
Technology Matters

Using Kahoot! to Pre-Teach Lexis

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Kahoot! is an online interactive digital tool that can be used to gamify the lesson and assist English language learners. While it is common in ELT to use the internet quiz program Kahoot! as a post-class comprehension check, it is also an effective means to pre-teach lexis in a receptive skills lesson. Pre-teaching lexis is useful in terms of learner comprehension and retention, and Kahoot! is a flexible tool that deserves experimentation in the classroom. This article advocates for the use of Kahoot! as a means of which to support learner vocabulary in the context of pre-teaching lexis for receptive skills. This article also encourages creative use of Kahoot! in the classroom by giving ideas for further exploration of the tool in an ELT environment.

Kahoot!は、双方向性のデジタルオンラインツールであり、授業にゲーム要素を取り入れて英語学習を助けることができる。インターネットクイズプログラムであるKahoot!は、授業後の理解度チェックのために用いられることが多いが、読書やリスニング授業で扱う語彙のプレティーチングを目的とした使用方法も有効である。語彙のプレティーチングは学習者の理解や語彙保持に活躍するものであり、Kahoot!は教室で実験するだけの意味がある柔軟なツールである。この論文は、読書やリスニング授業で扱う語彙のプレティーチングを行って学習者をサポートしようとする際に、Kahoot!を利用することを勧めるものである。また、Kahoot!のELT教室でのさらなる利用方法について検討し、Kahoot!の独創的な使い方を提唱している。

There is no shortage of technological resources that an English language teacher can use in the classroom. Pronunciation apps, YouTube, online corpora, and countless other technological resources are all readily available for instructors, and it can be a daunting task to choose which resources to use in the classroom. Technological resources are so abundant that they have become redundant in some cases, and concerns have been raised regarding teachers' use of technology for its own sake (Tour, 2012). While there is no doubt that technology can be overused, there is still room for effective use of technology in the classroom. The

online quiz app Kahoot! is one resource that educators across various disciplines and age groups have been using in recent days. In the ELT context it has been used as a type of controlled practice after introducing a grammar point or to assess vocabulary that was taught in a lesson (Medina and Hurtado, 2017). However, there is another method of using Kahoot! in the ELT classroom: to unlock key lexis that learners will encounter in a receptive skills lesson. Beginning with an overview of the connections that exist between pre-teaching lexis and receptive skill development, this article reports on classroom implementation of Kahoot! as a tool for pre-teaching lexis in a university context.

Connections between pre-teaching lexis, comprehension, and retention for receptive skills

Many communicative language teaching (CLT) methods include “pre-teaching lexis” or “unlocking vocabulary” for receptive skills lessons (i.e., reading and listening). Prior to a reading or listening activity, the instructor can select important and/or possibly unknown lexical terms and present them to the learners (Krashen & Terrell, 1998). Usually this involves the instructor showing an image, acting something out, or giving students a synonym in order to elicit potentially problematic lexis that students will encounter. Some students will already know the lexical item, some will not. Through a series of concept check questions, the instructor can assess whether or not the students “know” the lexical item. Pre-teaching lexis is basically “a means of attempting to scaffold receptive skills exercises to provide support in the development of these skills” (Ozóg, 2013, What is Pre-Teaching? section, para. 3). In the context of CLT, pre-teaching lexis can be an important step as a method to check student comprehension prior to receptive skills development activities.

Pre-teaching lexis can also assist learners in the acquisition of the target language. This is because pre-teaching lexis supports learner retention and recall (Gorjian, Moosavinia, Kavari, Asgari & Hydare, 2011). This is especially true when it is used in teaching receptive skills; it is effective for both listening and reading (Webb, 2009, 2010) and is more effective than grammar-focused tasks for EFL learner reading comprehension (Jahangard, Moinszadeh &

Karimi, 2011). Learners are more likely to be able to acquire pieces of language if it is comprehensible to them, or as Clark & Hecht (1983) put it succinctly, “comprehension must precede production” (p. 331).

In terms of reading comprehension, Jahangard et al. (2011) hold that reading is a complex process that is aided by background knowledge, or “schemata.” Jahangard and his research team experimented with three groups of pre-university students by pre-teaching grammar to one group, pre-teaching lexis to another group, and keeping a control group before giving the students a reading comprehension task. They found that the group engaged in lexical pre-teaching had slightly higher scores than the grammar and control groups. Conversely, the group that was pre-taught grammar before the reading comprehension task scored worse than the control group. In terms of receptive skills comprehension, pre-teaching lexis was shown to have more value for the learner than pre-teaching grammar.

Gorjian et al. (2011) used computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to pre-teach some selected vocabulary terms. They found that using CALL led to short-term vocabulary retention among both high and low-achieving students and long-term vocabulary recall among high and intermediate achievers. In a receptive skills lesson, the short-term lexical retention will serve the students well by giving them an increased possibility of comprehension for the listening or reading text that will immediately follow the pre-teaching lexis stage. According to Webb (2009), “...there appears to be a strong correlation between receptive recall and comprehension,” (p. 459). Furthermore, that there is a possibility for further long-term lexical recall means that a lexical pre-teaching can be of high value to language learners.

In his experiment on Japanese EFL students, Webb (2009) deduced that receptive vocabulary learning tasks improve learner comprehension of written materials (p. 461-462). Pre-learning foreign language lexis contributed to a higher score on Webb’s reading comprehension test, and demonstrates lexical retention for that task. In a separate study conducted in 2010, Webb analyzed vocabulary coverage in television shows. He found that pre-teaching certain low-frequency words could allow greater learner understanding of TV programs. His

analysis “...clearly indicates the relative value of pre-learning frequently occurring low-frequency word-families as a means to increase comprehension of television programmes...” (Webb, 2010, p. 510). In terms of pedagogical implications, Webb found that if the teacher is able to pre-teach certain lexical terms valuable for the listening task, it can lead to better comprehension for the learner (Webb, 2010).

There is a strong connection between lexical pre-teaching and comprehension and retention for the learner. When giving the learner a reading or listening task, they are more likely to comprehend the receptive task if the reading or listening task has been effectively scaffolded through lexical pre-teaching. Language that has been comprehended and retained by the learner can be produced in subsequent tasks involving productive skills. In other words, learners can use the language they have learned through listening and reading if they can comprehend it themselves. The question regarding pre-teaching lexis in a receptive skills lesson is thus not a matter of “if,” but rather “how.”

What is Kahoot!?

Kahoot! is an online tool that can be used for a number of purposes. Most notably, Kahoot! is often used to give interactive multiple-choice quizzes in a classroom setting. Students can take quizzes either individually or in groups. Students interact with quizzes online by answering questions either through a web browser interface (such as Google Chrome) or through the dedicated application designed for smartphones and tablets. Kahoot! is part of the recent gamification trend in education, which attempts to repackage educational materials as a student-accessible game (Yip and Kwan, 2006). The purposes of gamification are to increase student interaction with the material, provide students with an opportunity to interact with each other, and to increase student motivation and desire to learn. Gamification has been shown to raise student performance in various disciplines (Marzano, 2010), and in terms of English language vocabulary acquisition, Yip and Kwan (2006) have found that games provided a better form of acquisition than traditional classroom activities. Siegle (2015) has written a great analysis of the positive motivating factors and basic

information of how to use Kahoot! and configure it for classroom use. Recently, Kahoot! has gone through a graphic interface change. Figures 1 through 3 show the most recent Kahoot! interface.

Kahoot! for Lexical Pre-Teaching

As mentioned above, pre-teaching lexis for receptive skills activities can be done in a variety of ways. In my classes, I often showed a pictorial representation of a noun, and asked students what it was ("What's this?" / "An ice cream cone."). For more difficult concepts (e.g., "extraordinary") I asked follow-up questions for clarification ("Is this ice cream cone usual or special?" / "Special." / "Why?")

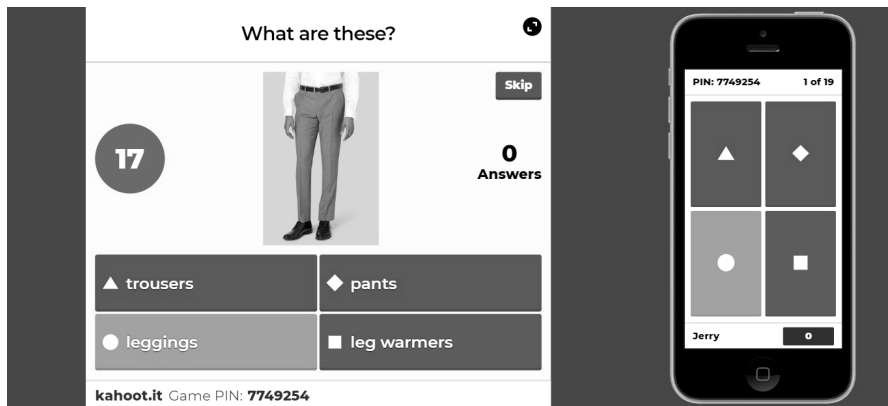


Figure 1. Simple pictures and word choices can support beginning-level students.

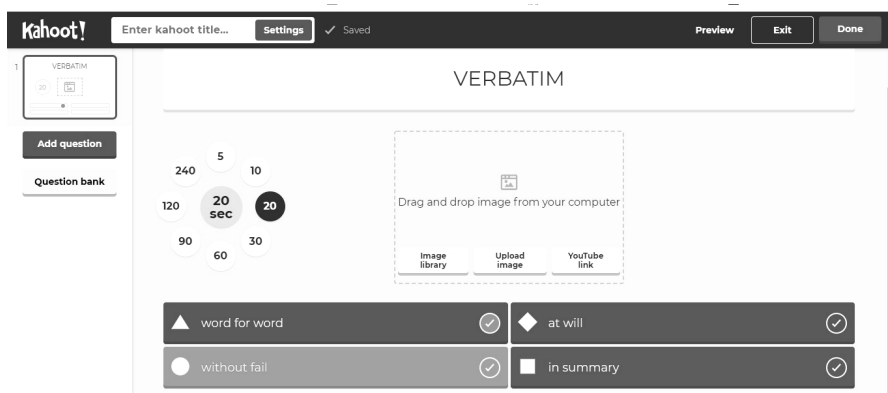


Figure 2. TOEIC vocabulary or changes in timing can be used for added variation.

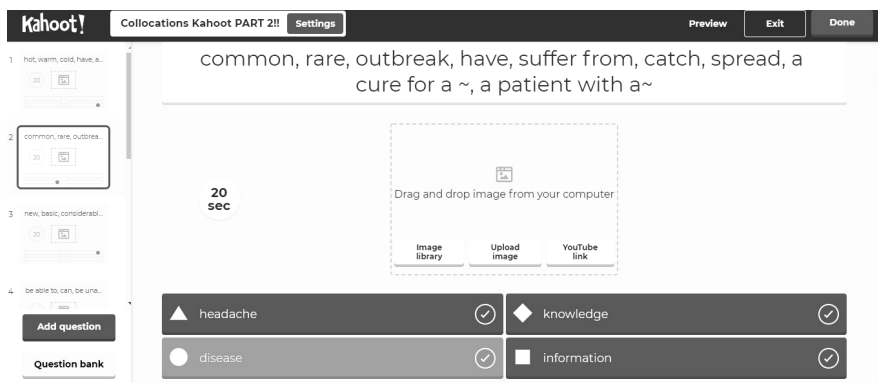


Figure 3. Learners can be challenged with collocations.

/"Because it has gold foil in it.") In this traditional teacher-focused method of inquiry, the more vocal students in the class would respond, but there were times that I was met with silence. Less vocal learners would tend to be passive in the pre-teaching lexis stage of the lesson, and would tend to struggle with meaning more in the receptive skills task. Perhaps some of the students were not confident enough in their answers to vocalize them in class. I wanted to add variation to my lexical pre-teaching routine, and add additional outlets for participation for the less confident and less vocal students. I had previously used Kahoot! to check comprehension after a lesson, and thought that it had application for pre-teaching lexis. I found that Kahoot! was adaptable to different levels of linguistic ability, flexible in terms of presenting lexical content, and attracted participation from all students.

There are several ways to differentiate Kahoot! for ability levels. For lower-level learners, a simple picture with four choices of a word is quite effective (Figure 1). When pre-teaching lexis not easily represented by a picture to lower-level learners, a word or phrase from the learners' L1 can be used as the "question" and the English equivalent as the answer. Difficulty can be increased by adding relevant collocations. For example, a picture of a shower running can be shown with "have a shower," "take a shower," "make a shower," and "go a shower," as potential answers. Multiple correct answers can be given to highlight regional dialects and spelling. Higher level classes or TOEIC preparation can

be supported by giving terms in English and having students choose the correct definition (Figure 2). With my higher-level learners, I try to include similar words in the answer set, or highlight differences in prefixes and suffixes by including them in the answer pool as options. Using TOEIC-style sentences with a missing lexical item, and having students choose the correct item can be of good use for students in a TOEIC preparation class. I recommend experimenting with multi-word lexical items as answers or using the answer pool to highlight differences in linguistic formality. When using Kahoot! to pre-teach lexis, the time between questions should also be utilized for pre-teaching purposes. In my classes, I ask clarification questions about the lexical terms, explain regional differences, and ask learners for non-examples to confirm that they understand the meaning of the lexical term. I also use time between questions to practice pronunciation of the lexical term that I'm pre-teaching. I have found that Kahoot! lends itself to being very versatile in terms of adjusting level of difficulty. In my classroom, I have also used time as a factor for variation. For pre-teaching lexis that the students may have previously encountered, I set the question timer to as low as five seconds. For particularly difficult questions that the learners have likely not encountered, I tend to give more time. The time given can be increased to up to four minutes per question (Figure 2). Allowing students time appropriate to their level will make for the best use of Kahoot! in pre-teaching lexis.

Kahoot! can be very flexible in meeting the various needs of the ELT classroom, and there is no "standard" way of using Kahoot! to pre-teach lexis. At my current university I teach an advanced class of first-year students and I have used Kahoot! to pre-teach collocations that are found in the students' reading. In the question space, I type words that are strong collocates and give students four choices that might be easy to mistake (Figure 3). Kahoot! is adjustable to situational needs, and I have often made more than one correct answer an option (in cases where there is more than one possible answer for strong collocations). When students later encounter the collocation in the receptive skills task, they are often able to correctly identify and understand the meaning of the collocation (as evidenced by their correct answers in the skills task).

From my perspective in the classroom, learner response to using Kahoot!

for pre-teaching lexis has been mostly positive. The students in my classes have enjoyed the competition aspect in trying to get the correct answer most quickly, and playfully engage with each other verbally between rounds. Learners that were shy and less vocal in previous lexical pre-teaching activities were fully engaged and actively participating in the Kahoot! activity. Students have told me that they like Kahoot! because of the instant feedback that a round of Kahoot! provides. Getting questions wrong in the Kahoot! quiz doesn't seem to lower learner motivation, or prevent students from remembering the meaning of lexical terms. I have observed on more than one occasion that students who had multiple incorrect answers in the Kahoot! quiz were able to successfully complete reading skills tasks after the lexical pre-teaching. A few students even circled lexical terms in the text or wrote notes in the margins based on information learned in the lexical pre-teaching Kahoot! activity.

Conclusion

Pre-teaching lexis for receptive skills lessons is highly valuable for learner vocabulary retention and comprehension. Using Kahoot! to assist with pre-teaching lexis may be of great interest to language educators in universities because of its versatility across levels of ability and motivation. While Kahoot! may not instantly make every ELT class better, it is a tool that should at least be on the radar of ELT teachers. Its flexibility makes it a valuable asset to an ELT teacher's arsenal, and its promising potential as an aid to pre-teaching lexis should be explored further.

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