

# Implementing an online vocabulary training program

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**Abstract.** Although vocabulary acquisition research has shed much light on practical methods for increasing lexical knowledge (Nation, 1994), many foreign language teachers hesitate to implement focused vocabulary-training programs in their classrooms. The reasons most often cited for this hesitation are associated with the difficult tasks of creating, managing and disseminating vocabulary sets. Luckily, an online-based solution has emerged, i.e. Quizlet® (<https://quizlet.com/>). Quizlet® is a free online flashcard program that supports various vocabulary training approaches. Originally created by a high school student as a means to learn French vocabulary items, Quizlet® has grown to become the most popular online flashcard system in the world with over 20 million registered users. Moreover, Quizlet® continues to add functionality to the website and its excellent mobile applications. According to quantcast.com, more than 20 percent of Quizlet® page views originate from mobile device browsers. Of particular interest to foreign language instructors is Quizlet®'s capability to support vocabulary terms in multiple languages (through its audio and auto-define functions) and create class and individual student progress reports. The author has successfully integrated Quizlet® into a variety of university-level English courses in Japan and hopes to introduce this powerful teaching and learning resource to other foreign language instructors.

**Keywords:** vocabulary flashcards, intentional vocabulary instruction, word knowledge, mobile learning.

## 1. Introduction

In 2012, the author taught a science-themed reading course which emphasized the acquisition of science and technology vocabulary. The students, second and third-year university science and engineering majors at a private Japanese university,

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were eager to read articles related to emerging technologies; however, their lack of general vocabulary (let alone knowledge of English for Science and Technology) often caused frustration. This class was large (48 students) and English proficiency levels varied greatly with TOEIC scores ranging from the low 300s to the high 600s. Equally problematic was the inability of most students to organize new vocabulary terms in any meaningful way. The course textbook included a bilingual glossary at the end of each reading passage with sample sentences of “difficult” and/or “technical” terms, yet few students produced their own vocabulary notes. As the author understood the prevailing theories of second-language vocabulary acquisition and was aware of some methods for increasing students’ lexical knowledge, he knew that he needed to actively engage his students in targeted-vocabulary training. Specifically, the author wanted his students to be able to effectively create personalized vocabulary sets, study these sets through flashcard-type activities and track their own performance. In other words, it was important to the author that students could manage their own learning. Additionally, as the course instructor, the author wanted to be able to manage and track their performance from within a single program (if possible) and at no cost to students. Finally, an ideal flashcard program would support mobile-based learning through a well-designed mobile application. And while various flashcard systems existed at this time, the author was frustrated at the prospect of being forced to use several web-based solutions in order to realize his ideal vocabulary training program. In the end, after investigating a variety of free web-based flashcard sites and content management system-based programs, the author decided to integrate Quizlet® into his classroom instruction.

## **2. Experience**

Teachers will appreciate the versatility and simplicity of Quizlet®. The process to establish an account, create a bilingual vocabulary set and house this set can be accomplished in minutes. Additionally, teachers can easily guide students through the registration process to activate their free user accounts and download the mobile application. It has been the author's experience that following the initial registration procedure and a 15-minute teacher-led orientation, students soon develop the confidence necessary to utilize Quizlet® outside of the classroom.

Beyond its ease of use, Quizlet® offers several key features which make it a particularly powerful resource from both a learner and instructor perspective. With Quizlet®, students can create and edit vocabulary sets from a PC and/or mobile device, which gives them greater control and responsibility over their own learning. Students can then self-study through various games and quizzes based

on these vocabulary sets as well as measure their performance against themselves and other classmates. With the latest PC version of Quizlet®, there are six “study modes and games”, available to help users memorize content, and three “study modes and games” through its mobile application. The participants of one study, which compared the effectiveness of three flashcard websites (Chien, 2015), reported that they had “positive attitudes” toward learning vocabulary through these type of web-based activities. Furthermore, these participants mentioned the Quizlet® Speller activity as their favorite, followed by the Test, Scatter, and Space Race activities. As mentioned earlier, students can also improve their listening and pronunciation skills as vocabulary items can be heard in 18 languages (through text-to-speech audio with native-speaker quality) and recorded by users.

With a Quizlet® Teacher account (annual subscription rate: US\$24.99), teachers can take advantage of several useful tools to help them manage individual and class performance. In particular, the Class Progress function (which resides within each vocabulary set) groups vocabulary items according to the percentage of time that students correctly identify terms. As a result, “difficult” or unknown vocabulary will appear at the top of the report under the *Students get these terms right 0%-10% of the time* header, whereas, “easier” and/or mastered vocabulary will appear at the bottom of the page under the *Students get these terms right 90%-100% of the time* banner. After students have had a chance to study and practice a given set, the Class Progress report breaks down class proficiency in terms of what a class (as a whole) has scored correctly 0%-10%, 10%-25%, 25%-50%, 50%-75%, 75%-90%, 90%-100% of the time. Also included in this report is a “study activity” log for each student. This data displays the type of study activity which a student has engaged in, and this information can be selected to reflect the activities completed within the past day, week, month, and year. Taken together, these reports assisted the author to prioritize vocabulary items for review and testing purposes and gauge individual student effort.

Quizlet® allows students and teachers to create customized vocabulary sets in two powerful ways: first, users can copy and edit content from the over 87 million user-generated study sets which are publicly shared; and second, users can copy and edit content from within non-shared study sets. The first benefit means that Quizlet® users do not have to recreate existing vocabulary sets, saving them significant amounts of time. Moreover, this encourages collaboration among teachers who can divide the task of creating large bilingual vocabulary sets which often require a native-speaker to double-check definitions and/or sample sentences. The second benefit of the Quizlet® editing function enables teachers to choose who can edit a particular set of terms. When editing rights are given to students, they can work

together to efficiently create vocabulary sets of unknown terms, thus reducing wasted time spent on reviewing mastered items.

### 3. Conclusions

There is growing research which suggests that the incorporation of multimedia and technology in English learning has become the preferred manner of instruction among students (Hu & Deng, 2007). Additionally, it has been reported that students who have engaged in intentional vocabulary learning via online vocabulary websites have reported increased motivation, which has led, in turn, to improved vocabulary and increased vocabulary knowledge (Chien, 2015). Milliner (2013), for example, has measured the positive effects on student receptive vocabulary knowledge and standardized test performance through the use of Quizlet®. Online flashcard websites enable learners to acquire receptive and productive vocabulary skills through interactive and engaging activities. Moreover, these websites assist students to broaden their vocabulary knowledge to include information related to the form, use and meaning of vocabulary items.

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