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ACTIVATING RECEPTIVE VOCABULARY IN EFL SPEAKING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The gap between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge remains a persistent challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking, particularly in contexts where learners have limited opportunities for authentic oral interaction. Although university learners often demonstrate substantial receptive vocabulary knowledge through reading and listening, they frequently struggle to retrieve and use this knowledge during spontaneous spoken communication. Recent advances in educational technology have been suggested as a means of facilitating lexical activation by providing increased opportunities for output, interaction, and feedback. However, empirical research examining how technology-mediated strategies specifically support the transformation of receptive vocabulary into productive spoken use remains limited, especially in underrepresented EFL contexts.

This study investigates the effectiveness of technology-mediated instructional strategies in activating receptive vocabulary into productive use in EFL speaking among university learners in Uzbekistan. Adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study examines changes in learners' spoken lexical performance following the integration of digital tools designed to promote lexical retrieval, repeated oral practice, and communicative use. Quantitative data are drawn from pre- and post-speaking tasks analyzed for lexical diversity, accuracy, and

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frequency of target vocabulary use, while qualitative data are obtained through learner reflections and interviews.

The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence on the role of technology-mediated strategies in supporting productive vocabulary development in EFL speaking. By focusing on the process of lexical activation rather than vocabulary knowledge alone, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of technology-enhanced vocabulary instruction and offers pedagogical implications for EFL speaking pedagogy in higher education contexts with limited exposure to spoken English.

Keywords: productive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary, EFL speaking, technology-mediated language learning, vocabulary activation, mobile-assisted language learning, university EFL learners.

Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a fundamental component of communicative competence in second and foreign language learning. However, numerous studies have demonstrated that possessing a large receptive vocabulary does not necessarily result in effective spoken communication (Laufer, 1998; Nation, 2013). Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are able to recognize and comprehend lexical items in reading and listening tasks, yet struggle to retrieve and use these same items during spontaneous oral production. This gap between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge represents a persistent challenge in EFL speaking development.

Research distinguishes receptive vocabulary knowledge—understanding words when encountered—from productive vocabulary knowledge, which involves accurate retrieval and contextualized use in speech or writing (Nation, 2001). Productive use requires deeper lexical mastery, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic control (Henriksen, 1999). From a

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psycholinguistic perspective, the transition from receptive to productive vocabulary entails processes such as lexical retrieval, repeated activation, and automatization, all of which are cognitively demanding and require extensive opportunities for meaningful output (Levelt, 1989; DeKeyser, 2007).

Despite this theoretical understanding, traditional EFL classrooms often provide limited opportunities for sustained oral practice and lexical experimentation. Instruction frequently prioritizes grammatical accuracy, reading comprehension, and examination preparation, resulting in restricted speaking time and minimal engagement in communicative tasks (Goh & Burns, 2012). Consequently, learners tend to rely on a narrow range of high-frequency vocabulary in speaking while avoiding more complex lexical items they can otherwise comprehend (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004).

This study adopted a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design to examine the effects of technology-mediated instruction on the activation of receptive vocabulary into productive use in EFL speaking. A mixed-methods approach was selected to capture both measurable changes in learners' spoken lexical performance and their perceptions of technology-supported vocabulary activation. Quantitative data were used to analyze changes in productive vocabulary use, while qualitative data provided insights into learners' experiences and engagement with the technology-mediated tasks.

Participants

The participants were undergraduate EFL students enrolled in English language courses at a public university in Uzbekistan. A total of N = 25 students (aged 18–22) participated in the study. All participants shared a similar educational background, having received English instruction primarily through form-focused and textbook-based approaches prior to the study.

Participants were assigned to an experimental group (n = 12) and a comparison group (n = 13). Both groups followed the same institutional curriculum; however,

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only the experimental group received technology-mediated instruction targeting lexical activation in speaking. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all students.

Instructional Intervention

The instructional intervention lasted eight weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week. The experimental group engaged in technology-mediated speaking tasks designed to promote receptive-to-productive vocabulary activation. The intervention was grounded in principles of lexical retrieval, repeated output, and communicative use.

Technology-mediated strategies included: Mobile-assisted speaking tasks, requiring learners to record short oral responses using target vocabulary; AI-supported conversational practice, allowing learners to interact with digital interlocutors in low-anxiety environments; Online discussion platforms, facilitating asynchronous spoken interaction and peer feedback; Speech recognition tools, providing immediate feedback on pronunciation and lexical accuracy.

Target vocabulary items were selected from course materials and confirmed to be receptively known through a pre-intervention vocabulary recognition test. Tasks were designed to require repeated use of these items across different speaking contexts, promoting retrieval and automatization.

The comparison group received traditional speaking instruction, including textbook-based discussions and teacher-led oral practice, without technology integration.

Instruments

Receptive Vocabulary Test

A vocabulary recognition test was administered prior to the intervention to ensure that selected lexical items were part of participants' receptive vocabulary

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knowledge. The test consisted of multiple-choice and form–meaning matching items.

Speaking Tasks

Participants completed pre- and post-intervention speaking tasks, including picture description and opinion-based prompts. Tasks were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Lexical Measures

Productive vocabulary use was analyzed using the following measures:
Lexical diversity (e.g., type–token ratio);
Lexical accuracy, measured by correct use of target vocabulary items;
Frequency of target vocabulary use in spoken output.

Qualitative Instruments

Learner reflections and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants from the experimental group to explore perceptions of technology-mediated vocabulary activation and speaking confidence.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred in three phases:
Pre-test phase: administration of the receptive vocabulary test and baseline speaking task;
Intervention phase: implementation of technology-mediated instruction for the experimental group;
Post-test phase: administration of the speaking task and collection of qualitative data.
All spoken data were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

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Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Paired-samples and independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine within-group and between-group differences in productive vocabulary use. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the magnitude of observed differences.

Qualitative data from interviews and reflections were analyzed thematically. Coding focused on learners' experiences with lexical retrieval, speaking confidence, and perceptions of technology use. Triangulation was employed to enhance the validity of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process.

The emergence of technology-mediated language learning has been proposed as a potential means of addressing these limitations. Digital tools such as mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), computer-mediated communication (CMC), speech recognition technologies, and AI-driven conversational agents can provide learners with increased exposure to input, opportunities for output, and immediate feedback (Chapelle, 2009; Stockwell, 2016). From the perspective of the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005), such technologies may facilitate vocabulary activation by pushing learners to retrieve and use lexical items in communicatively meaningful contexts, thereby strengthening the link between form, meaning, and use.

However, empirical research on technology-enhanced vocabulary learning has predominantly focused on receptive vocabulary gains, often measured through recognition-based tests (Webb, 2008; Hulstijn, 2011). Fewer studies have examined how technology supports the activation of known vocabulary into

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productive spoken use, and even fewer have analyzed changes in learners' spoken lexical performance. As a result, the mechanisms through which technology-mediated strategies contribute to productive vocabulary development in speaking remain underexplored.

This research gap is particularly evident in EFL contexts such as Uzbekistan, where higher education institutions increasingly emphasize English proficiency for academic mobility and employability. University learners in Uzbekistan are typically exposed to substantial receptive input through textbooks, lectures, and online resources, yet opportunities for authentic spoken interaction remain limited. Studies in similar EFL contexts suggest that learners often possess sizable passive vocabularies but lack confidence and fluency in oral communication (Alavi & Akbarian, 2012). Nevertheless, context-specific empirical evidence from Central Asia remains scarce.

Given these pedagogical and contextual challenges, there is a need for research that examines how technology-mediated strategies can facilitate the transformation of receptive vocabulary into productive use in EFL speaking. Investigating this process among university learners can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of lexical activation and provide evidence-based guidance for integrating digital tools into speaking instruction. Therefore, the present study explores technology-mediated strategies for activating receptive vocabulary into productive use in EFL speaking among university learners in Uzbekistan, aiming to address both theoretical and pedagogical gaps in the existing literature.

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