



The Challenges of Self-Learning Modules in the English Vocabulary Skills of ALSSHS Learners at Community Vocational High School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by Grade 11 and 12 Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners at Community Vocational High School in acquiring English vocabulary through Self-Learning Modules (SLMs). Ten purposefully chosen participants participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The results show that although SLMs provide flexibility, learners struggle because of the intricate language, the dearth of contextualized examples, and the lack of teacher support. Pupils frequently turn to outside sources for clarification when they are having trouble understanding and using new vocabulary. The majority of students believed that SLMs helped them expand their vocabulary in spite of these obstacles. To improve vocabulary acquisition and learner engagement, the study suggests enhancements like more interactive content, visual aids, bilingual support, and simpler language.

1. Introduction

The English language proficiency of Filipinos have suffered a massive decline according to Macasinag (2011) who goes so far to say that Filipinos have lost competitive edge that we have been known for all over the world. The Department of Foreign Affairs also encouraged the government to maximize and prioritize the teaching of English language. Educators and researchers still continue to find ways to stem this decline of English proficiency. Proficiency in grammar was also one of the competencies that a Filipino should have in order to be globally competitive. This is to promote bilingualism and invest heavily in the community's grasp of the English language.

Vocabulary undeniably stands as a cornerstone of both communication and learning. It is through the use of rich and diverse vocabularies that one can precisely articulate his ideas and thoughts. Nonetheless, a person lacking sufficient vocabulary skills may experience difficulties in interacting deeply with others or during the process of learning. Therefore, every learner must prioritize vocabulary development. Several methods exist to improve one's vocabulary. Number one on the list is reading comprehension activities, where students encounter new words within context. Another effective way is direct instruction, where teachers directly teach the meanings of words and their usage through lectures or worksheets. However, improving and broadening one's vocabulary is far more than just an academic endeavor; it is an important skill that allows people to deal with the intricacies of conversation and knowledge acquisition with confidence and expertise.

Students frequently encounter difficulties with correctly articulating words, writing them accurately, and discerning their meanings based on context. The factors contributing to these challenges are the vast number of vocabulary words required to be learned, the complexity of English spelling, and the intricate grammatical structures that characterize English, including inflections and collocations. (Susanto, 2021) Furthermore, students report confusion with idiomatic expressions, which they find particularly confusing due to cultural differences.

Lutfiyah et al. (2022) identifies key obstacles faced by students in learning vocabulary. Among these, pronunciation and spelling issues are prominent, as many students report difficulties reconciling the differences between the correct spelling and pronunciation of English words. Understanding word meanings, including synonyms, antonyms, and word connotation, poses further challenges for students. A significant portion of respondents indicated trouble in mastering vocabulary due to difficulties distinguishing between similar words and their respective meanings. This aligns with the aforementioned research indicating that the complexity of English vocabulary—marked by synonyms and nuanced meanings—creates barriers to comprehension and practical usage.

Adult learners have unique characteristics and approaches to learning. Unlike children, most adult learners have real-life experiences and knowledge that can effectively promote learning because they can relate to the concept of learning. As stated by Cozma (2015), older students have a more developed understanding of how language works, being familiar with the more advanced elements of grammar, such as how conjugation works, or what an adverb does. Adult learners utilize prior knowledge and experience as a vehicle for future learning, readily incorporate new knowledge into similar prior learning, and appreciate the application of knowledge in the context of real-life problems. Experience is not a human mechanism that acts on its own; it is intertwined with cognition, personality, interests, goals, professional and private roles, and overall physiological constituents. (Kovacevic, 2021)

Consequently, Shen et al. (2016) highlights that when learning to meet the adult experience and interests, learning motivation will be stimulated, since this is the end of adult learning.

Adults as learners of the English language face certain difficulties compared to young learners. For effective language instruction, it is crucial to understand the characteristics of an adult learner, his or her needs, and aims of learning. (Lytochenko et al., 2018) Moreover, according to Merriam and Caffarella, as cited by Lytochenko et al. (2018), "It is ... the nature of adults as learners and the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education." As they are adults, learning the language is for a specific purpose which helps them to be motivated to continue learning. Their motivation is driven by professional needs, career advancement, or personal development. Perceiving education as a way to improve their self-image and reach various personal goals, adult learners are usually highly motivated from the very beginning of the instruction process, and this makes it much easier for the teacher to perform his/ her task as a motivator. (Cozma, 2015)

The Alternative Learning System allows for the possibility of receiving basic education for adult learners to be allowed employment. Vocabulary is essential for such learners to effectively pursue vocations and be active members in society. Self-learning modules (SLMs) have gradually emerged as one of the main staples in ALS education, especially in the context of distance learning. Nevertheless, for Grade 11 and 12 ALS learners, self-directed learning through modules might be a concern in developing good mastery of the English language. This study aims to identify the challenges faced by Grade 11 and 12 ALS learners in Community Vocational High School in the improvement of their English vocabulary by using self-learning modules. Taking these difficulties into account, it is possible to define the further steps in development of SLMs that would contribute to the improvement of vocabulary acquisition from English for the target group.

The modular mode of learning a form of distance learning that uses Self-paced Learning Modules (SLM) based on the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCS) provided by DepEd. However, this study focuses on the use of modular learning in English Grammar acquisition for Secondary Education. As stated by De Gala (2018), the need of the students to be competitive in English language has always been one of the Department of Education's aims, thus different programs were planned and done in every institution. Self-paced Learning Module is the most used mode of learning in most of the public high school institution in the country. With this, students face difficulties in this rapid change in our education system. That's the reason why the researcher was prompted to conduct a study about the use of modular learning met by the students in learning grammar in this time of pandemic.

According to Cheng and Abu Bakar (2017), using a teaching module to teach the English language as compared to the face-to-face method of using a textbook is meant to increase active learning and improve critical thinking, as well as problem solving skills. The modules used in our country for modular learning in Secondary Education is provided by the Department of Education. These modules have their own styles, contents, and depth of coverage of materials that may affect the teaching and learning environment. However, as the use of a module presents a more flexible learning environment, students may face difficulties especially in learning vocabulary. The English vocabulary is a complex subject. The students alone may not effectively learn the topics properly. Also, learning vocabulary without the formal guide and instruction of their teacher would be difficult for them to understand and comprehend what is needed to taught. In addition, completing all the task given particularly that these modules have more loads of tasks given than face-to-face mode of learning. The modular mode of English vocabulary acquisition requires greater self-discipline and self-motivation. The use of this also increases the chances of distraction especially without the presence of their instructor.

However, according to Abad and Abad (2023) with self-paced learning module, students can access learning materials or modules at their own chosen time and place, allowing for individualized study schedules. The self-paced learning module emphasizes a student-centered learning environment where learners work independently or collaboratively and have the freedom to seek assistance from teachers or peers as needed. Learners are responsible for establishing their own learning goals, determining how their progress will be measured, and conducting self-assessment through activities like post-tests and online materials. In SPL, teachers act as facilitators who guide students in their learning journey rather than being the primary source of knowledge, enabling a more interactive and supportive educational experience. SPL promotes autonomy, self-direction, and lifelong learning, making it a significant educational approach.

Anh (2017) noted that student - teacher interaction is a key activity in the traditional teaching method when the teachers play a central role. With blended learning environment, learners play the central role, interaction between teacher and students become more flexible in many different forms. Students have more favorable conditions in terms of time and space to perform interactive operations. As we live in a rapidly changing society, we have to find a way to adapt well with using a new development, opening up new paths for learning and teaching. According to Ibyatova (2018), this means dealing with a modular approach in education, especially in this time of crisis. One of the most effective technologies of teaching foreign languages is a modular approach. After all, the aim of this study is to find out the effectiveness of using modular approach in learning the English grammar. As per Lapp (2012), the founder of the modular approach, P. A. Juceviciene, defines the term as "an information block, including a logically complete unit of learning material, program of actions determined by a specific purpose, and a guidance for didactic objectives to be achieved". With that in mind, according to Iovleva (2016), we understand the term "module" as a complete unit of a particular academic discipline, contributing to the formation of students' one or several universal and professional competences stated in the basic education program. A teaching module as a unit of the discipline content has a relative independence and integrity at the level of the education plan or curriculum and it determines the logic of learning process organization. Thus, the modular way of teaching grammar might be superior to traditional method. This would enhance their retaining capacity. Hence, it is to be considered as an alternative to traditional teaching methods for active participation and better learning of students.

2. Research Objectives:

This study explores the challenges experienced by ALS Senior High School (SHS) learners at Community Vocational High School in enhancing their English vocabulary through self-learning modules. Specifically, it seeks to gain insights into the following aspects:

1. What challenges do ALS SHS learners face when using self-learning modules to develop their English vocabulary skills?
2. How effective are self-learning modules in enhancing the English vocabulary skills of ALS SHS learners?
3. In what ways do learners' attitudes and motivation influence their engagement with self-learning modules for vocabulary development?
4. What improvements can be made to self-learning modules to better support ALS SHS learners in vocabulary acquisition?

3. Methodology

i. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to understand the problems encountered by ALS Senior High School students at Community Vocational High School regarding English vocabulary skill development through self-learning modules (SLMs). A descriptive method is necessary in order to capture the depth of the learners' perspectives and lived experiences pertaining to this instructional approach.

ii. Research Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants of this study are the Grades 11 and 12 ALS learners of Community Vocational High School. A sample of 10 participants was recruited from those willing and actively experiencing the ALS program. The researcher is using purposive sampling, which is the case with participants with direct experience of SLMs and hence rich, detailed accounts of their experiences. The respondents were selected because of their consistent interaction with Self-Paced Learning Modules (SLM) and responsiveness to open-ended questions.

iii. Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method used in this study was questionnaires containing open-ended questions. These questionnaires allowed participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the challenges they encountered with SLMs in developing their English vocabulary skills. The open-ended format provided participants with the space to offer detailed narratives and perspectives without being constrained by pre-determined response options. The questionnaires were administered in a safe and comfortable environment, either in person or through accessible digital platforms, depending on participant availability.

iv. Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected from the open-ended questionnaires underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to the ALS SHS learners' experiences with self-learning modules in acquiring English vocabulary. Initially, the researchers thoroughly read and reread the participants' written responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. Following this familiarization stage, meaningful units of data, such as phrases and sentences directly addressing the research questions, were identified and assigned preliminary codes. This coding process was inductive, allowing salient themes to emerge organically from the learners' narratives. Subsequently, these initial codes were carefully examined and grouped based on shared meanings and underlying concepts, leading to the development of broader, overarching themes that represented the core challenges encountered by the participants. The identified themes were then subjected to further refinement and organization, ensuring their coherence and distinctiveness through a continuous review of the original data. Finally, these refined themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research objectives and existing literature, culminating in a narrative presentation of the findings, supported by direct quotations from the participants' questionnaire responses to provide rich contextual evidence and illustrate the identified challenges in their own voices.

4. Results and Discussion

i. Overall Experience with Self-Learning Modules (SLMs)

In general, the learners' experience with self-learning modules (SLMs) for English vocabulary learning was positive and negative. This aligns with Lutfiyah et al. (2022) who indicate that self-paced study can enable learning but is often not accompanied by adequate instructional guidance. A number of students did find the modules helpful, but due to the scope of the language being taught, struggled with materials. This echoes Susanto's studies (2010) which identified that problems arising from learning a language with unfamiliar vocabulary, word structures or academic terminology are commonplace. On the other hand, other students did report that the modules enhanced their command of the language. This supports Cheng and Abu Bakar (2017) who noted that modular learning can assist in vocabulary acquisition when the content is organized appropriately.

ii. Frequency and Challenges of Using SLMs

The SLMs usage frequency by students was remarkably distinct; while some (S7, 9) employed them daily, others (S1, n) or used them sparingly. As previously highlighted, they had different encounters with SLMs and the level of difficulty observed: “it requires self-discipline and motivation to make this a realistic possibility.” Some students had difficulties with in focusing their attention and making progress, and these issues have been highlighted by Ibyatova (2018) who, in her paper “A lack of immediate teacher support can seriously contribute to learning problems in many cases, especially in complex subjects like learning vocabulary”, with the possible exception of non-mediated guidance.

iii. Specific Challenges in Vocabulary Learning

Most students participating in the research have been reported to experience difficulty learning new or complex vocabulary as not knowing how to manage vocabulary autonomously. Many of the participants struggled with what could be referred to as “deep” or idiomatic words” (Lutfiyah et al., 2022) (words that are more than challenging to pronounce and have multiple meanings). Some participants struggled with some pretty basic grammar and phonetic rules. These results are consistent with those of Susanto et al. (2021) regarding the intricacy of English spelling and English grammar. Moreover, according to Macasinag (2011) scholars in the Philippines face a greater issue of them not being proficient in English. This lack of knowledge further complicates the already steep challenge of encountering unfamiliar and sophisticated vocabulary, especially when dealing with idiomatic phrases and multimodal grammatical frameworks.

iv. Clarity of Instructions and Explanations

The participants emphasized the importance of clarity concerning the steps given in SLMs in relation to the level of instruction of the students. Overall, a large section of students claimed that the set instructions were easy to follow. A few of the students experienced challenges (Students 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9) because of the absence of Filipino translations and the overly complex English used. According to Lytovchenko and colleagues (2018), who noted that adult learners need multilingual support and simple language in learning materials, this was in fact feasible. As students stated about how self-directed learning functions (2016), a lack of convenient language and bilingual support led to students looking for extra resources, including online tools, to help close the understanding gap. In order to give students accessible and context-relevant materials, students made the following suggestions for enhancing their comprehension (see also Kovacevic, 2021) and as detailed in the text.

v. Coping Strategies for Difficult Words

To learn how to explain complex terms, many students (e.g., students 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10) turned to websites like Google or YouTube. Instead, some of them reread the material in an effort to acquire some insight, while others confided in friends or family who understood their concerns. These coping strategies are consistent with those outlined by Iovleva (2016), who postulated that in self-paced learning environments, students would turn to Wikipedia, blogs, and wikis to fill in the gaps when teachers are not there. Improved SLM material, including contextualized examples, integrated explanations, and perhaps more help for students struggling to learn new terms.

vi. Perceived Effectiveness of SLMs in Vocabulary Growth

Positive vocabulary learning progress was positively correlated with SLMs. The findings contradict those of De Gala et al. (2018), who found that although modular learning is flexible, it does not provide the same level of instructor engagement and feedback as traditional classroom settings. According to research by Ibyatova (2018), who found that organized support and instructor contact are necessary for vocabulary learning, the student who felt the least development in his or her vocabulary acquisition is the one who receives the least guidance and lacks real-time clarity.

vii. Recommendations for SLM Improvement

The addition of more visual aids, interactive exercises, literal translations of words, and more explanation and simpler wording were among the suggestions made by students to increase the efficacy of SLMs in terms of vocabulary acquisition. These recommendations are consistent with Kovacevic's (1920) advice to help adult learners with bilingual and contextually sensitive learning resources that offer clear and understandable instruction along with tangible examples. The findings of Lytovchenko et al. (2018), who emphasized the significance of clear instructional design and usability of materials, also supported the authors' recommendations about the significance of simplicity and clear instructional design.

viii. Motivation

Students were driven to participate in the SLMs by a variety of motivational factors. Personal ambitions were among these forms of motivation (Students 1, 3, 6, 9, 10). Family obligations, such as completing high school or college, or acquiring coping mechanisms for life's obstacles were additional motivators (Student 2). Though it may seem strange, Cozma (2015) frequently mentions this kind of motivation, stating that many people are driven by realistic, practical goals that encourage them to continue learning, particularly self-regulatory learning techniques (Student 7). Another illustration of autonomy in terms of sustaining motivation was the application of self-regulated learning techniques, as Student 7 explains. This type of autonomy is also mentioned by Merriam and Caffarella (2018) who mention self-directed learning and what is important about it in adult education.

ix. Summary

For ALS learners, self-learning modules (SLMs) provide accessibility and flexibility, but they also pose significant challenges to vocabulary acquisition. Language complexity, a dearth of contextualized examples, and a lack of instructor support were the main causes of the problems. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, students acknowledged that SLMs did improve their vocabulary growth. It is advised that SLMs be improved in terms of simpler language, bilingual support, visual aids, and more interactive content in order to properly utilize them in educational materials. More peer and teacher participation would also be helpful in assisting students in overcoming obstacles associated with self-paced vocabulary learning.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The results indicate that learning English vocabulary using self-learning modules presents several difficulties for students at the ALS Senior High School of Community Vocational High School. Self-study modules offer significant accessibility and flexibility for different learning styles. However, students believe that neither the self-paced modes nor the English language learning resources provide them with any direct instructional support, nor do they provide the relevant contextualized examples to help them grasp. As a result, these students are often found to have learning challenges that can be addressed by outside resources.

Notwithstanding these significant obstacles, the findings indicate that study participants were unafraid to state that SLMs had a beneficial impact on their vocabulary growth. In conclusion, the current approach still offers people with ALS, at the very least, the possibility of self-directed learning through modules to increase vocabulary.

The study makes numerous strong recommendations for improvement in order to promote the full usage of SLMs and to solve the deficiencies that have been found. These include enhancements to the modules' material for more straightforward and easy language use, bilingual assistance for increased learning, visual aids for increased study time, and interactive exercises to boost learning and retention. Additionally, strategies for enhancing instructor participation in the self-paced learning environment and chances to incorporate peer discussions should be taken into account in order to help students build the English vocabulary they may require as they mature on their own. With these recommended improvements, the self-study modules ought to become even more effective tools for assisting ALS students in acquiring the vocabulary in English they need for their future careers and to participate fully in society.

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