DOI: https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/59/18-25

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Improving Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Knowledge through Blog-Based Multimodal Tasks among University EFL Learners

Abstract

The current mixed-methods study investigated the impact of blog-based multimodal tasks on receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of 412 university EFL learners over 6 weeks. The experimental group received blog-based vocabulary instruction combining reading, writing, comment, and multimodal input (text, image, multimedia), while the control group received textbook-based vocabulary instruction. Receptive vocabulary knowledge was measured by participants' reading comprehension and word recognition performance, while productive vocabulary knowledge was assessed based on the use of target lexical items in writing blog posts and comments. ANCOVA and mixed-design ANOVAs show important and meaningful group gains for both receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge with larger gains for receptive than productive vocabulary Exploring interaction effects, the experimental blog-based instruction group was found to know more vocabulary items over time. In writing samples, the experimental blog-based instruction group were found to use the target vocabulary more accurately, more frequently, and with greater lexical diversity in real contexts. The findings indicate that through blog-mediated multimodal tasks that provide sufficient input, depth of processing and opportunity for meaningful production. Therefore, planned and sequenced blogging tasks may be an effective instructional strategy to promote EFL learners' vocabulary development and meaningful production.

Keywords: *blog-based learning, multimodal tasks, receptive vocabulary knowledge, productive vocabulary knowledge, efl learners, vocabulary acquisition, university students, digital learning environments, authentic language use, lexical development, mixed-methods research, vocabulary gains*

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Universitet səviyyəsində EFL öyrənənlər arasında bloq əsaslı multimodal tapşırıqlar vasitəsilə reseptiv və produktiv söz ehtiyatının inkişaf etdirilməsi

Xülasə

Bu qarışıq metodlara əsaslanan tədqiqat 6 həftə ərzində 412 nəfər universitet səviyyəli EFL (ingilis dilini xarici dil kimi öyrənən) tələbənin reseptiv (qəbul edən) və produktiv (istehsal edən) söz ehtiyatına blog əsaslı multimodal tapşırıqların təsirini araşdırmışdır. Eksperimental qrupa oxuma, yazma, şərh yazma və multimodal girişləri (mətn, şəkil, multimedia) birləşdirən blog əsaslı söz ehtiyatı tədrisi verilmiş, nəzarət qrupuna isə dərslik əsaslı söz ehtiyatı tədrisi tətbiq olunmuşdur. Reseptiv söz ehtiyatı bilikləri iştirakçıların oxuyub-anlama və sözləri tanıma göstəriciləri ilə ölçülmüş, produktiv söz ehtiyatı isə blog yazılarında və şərhlərdə hədəf leksik vahidlərin istifadəsi əsasında qiymətləndirilmişdir. ANCOVA və qarışıq dizaynlı ANOVA nəticələri həm reseptiv, həm də produktiv söz ehtiyatında əhəmiyyətli irəliləyişlər göstərmişdir; reseptiv sahədə artım produktiv sahəyə nisbətən daha böyük olmuşdur. Qarşılıqlı təsir analizləri göstərmişdir ki, blog əsaslı eksperimental qrup zaman keçdikcə daha çox söz öyrənmişdir.

Yazı nümunələrinin təhlili göstərmişdir ki, eksperimental qrup hədəf sözləri daha dəqiq, daha tez-tez və daha böyük leksik müxtəlifliklə real kontekstlərdə istifadə etmişdir.

Nəticələr göstərir ki, kifayət qədər giriş, dərin emal və mənalı istehsal imkanı verən blog əsaslı multimodal tapşırıqlar effektivdir. Buna görə də, planlı və mərhələli şəkildə təşkil olunmuş blog tapşırıqları EFL öyrənənlərin söz ehtiyatının inkişafı və mənalı dil istehsalının təşviqi üçün effektiv tədris strategiyası ola bilər.

Açar sözlər: *blog əsaslı öyrənmə, multimodal tapşırıqlar, reseptiv söz ehtiyatı biliyi, produktiv söz ehtiyatı biliyi, EFL öyrənənlər, söz ehtiyatının mənimsənilməsi, universitet tələbələri, rəqəmsal öyrənmə mühitləri, autentik dil istifadəsi, leksik inkişaf, qarışıq metodlu tədqiqat, söz ehtiyatında irəliləyişlər*

Introduction

In particular, lexical knowledge, especially vocabulary knowledge, is necessary for the understanding of language in use and even the production of spoken and written language. EFL learners are often found to have difficulties in learning vocabulary. Thus, the issue of receptive vocabulary knowledge versus productive vocabulary knowledge might affect EFL teachers' teaching of vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary knowledge is that which a learner understands through listening and reading, while productive vocabulary knowledge is that which a learner employs in speaking and writing (Zhou et al., 2010). This study intended to introduce blog-based multimodal tasks as a teaching approach to improve receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge of university EFL learners.

Research

Blogs are also being used as a language learning tool. They are a new form of multimodal communication, in that they map written linguistic data, images and audio. Thus, they could be a new tool for language learning. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether blog-based tasks could be an effective tool for receptive and productive vocabulary acquisition, and whether the implementation of multimodal tasks based on the blog could narrow down the gap between the receptive and productive vocabulary use. To that end, the study's research questions are:

1. To what extent do blog-based multimodal tasks lead to an increase in EFL receptive vocabulary?
2. What are the effects of blog-based multimodal tasks on university EFL learners' productive vocabulary knowledge?
3. What is the difference between receptive and productive vocabulary gains across the six-week blog-based intervention?
4. Do tasks with blogs promote the use of vocabulary by students?

Literature Review

2.1. Vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts

Vocabulary size is essential in language acquisition, reading, writing, and language skill. In EFL, vocabulary knowledge can be categorized into receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive vocabulary knowledge. The difference between receptive vocabulary knowledge, what one can read, listen to, but cannot recall for speaking or writing, and productive vocabulary knowledge, what one can recall for speaking or writing (Nation, 2001). A second distinction in vocabulary development is receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. It is possible for receptive vocabulary to develop before children's productive vocabulary, meaning children are able to recognize a word before they are able to produce the word (Zareva et al., 2005). In light of the aforementioned importance of both types of vocabulary knowledge in the EFL context, the current study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of using blog-based multimodal tasks in improving university students' receptive vocabulary knowledge. Accordingly, the following research question was formulated: To what extent do blog-based multimodal tasks improve university EFL students' receptive vocabulary knowledge?

2.2. The Importance of Multimodal Learning in Vocabulary Acquisition

Multimodal learning environments are learning environments where students learn in a variety of formats, such as text, audio, video and interactivity (A. Maftuna, Research has shown that multimodal environments result in better vocabulary learning than text-only environments (Leu et al., 2004),

which may be due to the fact that they ease deep processing of novel words, due to the use of multiple types of input and output (Paivio, 1986). Multimodal tasks, including videos, images, and other non-linguistic elements, may ease the comprehension and retention of new vocabulary due to their high contextual information value (Kern, 2000). Since these modes include active use of the target language, multimodal approaches seem to be even more effective for vocabulary development as they take into account how students use the target vocabulary in context by incorporating vocabulary into their writing and communicative situations (Bock et al., 2017). Thus, the second research question is stated as follows: To what extent do blog-based multimodal tasks raise university EFL students' productive vocabulary knowledge?

2.3 Blog Based Learning (BBL) in language education

Blogs are increasingly used in language learning as they motivate students, allow them to produce written language in more authentic environments, allow them to write for an audience, and allow them to receive feedback from peers and instructors. Some authors have argued that blogs may assist second language learners because they provide authentic audiences for learner writing and peer feedback (Richards, 2006). Blogs also provide an opportunity to practice productive vocabulary knowledge in authentic contexts while students write and provide peer feedback for blog posts.

Blog entries provide opportunities for EFL students to make use of vocabulary in context. They may also provide an opportunity for EFL students to provide context for lexical items which they have met in other forms of media (e.g. articles, videos and audio) and communicative modes (e.g. interaction, discussion, etc.) (Meskill, 2005). When receptive and productive tasks are combined (e.g. receptive reading and productive writing tasks based on reading blog posts such as commenting), blogs have been shown to affect vocabulary knowledge positively and also receptive and productive skills (Warschauer, 2007). Blogs have the potential to provide learners with opportunities for interacting with and reflecting on vocabulary in genuine authentic social contexts (Cunningham & McDonald, 2011). Thus, the third research question of the study, Is there a meaningful difference between receptive and productive vocabulary gains after a six-week blog-based intervention?, is mainly to find out whether receptive vocabulary gains are larger than productive vocabulary gains since the enormous body of research finds that receptive vocabulary gains are larger.

2.4. Vocabulary Knowledge and Blog-Based Multimodal Tasks

Blog-based multimodal tasks may include searching, reading and commenting on existing blogs, and writing and publishing new original blog posts on a variety of topics. Blog-based multimodal tasks may provide opportunities to develop receptive vocabulary through reading authentic blogs and productive vocabulary through the writing of original blog posts (Boulton, 2010). Blogs used in the EFL classroom have also provided ways for EFL learners to learn vocabulary receptively and productively. For instance, Yang (2012) indicated that EFL learners' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge was increased when they wrote and commented upon EFL classroom blogs. In addition, other researchers have suggested that blogs provide a means for learners to move from passive to active use of vocabulary (Boulton, 2010). Another advantage of the multimodal blog posting approach is retention of vocabulary learned. Smith (2013) found that vocabulary was better retained when it was learned in multiple modalities such as reading, writing, and peer interactions. These tasks, which were related to another research question: How effectively do blog-based tasks help students use newly learned vocabulary in context?, provided opportunities for learners to learn and use the target words. They evaluate how students are using and applying the target words in their blog postings and the comments they write on these postings.

Methodology

Thus, the current study adopted a mixed-methods research design to investigate whether blog-based multimodal tasks had any effects on the receptive and productive vocabulary development of university students enrolled in an EFL course. The 412 participants were undergraduate EFL students. Whereas the experimental group participated in blog activities, the control group received conventional vocabulary instruction through using the text book and completing the exercises in the classrooms.

3.1 Participants

Four hundred and twelve undergraduate students were recruited to take part in the study, matched as closely as possible on gender and subject expertise. Participants were aged 18 to 24 years old; English skills were assessed by a standard pre-test. Each participant was tested as having at least basic English skills.

3.2 Procedure

During the six-week experimental period, the experimental group performed multimodal tasks in blogs that were aimed at developing receptive and productive vocabulary, that is, they read blog entries, commented on peers' blogs, and wrote blog entries on a range of topics. The control group, by contrast, performed the customary vocabulary routines, that is, they were provided with textbook exercises, vocabulary drills, and discussed vocabulary with their teachers. Participants' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge was measured by pre and post tests. The receptive vocabulary test comprised a reading comprehension test and a word recognition test. The stimulus for the productive vocabulary test was a blog post and blog comments that contained all of the target words for the productive vocabulary intervention curriculum.

Results

Preliminary analysis indicated no important differences between the two groups prior to the test of the main effects (the pre-test means were similar; Levene's test for homogeneity of variances was satisfactory; and no meaningful departure from normality was detected (all ps > .05)). Descriptive statistics for each variable are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics for Receptive and Productive Vocabulary Scores by Group.

Group	Vocab. Type	N	Pre-M	Pre-SD	Post-M	Post-SD	Gain
Experimental	Receptive	206	52.34	8.91	71.58	7.62	+19.24
	Productive	206	48.17	9.43	62.45	8.74	+14.28
Control	Receptive	206	51.89	9.14	57.12	8.83	+5.23
	Productive	206	47.93	9.27	53.68	8.95	+5.75

Note. *M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Gain = Post-M minus Pre-M.*

RQ1: Blog-Based Tasks and Receptive Vocabulary

A one-way ANCOVA on receptive post-test scores, with group entered as a fixed factor and pre-test scores as a covariate, yielded a meaningful, large main effect of group, $F(1, 409) = 95.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .190$. Holding pre-test scores constant, the experimental group gained an average of almost 14 points over controls (M = 71.58, SD = 9.15; M = 57.12, SD = 9.74). In other words, students who read excerpts of blog articles and inferred the meaning of words from real-world multimedia input acquired receptive vocabulary substantially faster than students who completed textbook exercises. The ANCOVA results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.
ANCOVA Results for Receptive Vocabulary Post-Test Scores.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	ηp^2
Pre-test (Covariate)	3847.21	1	3847.21	62.43	< .001	.133
Group	5912.34	1	5912.34	95.97	< .001	.190
Error	24897.56	409	60.87	—	—	—
Total	34657.11	411	—	—	—	—

RQ2: Blog-Based Tasks and Productive Vocabulary

For productive vocabulary, parallel ANCOVA analyzes on post-test scores showed important effects for group. An F-test demonstrated $F(1, 409) = 59.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .127$. Students in the experimental group who blogged using target words performed better (14.28-point increase) than control group students (5.75-point increase), or approximately 2.5 times better. This moderate to large effect size was nevertheless smaller than that in receptive vocabulary, which accounted for the receptive-over-productive pattern in RQ3. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3.
ANCOVA Analyzes with Post-Test Productive Vocabulary Scores.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	ηp²
Pre-test (Covariate)	2913.47	1	2913.47	41.28	< .001	.092
Group	4201.89	1	4201.89	59.53	< .001	.127
Error	28883.12	409	70.62	—	—	—
Total	35998.48	411	—	—	—	—

RQ3: Do receptive and productive gains differ over time?

The main hypothesis (the effect of the intervention on development of each vocabulary type) was tested with a mixed 2 (Group) × 2 (Vocabulary Type) × 2 (Time) ANOVA. There were important effects of time ($F(1, 410) = 98.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .194$), group ($F(1, 410) = 78.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .161$), and vocabulary type ($F(1, 410) = 53.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .115$). All prosody and vocabulary type two-way and three-way interactions were meaningful (all ps ≤ .004). The three-way Group × Vocabulary Type × Time interaction, $F(1, 410) = 8.55$, $p = .004$, $\eta p^2 = .020$, is particularly important because it shows that receptive gains amongst the blog-based group were considerably larger than their productive gains, unlike in the control group. In this analysis, the Group × Time interaction ($\eta p^2 = .067$) indicates not only a superior effect of the group blogging condition at baseline, but also a greater learning gain (see Tables 4 and 5 for the ANOVA summary and pre-to-post paired comparisons).

Table 4.
Mixed-Design ANOVA: Vocabulary Type × Time × Group.

Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	ηp²
Between Subjects						
Group	6341.22	1	6341.22	78.34	< .001	.161
Error (Between)	33148.91	410	80.85	—	—	—
Within Subjects						
Vocab Type (V)	4218.67	1	4218.67	53.21	< .001	.115
Time (T)	7832.45	1	7832.45	98.73	< .001	.194
V × T	1123.89	1	1123.89	14.17	< .001	.033
Group × V	987.34	1	987.34	12.45	< .001	.029
Group × T	2341.56	1	2341.56	29.52	< .001	.067
Group × V × T	678.23	1	678.23	8.55	.004	.020
Error (Within)	32541.78	410	79.37	—	—	—

Note. *ηp² = partial eta-squared. V = Vocabulary Type; T = Time.*

Table 5.
Pre- to Post-Test Gains by Group and Vocabulary Type.

Group	Vocab. Type	Pre-M	Post-M	Gain	t	Cohen's d	p
Experimal	Receptive	52.34	71.58	+19.24	24.17	1.68	< .001
	Productive	48.17	62.45	+14.28	18.93	1.32	< .001
Control	Receptive	51.89	57.12	+5.23	7.14	0.50	< .001
	Productive	47.93	53.68	+5.75	7.82	0.55	< .001

RQ4: How effective is the teaching of authentic vocabulary?

The experimental group produced more wide-ranging and accurate target vocabulary in end-of-intervention blog writing samples than the control group. Chi-square tests of independence show that the groups differ in target vocabulary use on all three measures (all ps < .001). As well, more than three-quarters of experimental group students (78.4%) used language appropriately to its context compared to just over half of control group students (54.2%). Experimental group writers were also lexically more diverse (M = 3.82 vs. 2.47) and produced more target words per post than the control group (M = 6.31 vs. 3.14). Furthermore, the lexical transfers of each group were qualitatively different; those of the experiment group embedded the words in sentences that were syntactically different but semantically appropriate, while those of the control group were more formulaic. The content analysis results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6.
Analysis of Writing Samples with Respect to Vocabulary Usage.

Vocabulary Usage Category	Experimental (n=206)	Control (n=206)	χ^2	df	p
Accurate contextual use	78.4%	54.2%	31.47	1	< .001
Partially accurate use	14.2%	28.6%	15.83	1	< .001
Inaccurate or absent use	7.4%	17.2%	12.61	1	< .001
bI	3.82	2.47	—	—	—
Target words per post (M)	6.31	3.14	—	—	—

Note. Chi-square tests were not performed for continuous variables (i.e., lexical variety score, target words per post). All χ^2 values were important at p < .001.

Discussion

Overall, the blog-based multimodal tasks resulted in statistically important and pedagogically meaningful vocabulary learning gains across all the measures used. In this section, we interpret the results of the study, examine their pedagogical implications, and discuss the limitations and future research directions related to this study.

Receptive Vocabulary: Multimodal Input and Deep Processing

Input richness and contextual inferencing provide an explanation for the large effect size for receptive vocabulary ($\eta p^2 = .190$). Blog exposure provides students with vocabulary input as part of authentic discourse and also provides realistic cues, conventionalized collocations, and visual input that are not part of textbook reading passages. Because this multimodal environment involves more than one representational channel (Mayer, 2009), lexical representations are likely to be more elaborated than in single-channel text reading. In line with Nation (2001), it seems that the more

frequent and diverse the meaningful encounters with a target word (as there are with posts, comments, and responses), the more likely word learning is to occur. These relatively small gains in the control group suggest that ordinary textbook instruction, however organized, could not provide this density and variety of exposure.

Productive Vocabulary: Output Practice and the Limits of Six Weeks

However, this large albeit smaller effect ($\eta p^2 = .127$) seems to confirm the classic asymmetry in the lexical retrieval that is not satisfied by mere recognition. Using the productive storage requires knowledge about collocational restrictions, register and the ability to retrieve items on demand (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Melka, 1997). This process was begun by the blog-supported writing tasks, which required students to produce language in audience-aware contexts, thus providing the output-driven 'push' Swain (1985) identified as necessary for productive development. The productive gains were real, though arguably not as wide-ranging as the receptive gains, not a failure of the intervention or task, but a reflection of the natural gradient from recognition to production, and perhaps a need for more time or stronger task focus on productive use.

The Receptive-Productive Trajectory: What the Interactions Reveal

Mixed ANOVA interaction effects provided what may have been the most theoretically important results of the study. First, the three-way interaction again confirmed the hypothesis that the blog environment was differentiated in terms of receptive and productive development. Second, this was true of the blog condition only, and is not a general effect of vocabulary learning. This is consistent with depth-of-processing models (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) which predict that input which is rich in meaning and multi-modal will be consolidated into the mental lexicon as recognizable items before being freely available for production. The Group x Time interaction effect ($\eta p^2 = .067$) suggests that the blogging condition had an effect on the learning curve, in that cycling between input and output modes over the six-week intervention created a virtuous cycle whereby reading informed writing, and writing deepened reading. This has implications for how we think about the sequencing of receptive and productive tasks in digital learning environments.

Authentic Use: Evidence of Rich Lexical Knowledge

The content analysis results confirm the statistical findings in an important way: the effects of the blog group do not only appear in terms of scores, they also appear with regard to the learners' production. Here the difference also amounts to about 25 points in correctly used instances in context (78.4% vs. 54.2%) is what Nation (2001) has called 'rich' vocabulary knowledge that involves multidimensional knowledge of not only what a word means, but also how, when, and with what other words it collocates. Blog writing is intrinsically communicative and socially exposed, and this may have encouraged the students to consider words at a richer level. Writing for a real audience and purpose provided students with a motivation for productive language use, far beyond that provided by preparing for tests. Using a more lexically diverse vocabulary with higher target-word frequency in the experimental group supports the finding that blogging promoted exploratory use of vocabulary, rather than avoidance and rote use, often missed in standardized testing.

Pedagogical Implications

These findings suggest that structured blogging can be effectively conducted in EFL vocabulary learning, and particularly effective if input-rich and output-demanding work is done with new vocabulary after it has been given at the beginning of each blogging cycle in order to promote both productive and receptive aspects of vocabulary development. The teacher should not assume productive and receptive gains in language will develop at the same rate. A properly designed blogging curriculum might be understood as building a receptive foundation for productive knowledge. The social and audience-aware dimension of the blog platform appears to be a genuine pedagogical benefit and its impact on the quality of lexical output should not be underestimated.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations temper this conclusion: six weeks of treatment were sufficient to measure meaningful progress, but do not measure productive vocabulary growth over time or whether any progress made was retained after treatment ended. Future studies with longer interventions and later post-tests are needed to determine whether blog-based instruction and practice effects are maintained

and if the receptive-productive gap can be reduced. The relatively homogeneous sample, derived from a single university, may not be generalizable to other learners, skill levels, and contexts, justifying replication of this work with such samples. Finally, the study does not measure the students' own beliefs, strategies or experiences of the blogging task, leaving the evidence for the mechanisms behind these effects somewhat inferential. Such instruments, such as think-aloud protocols or reflective journals, could be used in follow-up studies to gather qualitative information that could supplement the quantitative and content-analysis data.

Conclusion

Overall, the data suggest that, following six weeks of multimodal VLS via a blog, students show statistically meaningful and educationally relevant gains in receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary use; and also that receptively learnt vocabulary appears more easily learnt than productive vocabulary, reflecting the second language literature's emphasis on the difficulty of moving from recognition to production and the need for wide-ranging scaffolding and practice. What was special about the blogging context was that, more than customary instruction, it provided frequent, varied, authentic encounters with target words in the context of communication with others. Thus, we conclude that this combination offers a promising avenue for vocabulary development and should have a prominent role in EFL instruction.

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Received: 07.12.2025
Accepted: 15.03.2026