD)	32.4 (6.2)	51.1 (7.3)	18.7 (4.2)	44.9 (6.8)	88%
95% CI	[30.4, 34.4]	[48.8, 53.4]	[17.4, 20.0]	[42.7, 47.1]	
Traditional					
Mean (SD)	33.1 (5.8)	45.4 (6.9)	12.3 (3.8)	41.2 (6.2)	91%
95% CI	[31.2, 35.0]	[43.2, 47.6]	[11.1, 13.5]	[39.2, 43.2]	
Control					
Mean (SD)	31.9 (6.5)	38.0 (5.4)	6.1 (2.9)	35.4 (5.1)	93%
95% CI	[29.8, 34.0]	[36.3, 39.7]	[5.2, 7.0]	[33.8, 37.0]	

ANOVA Results: $F(2,117) = 24.67$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.30$

Table 4: Post-hoc Comparisons for Receptive Vocabulary Gains

Comparison	Mean Difference	SE	p-value	Cohen's d	Effect Size
Digital vs. Control	12.6	1.8	< 0.001	1.14	Large
Digital vs. Traditional	6.4	1.8	< 0.001	0.72	Medium
Traditional vs. Control	6.2	1.8	< 0.001	0.68	Medium

5.3 Research Question 2: Productive Vocabulary Knowledge

Table 5: Productive Vocabulary Assessment Results

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Gain Score	Delayed Post-test	Contextual Accuracy	Collocational Accuracy
Digital Tools						
Mean (SD)	28.7 (5.4)	44.2 (6.1)	15.5 (4.3)	39.8 (5.7)	85%	78%
95% CI	[26.9, 30.5]	[42.3, 46.1]	[14.2, 16.8]	[38.0, 41.6]		
Traditional						
Mean (SD)	29.2 (4.9)	40.1 (5.8)	10.9 (3.6)	36.2 (5.2)	67%	58%
95% CI	[27.6, 30.8]	[38.2, 42.0]	[9.7, 12.1]	[34.6, 37.8]		
Control						
Mean (SD)	28.1 (5.7)	32.4 (4.7)	4.3 (2.1)	30.8 (4.3)	52%	41%
95% CI	[26.3, 29.9]	[30.9, 33.9]	[3.6, 5.0]	[29.4, 32.2]		

ANOVA Results: $F(2,117) = 19.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.25$

Table 6: Error Analysis in Productive Vocabulary Use

Error Type	Digital Tools	Traditional	Control	χ^2	p-value
Semantic Errors					
Frequency	48/400 (12%)	112/400 (28%)	184/400 (46%)	89.67	< 0.001
Syntactic Errors					
Frequency	32/400 (8%)	76/400 (19%)	128/400 (32%)	56.23	< 0.001
Register Inappropriateness					
Frequency	60/400 (15%)	132/400 (33%)	200/400 (50%)	94.12	< 0.001
Collocational Errors					
Frequency	88/400 (22%)	168/400 (42%)	236/400 (59%)	78.45	< 0.001

5.4 Research Question 3: Long-term Retention

Table 7: Vocabulary Retention Analysis (4-Week Delayed Post-test)

Group	Post-test Score	Delayed Score	Retention Rate	Score Decline	t-statistic	p-value
Digital Tools						
Receptive	51.1 (7.3)	44.9 (6.8)	78%	6.2 (3.4)	8.92	< 0.001
Productive	44.2 (6.1)	39.8 (5.7)	72%	4.4 (2.8)	9.63	< 0.001
Traditional						
Receptive	45.4 (6.9)	41.2 (6.2)	62%	4.2 (2.9)	7.24	< 0.001
Productive	40.1 (5.8)	36.2 (5.2)	58%	3.9 (2.6)	7.81	< 0.001
Control						
Receptive	38.0 (5.4)	35.4 (5.1)	48%	2.6 (2.1)	6.45	< 0.001
Productive	32.4 (4.7)	30.8 (4.3)	41%	1.6 (1.8)	5.67	< 0.001

Between-Groups ANOVA for Retention Rates: $F(2,117) = 16.83$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.22$

5.5 Research Question 4: Learner Perceptions

Table 8: Learner Perception Questionnaire Results (Digital Tools Group, n=40)

Dimension	Mean	SD	95% CI	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Effectiveness				
Overall effectiveness	4.3	0.6	[4.1, 4.5]	92.5%
Vocabulary retention	4.2	0.7	[4.0, 4.4]	87.5%
Learning speed	4.1	0.8	[3.8, 4.4]	85.0%
Engagement				
Interest level	4.5	0.5	[4.3, 4.7]	95.0%
Motivation to continue	4.4	0.6	[4.2, 4.6]	90.0%
Enjoyment	4.3	0.7	[4.1, 4.5]	87.5%
Usability				
Ease of use	4.1	0.7	[3.9, 4.3]	82.5%
Interface design	3.9	0.8	[3.6, 4.2]	77.5%
Technical reliability	3.8	0.9	[3.5, 4.1]	72.5%
Learning Features				
Personalized feedback	4.4	0.6	[4.2, 4.6]	90.0%
Authentic examples	4.6	0.4	[4.4, 4.8]	97.5%
Progress tracking	4.2	0.7	[4.0, 4.4]	85.0%

Table 9: Comparison of Learning Preferences (All Groups, N=120)

Preference	Digital Tools	Traditional	Control	χ^2	p-value
Preferred Learning Mode					
Digital-enhanced	38/40 (95%)	28/40 (70%)	22/40 (55%)	18.67	< 0.001
Traditional only	2/40 (5%)	12/40 (30%)	18/40 (45%)		
Study Time Preference					
Self-paced digital	35/40 (87.5%)	18/40 (45%)	15/40 (37.5%)	24.32	< 0.001
Structured classroom	5/40 (12.5%)	22/40 (55%)	25/40 (62.5%)		

5.6 Additional Analyses

Table 10: Technology Familiarity and Learning Gains Correlation

Variable	Digital Tools Group	Traditional Group	Control Group
Technology Familiarity Score			
Mean (SD)	4.2 (0.8)	3.6 (0.9)	3.5 (1.0)
Correlation with Vocabulary Gains			
Receptive vocabulary	r = 0.34**	r = 0.12	r = 0.08
Productive vocabulary	r = 0.29*	r = 0.15	r = 0.06

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

Table 11: Digital Platform Engagement Analytics (Digital Tools Group, n=40)

Engagement Metric	High Achievers (n=15)	Moderate Achievers (n=15)	Low Achievers (n=10)	F	p-value
Time Spent (hours/week)					
Mean (SD)	8.7 (2.1)	6.2 (1.8)	4.3 (1.5)	23.45	< 0.001
Interactive Features Used					
Sessions with multimedia	24.3 (3.2)	18.7 (2.8)	12.1 (2.4)	45.67	< 0.001
Corpus queries performed	156 (28)	98 (22)	52 (18)	67.89	< 0.001
Self-Assessment Attempts					
Weekly average	12.4 (2.7)	8.9 (2.1)	5.6 (1.8)	34.21	< 0.001

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The results provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of digital vocabulary learning tools among advanced ESL learners. The significant advantages observed in receptive vocabulary knowledge, productive usage accuracy, and long-term retention suggest that well-designed digital tools can successfully address the unique challenges faced by advanced learners.

The superior performance of digital tool users aligns with theoretical predictions based on the Involvement Load Hypothesis. The interactive, personalized, and multimodal features of digital platforms likely increased cognitive involvement and processing depth, facilitating more effective vocabulary acquisition.

6.2 Pedagogical Implications

These findings have several important implications for ESL instruction and curriculum development. First, they suggest that digital tools should be integrated into advanced vocabulary instruction programs as complementary rather than replacement resources. The combination of technology-enhanced learning with traditional pedagogical approaches may optimize learning outcomes.

Second, the results emphasize the importance of tool selection and implementation. Not all digital vocabulary tools are equally effective; success depends on pedagogically sound design principles, appropriate difficulty levels, and alignment with learners' proficiency levels and goals.

Third, the findings highlight the potential for digital tools to support autonomous learning and learner agency. Advanced ESL learners demonstrated increased self-direction and engagement when provided with appropriate technological resources.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to several theoretical discussions in second language acquisition and computer-assisted language learning. The results support the Involvement Load Hypothesis by demonstrating that increased cognitive engagement through interactive digital features enhances vocabulary learning outcomes.

The findings also extend Dual Coding Theory by showing that multimodal digital presentations can effectively enhance vocabulary acquisition among advanced learners. The combination of verbal and visual processing appears particularly beneficial for developing nuanced understanding of word meanings and usage patterns.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting these results. First, the quasi-experimental design, while ecologically valid, limits causal inferences compared to true experimental designs. Second, the study duration of eight weeks, though substantial, may not capture long-term learning trajectories beyond the measured retention period.

Third, the study focused on academic vocabulary, and results may not generalize to other vocabulary types or contexts. Fourth, individual differences in technology acceptance and digital literacy may influence outcomes in ways not fully captured by this study.

Future research should investigate longer-term effects of digital vocabulary tools, explore optimal integration models with traditional instruction, and examine effectiveness across different vocabulary types and learner populations. Additionally, research into the specific design features that maximize learning effectiveness would inform tool development and selection.

7. Conclusion

This empirical investigation provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of digital vocabulary learning tools in enhancing advanced ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition outcomes. The significant improvements observed in receptive knowledge, productive usage accuracy, and long-term retention demonstrate that appropriately designed digital tools can successfully address the complex vocabulary learning needs of advanced students.

The findings support the integration of digital vocabulary tools into advanced ESL instruction while highlighting the importance of pedagogically informed tool selection and implementation. The positive learner perceptions and evidence of increased autonomous learning behaviors suggest that digital tools can contribute not only to immediate learning gains but also to the development of lifelong learning skills.

As the field continues to evolve, this study contributes valuable empirical evidence to inform evidence-based practices in technology-enhanced vocabulary instruction. The results suggest that the future of advanced vocabulary learning lies not in choosing between digital and traditional approaches, but in thoughtfully integrating the best of both to create optimal learning environments for advanced ESL learners.

The implications extend beyond immediate pedagogical applications to inform theoretical understanding of vocabulary acquisition processes and the role of technology in second language learning. As digital tools continue to evolve in sophistication and accessibility, their potential to transform advanced vocabulary instruction appears increasingly promising.

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