

[Software review]

Vocabulary.com

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Title	Vocabulary.com
Author	Thinkmap, Inc., 599 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, New York 10012.
Contact information	https://www.vocabulary.com
Type of product	Website/Mobile application for vocabulary testing and practice
Platform	Online, iOS, and Android
Minimum hardware requirements	Website: Computer, a browser, and Internet connection Mobile Application: Requires iOS 6.1 or later
Price	For learners: Free account on the website \$2.99 for iPhone For teachers: The price for membership ranges from \$159 to \$599 per year. The price depends on the maximum number of students allowed in the membership (from 25 students to +200 students). More information regarding memberships and pricing can be found at https://www.vocabulary.com/membership/teachers/

Introduction

There is no denying that technology plays an integral role in our lives. Some of the endless benefits of technology can be found when it is integrated with literacy learning; such integration in literacy classrooms can potentially enhance learners' experiences in areas such as receiving immediate and individual feedback, enabling learners to work independently (i.e., promoting learners' autonomy), and helping learners to gain a sense of accomplishment (Meridith & Linda, 2009). In addition, it can support the acquisition of vocabulary, whether in the first language (L1) (Pearson et al., 2007) or the second language (L2) (Folse, 2004). Vocabulary acquisition is essential in the process of literacy learning and reading comprehension, as well as in the

development of L2 learners' writing quality (Csomay & Prades, 2018) and listening comprehension (Matthews, 2018).

Choosing an effective technology to enhance students' literacy can be a challenging task despite a plethora of available options. To overcome such a challenge, teachers can refer to a well-defined set of criteria when evaluating a technology to support learners' literacy. Cummins et al. (2007) proposed such criteria as design principles for technology-supported literacy instruction. Therefore, the following four criteria adopted from Cummins et al. (2007) will be used to guide this review of the Vocabulary.com website. These criteria are:

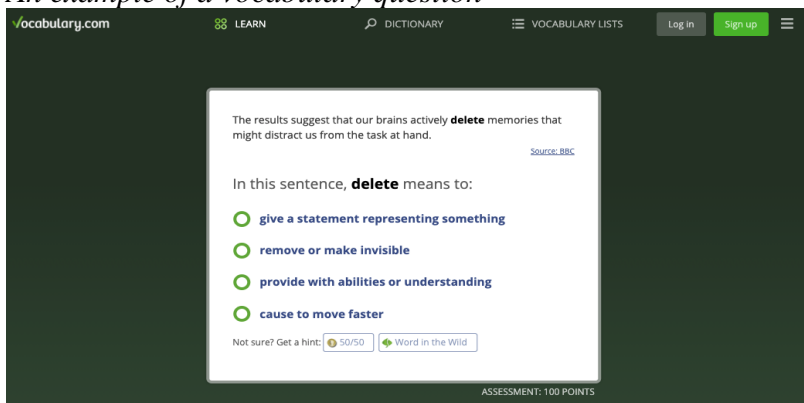
1. cognitive challenge and opportunities for deep processing of meaning;
2. active self-regulated collaborative inquiry;
3. relating instruction to prior knowledge and experiences; and
4. extensive engaged reading and writing (p. 109).

General Description

Vocabulary.com is a free website that is primarily designed to support vocabulary learning in the English language. Vocabulary.com is available on computers, tablets, and smartphones; however, the smartphone version must be purchased. Users need to create one of two types of account in order to use the website: a learner account (free) or a teacher account (free for 30 days). Before signing up, the website provides a short vocabulary quiz that demonstrates some of the basic features. The quiz presents a variety of vocabulary questions in multiple formats to determine the users' vocabulary level and personalize their learning experience. The types of vocabulary questions include choosing the best picture for the provided word, choosing the meaning of a given word, and choosing the meaning of a given word within a sentence. An example of a vocabulary question is shown in Figure 1 below.

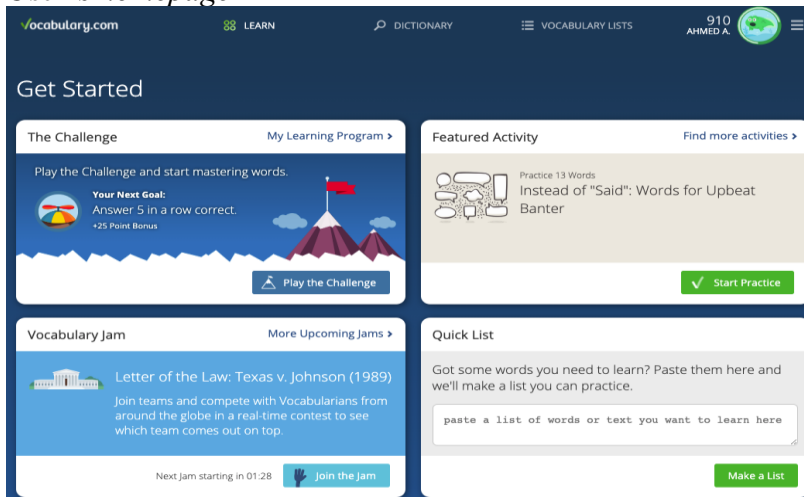
Figure 1

An example of a vocabulary question



After the user signs up, the website offers a variety of features that can help in promoting vocabulary learning. For example, Figure 2 below shows the user's homepage that presents some of the vocabulary learning options, as well as the user's score that is obtained from participating in individual and online vocabulary activities.

Figure 2
User's homepage



One of the features that Vocabulary.com offers for vocabulary learning includes participating in “Vocabulary Jams” online with other users. In this option, learners work in two teams to compete with each other by answering vocabulary questions that are based on certain content. The website offers multiple scheduled options of “Vocabulary Jams” for the learners to choose from (shown in Figure 3 below).

Figure 3
Playing collaboratively with teams in a vocabulary jam



Another feature Vocabulary.com offers is that users can look up words from an online dictionary. Figure 4 below shows an example of a definition of a searched word with many features. The online dictionary provides the definition of the searched word, its pronunciation, some uses, parts of speech, and many authentic examples that are adopted from different sources (e.g., fiction, arts, news, business, sports, science, and technology), allowing learners to check examples based on their preferences.

Figure 4

Looking up words from the online dictionary

joy 🔊 [Add to list](#) [Share](#)

Joy is the emotion of pleasure and happiness. *Joy* can also be the very thing that delights you. You might find great *joy* in learning new vocabulary. Or not.

Joy can also be used as a verb. You can *joy* in the fact that you have no homework for the weekend. Or, you might want to rejoice when the teacher announces that the test has been canceled. It's a real *joy* to use the word as an adjective, too. For example, receiving straight A's probably makes you extremely joyful.

Definitions of joy

- (noun)** the emotion of great happiness
synonyms: [joyfulness](#), [joyousness](#)
[see more](#) ▾
- (noun)** something or someone that provides a source of happiness
"a joy to behold"
synonyms: [delight](#), [pleasure](#)
[see more](#) ▾
- (verb)** feel happiness or joy
synonyms: [rejoice](#)
[see more](#) ▾
- (verb)** make glad or happy
synonyms: [gladden](#)
[see more](#) ▾

Usage Examples All sources ▾ < prev | next >

A whoop of **joy** escaped his lips as he ran across the sand.
Ship Breaker

I watch the different emotions flash across her face— disbelief, **joy**, confusion— before she takes a step forward.
Legend

He walked easily, with a **joy** of movement and with a feeling of walking in sunlight.
1246

The boys and girls of Big Creek went back to their chairs and held their diplomas and looked at one another, filled with present **joy** and impending loss.
October Sky

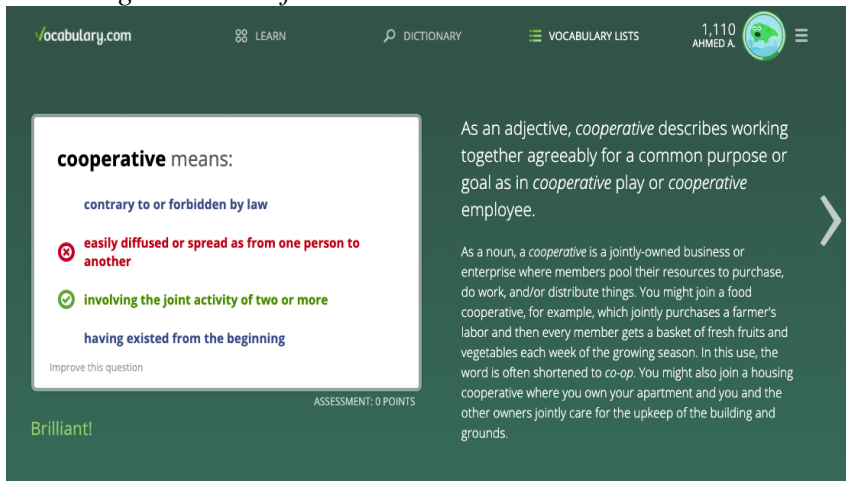
Word Family

joy — enjoy

the "joy" family

In addition, the website offers some features such as immediate feedback. Figure 5 shows the type of feedback the website provides. If the chosen answer is incorrect, it asks the learner to try again. If the chosen answer is correct, it provides an explanation of the word and some uses of the word.

Figure 5
Providing immediate feedback



In terms of learners' proficiency levels, the provided options and features present vocabulary that is generated through the website's pool of over 228,000 questions. According to the website, it uses "sophisticated algorithms" that help learners to learn over 15,000 words. More information regarding the features and how the website works can be found at <https://www.vocabulary.com/howitworks/>. In general, on top of the various options and features, teachers can teach new content-based vocabulary, create and administer quizzes, assign readings, and promote online-based classroom learning by using their teacher account. More information regarding the offered features and how to use them can be found at <https://www.vocabulary.com/membership/>.

Evaluation

By following the criteria adapted from Cummins et al. (2007), this section evaluates the website, Vocabulary.com, for potential strengths and weaknesses.

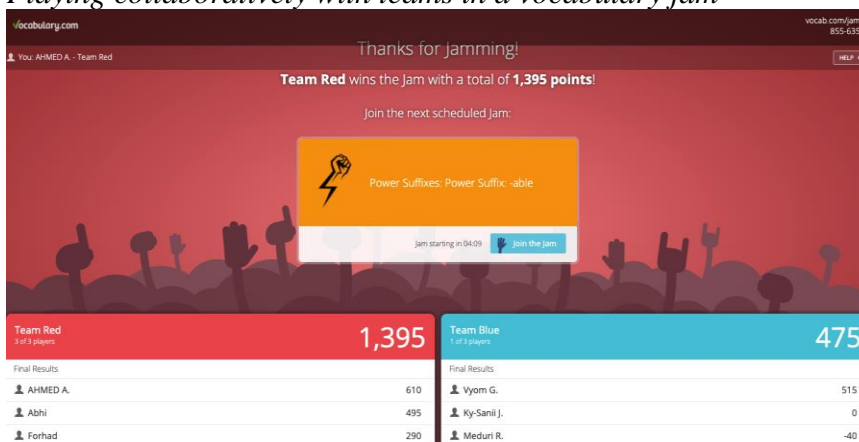
Providing cognitive challenge and opportunities for deep processing of meaning

Vocabulary.com mostly provides vocabulary learning options that are essentially aligned with providing cognitive challenges, as well as providing opportunities for deep processing of meaning. For one, the website uses a wide range of questions that work as a diagnostic tool for determining learners' levels. These questions increase gradually in their difficulty in order to provide cognitive challenges as the questions get more challenging. Another example is that the website offers authentic learning opportunities, in which it shows learners some examples of where words are used in a real-world context. In addition, the website always provides immediate feedback on learners' choices while giving further information and other uses of each word, as shown in Figure 5 above.

Promoting active self-regulated collaborative inquiry

Vocabulary.com offers many features that promote self-regulated collaborative inquiry. At its core, learners build their own vocabulary in a personalized manner although many options are available for collaboration. Learners can control what topics they want to explore, what challenges they want to try, and what vocabulary lists they want to create, through which these activities can be shared with other learners for collaborative learning. In addition, the website provides learners with opportunities that are purely collaborative. For instance, learners can play collaboratively with others who share similar levels and interests (shown in Figure 6 below). With such options for collaboration, teachers can also assign groups who can work together to explore a wide variety of readings. Moreover, teachers can design or choose pre-designed Vocabulary Jams and challenges and assign groups to compete with each other.

Figure 6
Playing collaboratively with teams in a vocabulary jam



Relating instruction to prior knowledge and experiences

Vocabulary.com utilizes prior knowledge through the use of certain algorithms that track, record, and customize the presented types of vocabulary, games, challenges, and readings. Also, learners can choose from a large database of different topics depending on their background knowledge and experiences. With the feature of having personalized lists, learners can keep building their vocabulary based on what they already know or experienced. Furthermore, the website offers many activities related to certain reading materials that encourage learners to employ their background knowledge and experiences to complete the activities. However, some of the descriptions found on the website may be difficult to understand if the users are beginning English language learners (ELLs).

Encouraging extensive engaged reading and writing

Although Vocabulary.com mainly focuses on building vocabulary through personalized and pre-designed games and challenges, it offers many reading opportunities. Learners can search, within the website, for reading materials and books with different content depending on their needs and preferences. When choosing to learn a certain pre-designed reading material or book, the website provides multiple learning options that focus on vocabulary knowledge based on the reading. In each reading, learners can practice their vocabulary by answering some comprehension questions. Additionally, learners can practice their spelling based on the selected vocabulary from the reading. To encourage learners, the website offers learners opportunities for participating in collaborative, competitive, and real-time online games based on the reading (see Figure 7 below). However, the website does not promote writing of any kind, except for the website blog.

Figure 7
Choosing from a variety of activities for reading comprehension

The screenshot shows the Vocabulary.com interface for the book 'Out of Darkness' by Russell Freedman. The page features a dark header with navigation options like 'LEARN', 'DICTIONARY', and 'VOCABULARY LISTS'. Below the header, there are tabs for 'Featured Lists', 'Non-Fiction', and 'My Lists'. The main content area displays the book cover and title, along with a brief description: 'In this biography, Russell Freedman explores the life of Louis Braille, who developed a system of writing for blind people.' There are buttons for 'Learn', 'Explore the Words', and 'Assign'. Below the book information, there is a section titled 'Start learning with an activity...' which offers three options: 'Practice' (with a green checkmark icon), 'Spelling Bee' (with a yellow bee icon), and 'Vocabulary Jam' (with a blue hand icon). Each activity has a brief description and a 'Start' button. At the bottom, there is a progress bar for 'Practice progress on lists in this collection:' with two entries: '25 Words: Chapters 1-4' (with a green 'Start Practice' button) and '30 Words: Chapters 5-8' (with a grey 'Start Practice' button).

Conclusion

Based on the evaluation above, Vocabulary.com offers many opportunities for vocabulary learning that can support literacy development. However, there are a few limitations that may lead to potential shortcomings. On the one hand, Vocabulary.com has a wide range of pre-designed vocabulary activities for different contents that learners can practice and learn from based on their L2 levels. In addition, the website allows learners to personalize their learning based on their needs and base while providing them with authentic materials with immediate feedback. For teachers, the website helps in designing content-based materials that can serve their goals and objectives. Moreover, teachers can engage their

students in engaging games and challenges that could be done individually or collaboratively. On the other hand, one limitation is that Vocabulary.com provides instructional language that can be difficult for beginning ELLs. Another limitation is that the website does not promote writing skills or provide writing activities. Overall, Vocabulary.com is a vocabulary learning source for both teachers and students that offers many options and features that can help in promoting L2 vocabulary learning as well as reading comprehension.

References

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