

**HOT POTATOES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: EFFECTIVENESS IN
ENHANCING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR**

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Abstract

Language is an effective way of communication whichever place we live. As an articulated system of words and sound, the learning of language is very important to gain knowledge of various kinds and to interact with others properly. To make English language learning more effective as a second language in several schools in Kerala, this study explored the use of Hot Potatoes software to teach vocabulary and grammar in secondary school students. The findings reveal that the web based interactive exercises developed in Hot Potatoes were effective to enhance the achievement of vocabulary and grammar in students subjected for the experimental treatment. This would help to understand the use of this software as an emerging digital technology capable to harmonize interactive practice sessions in a web based environment to harness the real potential of students in their foreign language learning.

Keywords: Hot potatoes, CALL, ESL, vocabulary, grammar

Introduction

The tremendous benefits of the transformation that ICT has made in education have several benefits not only to teachers but also to students alike as a motivating force to boost instructional practices. Educational softwares offer a varied and inclusive platform for learners to tune their learning needs according to the learning contexts. Language learning is not an exception to this. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) provides impetus to design courses effectively and align active interaction to learn in flexible more adaptive classroom settings. Web 2.0 and emerging leaning technologies constitute materials and tools to enrich learning. The Hot Potato software is a shareware created by the R & D team of the University of Victoria, Humanities Computing and Media Centre (Half Baked Software Inc.) has proved to be a powerful tool for creating and managing tasks for student learning. The five different types of self test exercises provide opportunities to create learning tasks and assess their attainment. This easy to access medium enable learners to create and edit responses to gain feedback instantaneously. The quasi-experimental study by Susana (91) showed that use of Hot Potato enhances vocabulary of primary students. Instructors are able to plan and design exercises to inculcate proper and desirable teaching practices embedded in technology rich learning climate.

Literature Review

The term vocabulary refers to the knowledge or words including their structure (morphology), meaning (semantics), use (grammar), and links to other words (semantic relationships). Vocabulary is the foundation of language, the raw building blocks to express our thoughts and ideas, share information, understand others and build good relationships. It is surely one of the language components that need to be mastered by all students because it is a robust way to boost communication which is a skill essential for toady in every walk of life. It matters much for increasing reading comprehension, communicate ideas faster and enable to write clearly and creatively. As put by the British linguist David A. Wilkins, *“without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”* As a stepping stone to higher levels of language fluency, acquiring wide vocabulary in secondary school students helps them to improve their levels of academic performance. As learning vocabulary is a

continuous process of literary development, teachers should focus on developing vocabulary in students if we want to improve the overall standard of English language teaching. Sinatra et al (353) noted that knowledge of vocabulary affect children's abilities to understand and use words appropriately during the language acts of listening, reading and writing. Such knowledge influences the complexities and nuances of children's thinking, how they communicate in the written and oral languages, and how well they will understand the printed texts.

English is a compulsory subject to be learned in our schools. Learning English grammar and vocabulary is a challenging task to many students as it is not the mother tongue to them. Students usually learn new words in a foreign language by rote memorizing and monotonous practicing. This may demotivate students to engage in boring exercises that they find difficult to learn. Therefore it is imperative that they need a better way to help them sustain interest and enhance language learning in order to communicate well in academic contexts. This is more demanding in the case of teaching English as a Second language (ESL) and the increasing number of English language learners. Many web tools, social media tools and other modern softwares are used to enable language learners more effectively. These e-learning and digital tools help to enliven the classroom environment and facilitate diversification of learning activities in an inclusive manner. Use of web-based interactive exercises in these learning tools makes learning attractive and interesting. Researchers have explored the benefits of Hot Potatoes to improve student's grammar usage especially in the learning of tenses (Arumsari 7, Alimah 7, Villareal et al), and reading comprehension (Dewanti 1). A few others have found the use of hot potatoes for improving paragraph writing (Rodriguez 24), teaching descriptive text (Angorro and Arif 27) and for teaching vocabulary (Setiawan 234; Hakim 107). The software has great potential for language learning if used properly with clear educational objectives that motivate students and sustain interest in them to learn new communication skills (Gohil & Parmar 377). A detailed review of its application in different learning contexts was done to gain knowledge on the nature and usage of Hot Potatoes.

The main aim of this study was to explore the use of a user friendly interface in Hot Potatoes as an effective way to motivate secondary school students to learn English in an easy to access manner. The study has greater significance in that usage of Hot Potato software would create fun in learning English language and allow them to gain control of their learning. The learners are provided with flexibility allowing a better pace of learning a foreign language. Strengthening the principle of individualization and student support in a beneficial manner, it promotes interactivity and individuality in learners to set control of their learning. The research question that arose in this regard was: Is the use of web-based interactive exercises using Hot Potatoes effective to enhance vocabulary and English Grammar of Secondary School Students?

Methodology

This study applied experimental method with a single group pre-test post-test design to evaluate the outcomes after implementing the software by the treatment group. The subjects of the research were ninth standard students from a secondary school in Kerala. Web based exercises were developed in Hot Potato software choosing JCloze, JMatch, JQuiz and JCross tests in the following manner: gap fill exercises, fill in the blanks with appropriate tense form, select the correct plural form, error correction – correct mistake in the given sentence, read the clues and fill the missing words, write the correct word for the jumbled word, put the verbs in the correct tense – present continuous or simple present, fill the pap with verbs in present continuous tense, match the following, and put the words in the correct order to make a meaningful sentence. These exercises were introduced as a game to increase the learning of vocabulary and grammar. The focus in vocabulary was on the form of the words and its usage while the grammar exercises dealt with simple present and present continuous tense. The exercises were arranged in a manner that the student could get feedback for the responses done during the pedagogical

intervention of implementation. An achievement test was prepared to measure the mental processes MP4 (clarifies/categorizes/organize information appropriately) and MP5 (translate/transfer knowledge/understand, apply them in new situation) out of the 10 processes specified by SCERT for standard IX English Textbook of Kerala State syllabus. Objective type questions were prepared giving more weightage to the average level of difficulty. This test was used both as pre and post tests in the treatment group.

Data Analysis

The test of significance of difference between means (paired t-test) was employed as the inferential statistical technique to estimate the characteristics of the treatment group. The difference between the mean scores of the two tests was tested for significance by finding the critical ratio.

Table 2: Data and results of test of significance of pre-test and post-test scores in Achievement

Groups	Mean	No. of Students	SD	Critical ratio	Level of Significance
Pre-test	33.9500	40	3.63000	22.89	significant at 0.05 level
Post-test	43.4750	40	3.36641		

The table shows that the mean post-test scores are higher than mean pre-test scores for the total sample (N=40). The critical ratio obtained is 22.89 which is significant at 0.05 level. This shows that there is a significant difference between the means of the pre-test and post-test scores of secondary school students. Therefore it can be inferred that students differ significantly in their performance after the implementation of web based exercises using Hot Potatoes.

Table 3: Data and result of test of significance of pre-test and post-test scores in achievement of secondary school students based on gender

Groups	Gender	Mean	N	SD	Critical ratio	P value	Significance level
Pre-test	Boys	33.050	20	3.37192	1.59	0.118	not significant
Pre-test	Girls	34.850	20	3.73145			
Post-test	Boys	42.850	20	3.49850	1.80	0.245	not significant
Post-test	Girls	44.100	20	3.19374			

The obtained t-value of the scores in pre-test and post-test of boys and girls is less than the table value 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance. This means that there is no significant difference between boys and girls in their achievement in vocabulary and grammar before and after the treatment.

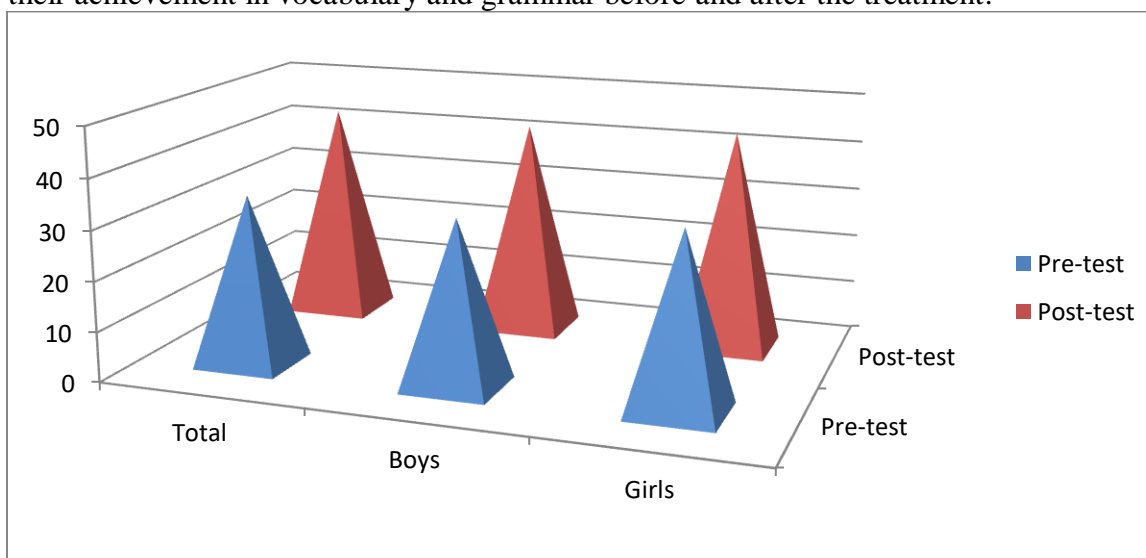


Figure 1: Graphical representation of pre-test and post-test scores of total sample and subsample

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of mean scores of pre-test and post-test in the treatment group reveals that the mean post test score is significantly greater than the mean pre-test score of the students in the treatment group. (CR, $t=22.89$, $p<0.05$). It is evident that there is significant increase in the achievement of vocabulary and grammar after the experimental treatment. So it can be concluded that the web based exercises using Hot potatoes are effective in enhancing language learning.

For sub sample based on gender, the results show that the mean pre-test and post-test scores of boys and girls revealed that there is no significant difference among them in their pre-test scores ($t=1.59$, $p<0.05$). The post-test scores also reveal that there is no significant difference between boys and girls in their grammar and vocabulary development ($t=1.80$, $p<0.05$). This indicates that gender has no influence in the learning of vocabulary and grammar using Hot potatoes.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the study raises hope to English language teachers of the fact that Hot potatoes are beneficial for developing language skills in ESL students. The interactive programmes in the software would be helpful to practice lessons that demand the development of vocabulary and grammar. It serves as a means to support student engagement in exploring new words, their form, meaning and its usage in particular meaningful contexts. This supports the view of Setiawan 240 that Hot Potatoes can facilitate both students' learning of vocabulary and their motivation in learning. Fansury et al 1552 shares the same view that web based learning using Hot Potatoes help students to develop language ability. Hence it can be concluded that Hot Potatoes could be quite beneficial to practice language and its assessment. The results also suggest its use to plan and organize assignments and homework as follow-up practices to strengthen language development that lead divergently to create ideas and use knowledge in novel contexts.

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