

THE EFFECT OF GAMIFIED CALL ACTIVITIES ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN B1 LEVEL EFL LEARNERS**Madina Qurbonaliyeva**

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Abstract

This study looks at how gamified CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) activities affect vocabulary learning in B1 level English classes. The research was carried out in a public secondary school in Uzbekistan with 32 students. One group of 15 students used digital quiz platforms (Quizizz and Kahoot) in their lessons, while another group of 17 students followed the regular textbook-based approach. After six weeks, the digital group improved their vocabulary scores by 28 percentage points, compared to only 12 points for the traditional group. Students also reported feeling more motivated and engaged during the digital lessons. The findings show that using gamified CALL tools within a task-based teaching approach can make vocabulary learning more effective and more enjoyable for B1 learners. The paper also suggests practical steps for teachers and educational policymakers in Uzbekistan.

Keywords

CALL, vocabulary acquisition, gamification, task-based language teaching, EFL, B1 level, Uzbekistan

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most important parts of learning a language. Without enough words, learners cannot express their ideas, understand what they read or hear, or hold a simple conversation (Nation, 2001). Students at the B1 level, according to the CEFR, are expected to discuss familiar topics, understand general texts, and communicate in everyday situations. To do all of this, they need a solid and active vocabulary.

However, in many EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan — and in similar contexts around the world — vocabulary is still taught in very traditional ways: students write word lists, do translation exercises, and fill in gaps on worksheets. These methods tend to be passive and repetitive. Research shows that they often lead to weak retention because students do not get enough varied, meaningful practice with new words (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000).

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) offers a different approach. Digital tools can show vocabulary in context, give students immediate feedback, and repeat words in different ways across multiple sessions. When gamification is added — meaning elements like points, rankings, and timed challenges — these platforms can also make practice genuinely enjoyable (Hamari et al., 2014). Students are more likely to stay engaged and put in more effort when learning feels like a game.

Despite the growing interest in CALL, there is still very little research on gamified vocabulary instruction in Central Asian EFL settings. This study aims to fill that gap. The central question is: Does using gamified CALL activities improve vocabulary learning for B1 level EFL students more than traditional teaching methods?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CALL and vocabulary learning

Research has long supported the idea that CALL can help students learn vocabulary more effectively. One of the most important early studies was by Chun and Plass (1996). They found that students who saw vocabulary with both pictures and written explanations remembered words much better than students who only received written definitions. This makes sense — when a word is connected to an image, a sound, and a sentence, it becomes easier to remember.

Nation (2001) points out that good vocabulary learning depends on meeting a word many times, in different situations. Simply seeing a word once or twice is not enough. Digital quiz platforms are well suited for this because they can present the same words across multiple sessions, in different types of questions. This repeated, varied exposure is one of the key reasons CALL tends to produce better vocabulary results than traditional methods.

More recent studies have confirmed this. Stockwell (2012) showed that mobile vocabulary apps can produce real gains in word knowledge, especially when tasks are short and interactive. The key factor is not just the technology itself, but how it is used — tools that give immediate feedback and allow for repeated practice tend to work best.

2.2 Gamification and learner motivation

Gamification means adding game-like features — such as scores, leaderboards, badges, and time limits — to non-game activities like classroom learning (Deterding et al., 2011). A large review of studies by Hamari et al. (2014) found that gamification generally has a positive effect on motivation, especially when students actually enjoy the experience rather than feeling forced into it.

This connects to what Dörnyei (2001) says about motivation in language learning: motivated students try harder, practice more, and therefore learn more. When students enjoy their lessons, they are more likely to pay attention, participate actively, and come back ready to learn the next day. Gamified platforms seem to tap into this by making even repetitive vocabulary practice feel rewarding.

Research on specific platforms supports this. Bicen and Kocakoyun (2018) found that students learning vocabulary through Kahoot scored significantly higher and reported greater motivation than those in traditional classes. Similar results have been found for Quizizz (Zhao, 2019), which allows students to work at their own pace while still seeing how they compare to their classmates.

2.3 Task-based language teaching and CALL

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses on giving students real communicative tasks to complete, rather than just explaining grammar rules or asking them to memorize lists. Ellis (2003) argues that tasks encourage students to process language at a deeper level, which leads to better learning. When tasks also involve technology, students get the benefits of both approaches.

Chapelle (2001) describes good CALL activities as those that provide meaningful input, allow for interaction, and give clear feedback. This description fits well with gamified task-based lessons: students interact with content in a meaningful way, work with others, and get instant results. The combination of TBLT and CALL is not just a trend — it is backed by solid evidence from classroom research (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design and participants

This study used a quasi-experimental design with pre-tests and post-tests in two groups. This type of design is common in classroom research because it is not always possible to randomly assign students to different groups (Dörnyei, 2007). Thirty-two B1 level students aged 14 to 16 took part, all from the same public secondary school in Uzbekistan. Fifteen students were placed in the experimental group and seventeen in the control group, based on their existing classes. Both groups scored similarly on the pre-test (experimental group: 54%, control group: 55%), which confirms they started at the same level.

3.2 Instructional treatment

Both groups had three English lessons per week for six weeks and covered the same vocabulary content. The difference was in how that content was taught. The experimental group followed a three-stage lesson structure. First, students watched short videos or looked at pictures to get familiar with the topic and new words. Then they completed interactive tasks using Quizizz and Kahoot — answering vocabulary questions, competing in quiz games, describing pictures in pairs, and creating short dialogues in small groups. Finally, they reviewed their results, discussed mistakes, and practiced using new words in sentences. The control group learned the same vocabulary through standard methods: teacher explanations, textbook exercises, and written drills, without any digital tools.

3.3 Instruments

Vocabulary tests. Both groups completed a vocabulary test at the start and end of the six weeks. Each test had 30 questions — multiple choice and sentence completion — covering the words taught during the lessons. The tests were designed to measure both understanding of word meanings and the ability to use words correctly in context.

Motivation questionnaire. After the six weeks, students in the experimental group answered a short questionnaire with five statements rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), as well as three open questions asking them to describe their experience in their own words.

Classroom observations. Throughout the six weeks, the researcher kept notes on how engaged students were, how actively they participated, and how they responded to different types of activities.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Vocabulary test results

Table 1 shows how both groups performed on the vocabulary tests before and after the six-week period.

Table 1

Vocabulary test scores before and after the instructional period

Group	Pre-test (%)	Post-test (%)	Improvement (pp)
Experimental (n = 15)	54	82	+28
Control (n = 17)	55	67	+12

Note. pp = percentage points.

Both groups made progress over the six weeks, which is expected with regular instruction. However, the experimental group improved much more — by 28 percentage points, compared to 12 points for the control group. Since both groups started at nearly the same level, this difference is likely due to the teaching approach rather than any pre-existing advantage.

Why did the digital group learn more vocabulary? A few reasons stand out. First, students encountered new words many times and in different ways — in videos, in quiz questions, in group tasks. Nation (2001) explains that this kind of varied, repeated exposure is exactly what vocabulary learning needs. Second, the platforms gave immediate feedback. Every time a student answered a question, they found out straight away if they were right or wrong. Nagata (1993) showed that this kind of quick feedback helps students correct their understanding before wrong ideas become habits. Third, and perhaps most importantly, students actually enjoyed the activities. When students are engaged, they naturally pay more attention and absorb more.

4.2 Motivation and engagement

Table 2 shows how the experimental group responded to the motivation questionnaire.

Table 2

Motivation questionnaire results — Experimental group (n = 15)

Statement	Mean (1–5)
I enjoyed the digital quiz activities (Quizizz/Kahoot).	4.7
The activities helped me learn new vocabulary.	4.5
I felt more motivated during digital lessons.	4.6
I prefer digital activities to written exercises.	4.4

Group tasks helped me practice speaking English.	4.3
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All five items scored above 4.3, which shows a very positive response overall. Students particularly enjoyed the quiz activities (4.7) and said they felt more motivated during digital lessons (4.6). In the open questions, students mentioned three things most often: they liked seeing their scores update in real time; they felt more confident using English when the activity was interactive; and they found digital lessons more interesting than written exercises.

These results fit well with what Dörnyei (2001) says about motivation: when students enjoy their lessons, they put in more effort, and more effort leads to better results. Hamari et al. (2014) found the same pattern — gamification works best when students experience it as genuinely fun rather than stressful. The classroom observations also confirmed this. During Quizizz and Kahoot sessions, students were noticeably more alert, more willing to answer, and more expressive compared to textbook lessons.

It is worth noting that motivation and vocabulary learning seem to reinforce each other here. Students who enjoyed the activities practiced more. More practice led to better test scores. Better scores made students feel more capable. This kind of positive cycle is something teachers can deliberately create through well-designed gamified activities.

4.3 Why gamification helped

It is difficult to say with certainty whether it was the gamification specifically — or the multimedia input, or the task-based structure — that caused the vocabulary gains, since this study did not include a non-gamified CALL condition. However, the combined picture from test scores and questionnaire data strongly suggests that gamification played a meaningful role. Students were more motivated, and more motivated students practiced more and paid closer attention.

Bicen and Kocakoyun (2018) described a similar finding in their Kahoot study: the game elements did not replace good pedagogy, but they amplified it. Tasks gave students a reason to use vocabulary meaningfully, while gamification gave them the energy and interest to keep going. The two work well together, and that combination appears to be exactly what made this approach effective.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study asked whether gamified CALL activities could help B1 level EFL students learn vocabulary better than traditional methods. The answer, based on six weeks of classroom research in Uzbekistan, is clearly yes. The experimental group improved their vocabulary scores by 28 percentage points — more than twice the 12-point improvement of the control group. Students also reported high levels of motivation and enjoyment. These results are backed by established research on vocabulary learning (Nation, 2001), gamification (Hamari et al., 2014), and task-based instruction (Ellis, 2003).

The study also matters for the local context. There is very little classroom-based CALL research from Central Asia in the international literature. This paper shows that meaningful results are achievable in Uzbek public schools, using simple tools that run on students' own smartphones.

Based on the findings, here are three practical recommendations.

For teachers: Try using Quizizz or Kahoot for vocabulary practice — even once or twice a week. The key is consistency. Using these tools regularly, across multiple lessons, gives students the repeated exposure to words that leads to real retention. They work best when paired with speaking or writing tasks, not used in isolation.

For teacher educators: Training programs should include practical sessions on how to design CALL activities with clear vocabulary learning goals. Technology use should be grounded in pedagogy — teachers need to understand not just how to use a platform, but why and when it helps.

For future researchers: This study had a small sample size and a short timeframe. Future work should involve more students, run over a longer period, and also test whether the vocabulary gains last over time.

To put it simply: technology does not automatically make lessons better. But when digital tools are used thoughtfully — with clear goals, good task design, and a bit of fun built in — they can make a real difference. This study shows that gamified CALL is one practical way to do that, and it is well within reach for teachers in Uzbekistan.

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