

**APPLICATION OF QUIZLET.COM TO TEACHING AND LEARNING
BUSINESS ENGLISH VOCABULARY
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS HO CHI MINH CITY**

Trần Thị Phi

Võ Đoàn Thơ

Nguyễn Lương Hoàng Thành

Hồ Đình Phương Khanh

Phan Thúy Khanh

I. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays an important role in studying a foreign language. Without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot understand others and express their own ideas. There are many things to learn about each piece of vocabulary such as pronunciation, meaning, spoken/written forms, collocations, word family, connotations, grammatical behavior... Therefore, learning vocabulary is a gradual process that takes place in small, manageable increments over time. Furthermore, it is crucial to help students become self-sufficient learners. The problem is that because of time constraint and other reasons, teachers cannot spend much time on teaching vocabulary in class. Therefore, providing students with a variety of learning resources for learning outside the classroom may be a solution. With the hope that blended learning can help students be better learners and acquire good learning habits in studying vocabulary, we set structured learning tasks on Quizlet.com that can be done out of class. We have created the vocabulary learning pages on *quizlet.com*, named UEH-Business English, for four modules in accordance with the course book Market Leader. Each set consists of 6 units and each unit is divided into 2 pages. One page includes 15 words together with supplementary collocation page. These sets of terms can then be studied under six study modes: cards, learn, speller, test, scatter and gravity. UEH students, following Business English courses from module 1 to module 4, can use Quizlet to study vocabulary by visiting **www.quizlet.com**

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The role of vocabulary

2.1.1 Definition of vocabulary

For years, there have been a lot of studies trying to define the meaning of vocabulary as well as its importance in language learning and teaching. According to Nash and Snowling (2006), vocabulary is described as “*the knowledge of words and their meanings*” (p. 336). In the meanwhile, Sheehan (2002) supposes that vocabulary is “*the ability to understand and use words to acquire and convey meaning*” (Vocabulary, para. 1). In brief, a word in vocabulary is a sound or a combination of sounds, which is presented in writing or printing to symbolize and communicate a meaning. In recent studies, the understanding of lexis, the Greek for word, has been drawn to “*refer to all the words in a language, the entire vocabulary of a language*” (Barcroft, Sunderman, & Schmitt, 2011, p. 571). This means that vocabulary not only addresses single lexical items or words with specific meanings but also includes lexical phrases or chunks. For that reason, research suggests that vocabulary learning involves learning lexical chunks, phrases of two or more words as single lexical units. The phrases consisting of more than one word have a clear, formulaic usage and play a significant role in spoken or written English language usage. That is why they are important in English vocabulary learning and teachers should pay much attention to teaching vocabulary (Lewis, 1993).

2.1.2 The importance of vocabulary

In English learning and teaching, vocabulary always plays an important role because all learners need to acquire a certain number of words in order to communicate with others. Wilkins (1972) said that “. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (pp. 111–112). Researchers realised that many of learners’ difficulties, both receptively and productively, result from an inadequate vocabulary, and even when they are at higher levels of language competence and performance, they still feel in need of learning vocabulary (Laufer 1986; Nation 1990). Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that “lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language”. Nation (2001) further describes the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge. The

importance of vocabulary is demonstrated daily in and out the school. In classroom, the achieving students possess the most sufficient vocabulary. Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1999), Maximo (2000), Read (2000), Gu (2003), Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) and others have realized that the acquisition of vocabulary is essential for successful second language use and plays an important role in the formation of complete spoken and written texts.

2.2 The role of vocabulary teaching and learning strategies

2.2.1 Vocabulary learning strategies

Due to the importance of vocabulary in language learning, all learners have to apply various strategies to acquire as many meaningful words as possible. Vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) are intuitively appealing to teachers and learners. It has also become a popular research topic among researchers over the past few decades. Most research so far has demonstrated a meaningful relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and learning results either through a correlational approach (e.g., Fan, 2003; Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999) or by establishing strategy similarities and differences among learners with different degrees of success (Gu, 1994, 2003a; Moir & Nation, 2002). A lot of researchers have found out different strategies to be appropriate with different styles of learners. Gu & Johnson (1996) list vocabulary learning strategies as metacognitive, cognitive, memory and activation strategies. Another vocabulary learning strategy taxonomy is proposed by Schmitt, 1997 (cited in Takac, 2008) which is extracted from the taxonomy of Oxford 1990 with an addition of a new category, i.e. determination strategies. He distinguishes the strategies into two groups: *discovery strategies* that are used in determining the meaning of new words when encountered for the first time, and *consolidation strategies* which are used in consolidating word's meaning when encountered again. Ghazal (2007) mentions that according to Schmitt's taxonomy, learners use a variety of social, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies to consolidate their vocabulary knowledge. Besides, there have been many different classifications of vocabulary learning strategies given by various scholars such as Siriwan (2007), Schmitt (1997), Rubin and Thompson (1994), Lawson and Hogben (1996), and more recently Siriwan (2007).

2.2.2 Vocabulary teaching strategies

Both researchers and language teachers have worked really hard in order to facilitate learners' vocabulary learning. To be compatible with various learning strategies, there has been a variety of teaching approaches suggested so as to assist teachers in their teaching of vocabulary. In a study conducted in 1990, Palmberg proposed two main types of teaching methods to improve vocabulary learning. The first focuses on the sense of L2 based exercises and activities, which stand as a main target of CLT, and has received much attention in recent vocabulary teaching practices and materials. The second, however, focuses on the development of learners' own L2 associations, which are partly dependent on learners' background of languages. However, students' learning experiences can be so different, especially in multi-lingual societies that teachers need to include an element of uncertainty or flexibility into classroom activities to support the development of learners' own vocabulary learning program. According to Hatch and Brown, unplanned vocabulary teaching strategies is likely to take less time than planned vocabulary teaching strategies, in which teachers normally would have prepared teaching materials in advance or use a published textbook, including a listing of the target words. To analyse vocabulary teaching methods in more detail, Oxford and Crookall (1990) classified common techniques into four categories: *de-contextualising*, *semi-contextualising*, *fully contextualizing*, and *adaptable*. To support this, a 2C model including contextual and consolidating has been suggested as an effective way of teaching vocabulary for teachers. However, there has always been an objection to the traditional teaching approach, in which teachers tend to let students unsystematically learn vocabulary by themselves. In 1994, Oxford and Scarcella recommended a new research-based approach to teaching vocabulary, where teachers focus on words students are expected to meet frequently, and present words systematically based on a careful consideration of needs analysis. In addition, considerable emphasis is put on encouraging independent learning strategies among students so that they know how to continue to learn vocabulary on their own.. To sum up, each strategy and technique teachers use in helping students acquire vocabulary have their own benefits. Teachers have to take into consideration the impact of numerous factors so as to have a proper strategy to teach vocabulary effectively.

2.3 The application of Quizlet in teaching and learning vocabulary

2.3.1 An overview of Quizlet

Quizlet is an online learning tool that is specialized in vocabulary development and created by high school sophomore Andrew Sutherland in Albany, California. It was originally conceived in October 2005 and released to the public in January 2007. As of January 2014, Quizlet has over 35 million user-generated flashcard sets and more than 11 million registered users. (Wikipedia)

This tool has a very specific target audience who would like to work on vocabulary development. Therefore, any teacher who wants to encourage his/her students to work on their vocabulary knowledge OR any student who aims to improve their vocabulary easily and in a fun way are the intended audiences of this tool. Quizlet is really simple to use. You simply go to its website; then you can log in using your Google or Facebook account in order to make it quicker and easily share your records with friends, or if you are a kind of person who does not want to share social networking accounts on websites like this, you can also create a new account with your email address. Afterwards, the self study process is ready to start.

2.3.2. Evaluation of Quizlet

In the study about the use of Quizlet compared with Rote Rapid, Gregory E. Menke finds that his students prefer Quizlet because it is easier to use, more accessible, and more user friendly. Certain students in the class post vocabulary lists in Quizlet on a regular basis making it easier to focus on important vocabulary. As a group member, Quizlet notifies all users of updated lists. Because Quizlet automatically creates subsequent lists of just missed words, we can focus on what we need most. This saves a lot of time. Quizlet is more flexible for accessing subsets of lists. Quizlet offers more adaptive testing features. Quizlet is more collaborative and competitive. In order to evaluate web-based flashcard programs, Nakata (2011) put forward a set of criteria which are used to evaluate Quizlet such as: flashcard creation, multilingual support, multi-word units, types of information, presentation and retrieval modes, retrieval effort, generative use, adaptive sequencing, block size, and expanded rehearsal. Because of the benefits mentioned above, we have decided to use Quizlet to create a web-based vocabulary learning tool to offer our students at UEH an effective way of acquiring new words.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participant profile

The online learning tool Quizlet.com was introduced in twelve classes at University of Economics HCMC with 210 students in total. All of them are in their 2nd and 3rd year of university. Their first language is Vietnamese, and their English proficiency level is at least pre-intermediate or higher as they have been learning English for at least 8 years (since grade 6). However, what to keep in mind is that they do not live in an English speaking environment and they do not have much chance to use English in daily life; therefore, their speaking and listening skills are limited. Their vocabulary and grammar competence are supposed to be good because when studying in secondary and high schools, the more emphasis is usually on vocabulary and grammar. One more thing to take into consideration is that most vocabulary they have learned is of general English and used in everyday conversation. At this stage of schooling, they might get acquainted with some business English, but not much. During the teaching and learning process, the knowledge of business English is what we want them to acquire. Talking about the attitude, the research is conducted in the University of Economics whose students are supposed to be hard-working and self-oriented. As students of business school, they can work well under pressure, especially under little or even no supervision. This is beneficial to our research because Quizlet.com is a self-learning tool by nature.

3.2 The instruments

The data were gathered from 3 sources: questionnaires for students and teachers, interviews with students and teachers and the results of the vocabulary tests in class. All items of the questionnaires and interviews were written and spoken in Vietnamese in order to make sure that this would not take much time and to minimize any misunderstanding.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 FROM STUDENTS

With an aim to collect the opinion of the students after using the vocabulary learning website Quizlet.com, a questionnaire of twelve questions has been carefully designed to get the information about five different categories as below: the background knowledge/opinion, the layout, the content, the tasks, and the effectiveness

🚩 The background knowledge/opinion (2 questions)

To check the background knowledge/opinion of the students is the reason for the first two questions. In question one, the students are asked to rate the importance of learning English vocabulary on a 5-point Likert scale. The majority of them (177/210 – 84%) agree that learning English vocabulary is “very important” and “important” (117 and 60 respectively). 9% of the students surveyed have neutral ideas and the rest (7%) do not see the importance of learning vocabulary. Question 2 serves as a means to survey how the students know about the website Quizlet.com. It is noticeable that most students (203 – 97%) know about the website through their teachers, five students through their friends, and the other two through the internet.

The layout (1 question)

When being asked “What do you think about the layout of Quizlet.com?”, more than three quarters of the students (76%) choose the answers “very user-friendly” and “user-friendly”. 20% of them give neutral ideas, the rest of 4% find the website difficult to use. It is no wonder why so many students can use the website easily. First of all, they are young and they have been familiar with hundreds of websites. More important to say, Quizlet has been in use worldwide for a long period of time (since 2007). During that time, it has been constantly developed to become more and more user-friendly. As one of the founders of Quizlet once mentioned, he wanted to make it the simplest learning tool on the internet.

The content (4 questions)

Our research group has designed the next four questions in the questionnaire to get the students’ opinion about the content of our 96 vocabulary lessons. The first question in this part is about the number of words for each unit. After careful consideration, our recommended number is 30 new words for each unit. The majority of the students (131 – 63%) agree that 30 new words are enough for them to learn. The others want to add more words to each unit: 40 words, 50 words and 60 words (44 students – 21%, 26 students – 12%, and 9 students – 4% respectively). It is not surprising that some students are better learners and want to study more. Nevertheless, we are happy that most students share the same idea with our research group: 30 is the ideal number because of many different factors. Besides, in each unit, there are also 30 collocations which we will discuss later in this research finding. Next, in the second question of this part, students are asked whether they have difficulties in understanding the English definition of the given words. Almost three quarters (64%) of the students surveyed admit having difficulties understanding the

definition in English. There are a number of reasons we can think of. First of all, it can be because of their English proficiency level. Secondly, it may be because the teachers in Vietnam often have the habit of translating or explaining new English words in their mother tongue; consequently, the students do not have the habit as well as the skill of using the dictionary to figure out the meaning themselves. Another reason may be from us – the compilers. Although the definitions are taken from the world’s renowned dictionaries such as Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary or Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, they are sometimes not simple enough for our students to understand. This leads us to the third question in this category. We want to know if students need Vietnamese equivalents or not. Not to our surprise, only 27 out of 210 students (13%) do not need Vietnamese translation. The rest (183 students – 87%) think that Vietnamese equivalents should be added. However, what should be noticed is that among these 183 students, only 84 of them actually do not understand the definitions in English. The other 99 students want Vietnamese definitions, not because they do not understand but for some other reasons. Whether or not we will add the Vietnamese definitions will be discussed in detail in the next part of the research. The last question in this part deals with the role of collocations added to the vocabulary. We are really surprised when most students in the survey (202/210 – 96%) view collocations as “very useful” and “useful”. Only 8 students do not see the usefulness of collocations. This is a pleasant surprise for us because normally; students seem to have the habit of learning words separately while in reality when using English, we have to use word partnerships. In the past, collocations did not receive proper attention from both teachers and students, but everything seems to change. Once students recognize the usefulness of collocations, they will gradually develop the habit of learning and using them more in the future.

The tasks (2 questions)

As presented in the previous part of the research project, Quizlet divides the webpage into 6 main sections, four learning sections (flashcards, learn, speller, and test), and two vocabulary games (scatter and race). In order to check which part interests the learners most, we ask them two more questions. From what you can see from the bar chart below, there is a minor difference between the figures of students rating all the activities as “very interesting” and “interesting”, with the figure for the racing game is a little bit higher than the others, followed by speller, learn, flashcards, scatter and test. It is understandable why test is the least interesting to them.

However, this is still a surprise when 75% of the students rate “test” as “very interesting” and “interesting”, much higher than we have predicted. The reason can be traced back to the wonderful format Quizlet’s test. At Quizlet.com, learners can design the test for themselves just by following some basic steps. They can choose the form of testing questions such as “written, matching, multiple choice and true/false”. They can even set the number of questions in the test. When finished, the webpage will automatically mark the answer within a few seconds. Among six activities, “flashcard” is less interesting than the others. Although this activity is quite important to other activities, the interaction between the computer and the learners in this activity is not really significant; therefore, students may get bored going through this part.

The effectiveness (3 questions)

In our research, we allow the students of different English proficiency levels trial the online tool for one semester which lasts approximately three months. After that, we deliver the questionnaires and get the feedbacks to see how effective they think Quizlet is. Therefore, the last three questions can be considered as the most important in concluding whether the trial application of Quizlet is a success. We ask them about the usefulness, the motivation and the decision about Quizlet popularization. The results are as follows: 81% of 210 students describe the website as “very useful” and “useful”, 15% of them have neutral opinion, and only 8 students (4%) provide negative feedback. In reply to the question on motivation, 158 students (75%) think that they feel “very motivated” and “motivated” when learning English vocabulary with Quizlet.com. 42 students (20%) have neutral opinions, and the rest of 5% think that they are not really motivated. There should be a number of reasons; however, this does not in the least discourage our research team. As we all know, even the most effective method can not work without the active cooperation from the learners themselves, and vice versa. We therefore feel satisfied to learn that the majority of our students are well-motivated. In the very last question, most students (198 – 94%) provide a “yes” answer, which mean they will definitely introduce this online learning tool to their friends. This figure means even more than that if we look at two previous questions. Although some students in the survey may be in two minds about the usefulness as well as the motivation of using Quizlet, still they want to introduce it to their friends. Learning English is a process of great difficulty in which students can sometimes get

bored and discouraged; therefore, any tools that can help to motivate the students in their learning should be taken seriously, and Quizlet seems to be the tool we have been looking for.

4.2 FROM LECTURERS

As we have predicted and later proved by the answers of the students in the survey, most students know about the website Quizlet.com thanks to their lecturers. This highlights the role of teachers in introducing the online learning tool to students. In order to get the lecturers' opinion, we use two different methods. One source of data is the answers from face-to-face interviews with selected lecturers. The other one is the results collected from another set of survey questionnaires which is distributed to 9 carefully chosen lecturers of SFLE of UEH who are directly involved in implementing Quizlet.com. The twelve-item questionnaire is also divided into five different categories. The questionnaire also starts with two questions to check the background knowledge/opinion of the lecturers. In the first question, when being asked to rate the importance of learning English vocabulary, six lecturers choose "very important" for their answer, one thinks that it is "important", and one has neutral idea. The second question is "How do you know about Quizlet?" Surprisingly, 100% of the teachers surveyed provide the same answer: through their co-workers, which proves that the teacher-teacher networking works really well and plays an important role in sharing information. Next is about the layout of Quizlet. Eight lecturers describe the layout of Quizlet as "very user-friendly" and "user-friendly", one has neutral idea. To check the lecturers' opinion about the content of the website, we also ask them three questions. The first question is about whether 30 words for each unit are enough. All of the lecturers share the same idea that it is sufficient. The second question in this part deals with the additional Vietnamese equivalent. Three lecturers think that we should add Vietnamese explanation no matter whether the students understand the English explanation or not. The rest of six lecturers do not think this is a thing to do. As for the collocations, all lecturers in the survey rate this part as "very useful" and "useful". No one thinks it is "not useful". When the lecturers are asked to share their opinions about six tasks of Quizlet according to their interest, no one checks the boxes "not interesting" or "not at all interesting". They all rate these activities as "very interesting" and "interesting", with the most interesting activity is "Space race" followed by Scatter and the others. The "learn" activity has most neutral ideas (from four teachers) followed by flashcards (three teachers), test (two teachers) and the rest two activities (one

teacher for each). To get information about whether Quizlet is effective or not, we ask the lecturers four more questions in the last category. First of all, the lecturers are asked how motivated it is when applying Quizlet into learning vocabulary. Five lecturers think that it has motivation effect and four lecturers give neutral ideas. When being asked about the usefulness, eight lecturers rate this website as “very useful” and “useful”, only one has neutral idea. This leads to the next question in which we inquire the lecturers about the improvement of students. Eight of them think that they see the improvement in the English proficiency of their students. In the last question, the teachers are asked whether they will recommend the tool to other peers. And not to our surprise, all lecturers surveyed provide a “yes” answer.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings have revealed several interesting things to be discussed. First of all, it can be pointed out that the participants are quite motivated to learn the English vocabulary on Quizlet.com as they consider it essential and beneficial. They are also aware of the importance of learning vocabulary although it seems that they are used to the traditional ways of teaching, which they may find boring, and they have not had sufficient material sources for practice. Thus, it is crucial that teachers put more efforts in teaching vocabulary by using suitable methods. They should be encouraged to use Quizlet.com as a supplementary source to teach new words in their classrooms. Thanks to the availability of online activities such as Cards, Learn, Speller, Test, Scatter and gravity, the students can improve their pronunciation, check what they have learned easily and have fun with the games. This brings them a new learning experience as they can learn and play at the same time rather than memorize long lists of words. These activities can also be used as homework accounting for part of the midterm score, which helps promote students’ autonomy and develop their self-study skills. With respect to the effectiveness of the website, it can be suggested that both teachers and students should continue to use the page. However, some things should be taken into consideration. After some time using the site, the students may find the activities boring as they are the same in all the units. Moreover, due to the fact that Quizlet.com is currently recommended, not compulsory, the students may not be motivated to participate. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to combine different methods of teaching to make the lessons more appealing.

References

- [1] Saputra , G.D. . *The Influence of Contextual Teaching Learning to the Students Vocabulary Achievement*. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of AsSyafi'iyah. East Jakarta, 2007.
- [2] Folse, K. S. . Six Vocabulary Activities for the English Language Classroom. *English Teaching Forum*, Vol.46, No.3, 2008, p. 12.
- [3] Sedita, J. . Effective Vocabulary Instruction. *Insights on Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 2, No.1, 2005, pp. 33-45.
- [4] Bromley, K. D. . *Stretching Students' Vocabulary*. Scholastic Professional Books, New York, 2002.
- [5] Mohammad Reza Ahmadi. *Improving Vocabulary Learning in Foreign Language Learning Through Reciprocal Teaching Strategy*. School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) 11800, Penang, Malaysia, 2012.
- [6] Maximo, R. . *Effects if rote, context, keyword, and context/ keyword method on retention of vocabulary in EFL classroom*, *Language Learning*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2000, pp. 385-412.
- [7] Read, J. . *Assessing vocabulary*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom, 2000.
- [8] Nation, P. *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, Newbury House, New York, 2011.
- [9] Lin, S.. *Modeling a Supplemental Course Web Site for EFL Vocabulary Acquisition*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Delaware, USA, 2002.
- [10] Fan, M.Y. *Frequency of use, perceived usefulness, and actual usefulness of second language vocabulary strategies: A study of Hong Kong learners*. *Modern Language Journal*, Vol 87, 2003, pp. 222-241.

