Review of *Vocabulary.com*

Title	Vocabulary.com
Website	https://www.vocabulary.com/
Type of product	An online adaptive vocabulary learning game and dictionary
Platform	Web-based and iOS and Android
Minimum hardware requirements	Android devices require Android 4.1 or later iOS devices require iOS 9.0 or later Mac requires OS 11.0 or later
Supplementary software	None
Price	**Educator Edition:** The subscription fee for educators is $179 annually for 25 students **Learner Edition:** The subscription for learners is from free (10 challenge questions daily) to unlimited access for: • US $59.99 annually • US $39.99 for 6 months • US $12.99 a month

Vocabulary acquisition is a dynamic process that involves acquiring and understanding words to effectively comprehend and communicate language. While children naturally learn many words indirectly, numerous words require direct instruction. Marzano and Pickering (2005) introduced the Six-Step Model, which provides a concise process for introducing and reinforcing new words to students. This model involves steps such as describing words, restating them, and incorporating visual aids. Additionally, activities, discussions, and games are utilized to engage students and provide multiple exposures to the new vocabulary. Yet, in recent times, the utilization of technology has become increasingly influential in the realm of vocabulary acquisition and learning.

This media review focuses on the website application "*Vocabulary.com*" for learning and teaching English language vocabulary. The review is presented in three sections: (1) a general description

of *Vocabulary.com*, (2) an evaluation of the application based on the criteria provided, and (3) some general recommendations for language teachers.

General Description

Vocabulary.com is an online platform designed to help learners improve their vocabulary skills. The website uses adaptive technology to build a model of the user`s vocabulary knowledge, and it uses artificial intelligence to create personalized learning. The more the learner progresses through the website, the more the words are tailored to a student's individual needs and vocabulary development.

Vocabulary.com offers a range of tools to engage students in learning new vocabulary. It contains an extensive word database with over 140,000 words, definitions, and examples. It provides multiple features for vocabulary learning including: (1) a vocabulary training challenge; (2) vocabulary lists; (3) spelling practices and quizzes; (4) vocabulary competitions and games; (5) an online dictionary; and (6) learning progress reports. In addition, the Educator Edition provides several functions for teachers such as adding classes and assigning word lists. The app is designed for users from 5th grade on. Learners can have limited free access to learn 10 words daily; however, for unlimited vocabulary learning, a purchase is required. *Vocabulary.com* offers a free 10-day trial for teachers including all website features.

Account creation starts by clicking the green *sign-up* button located at the top right corner of the homepage. Accounts can be created with a Google or Facebook account or by providing email, username, password, and date of birth. After signing in, users will see the home page. There are four tool features on the top of the homepage: (1) learn; (2) dictionary; (3) vocabulary lists; and (4) vocab trainer. Figure 1 shows the homepage features.
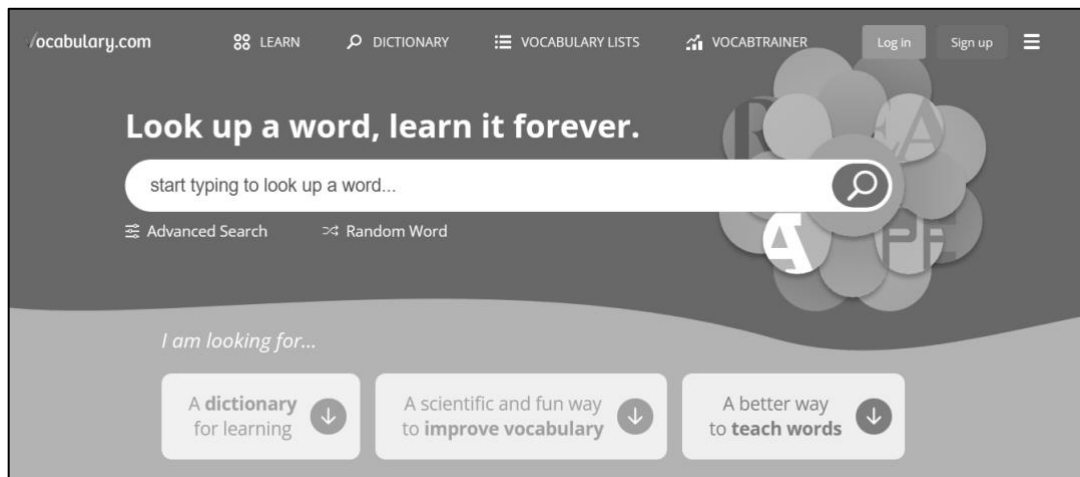

Figure 1 *The Home Page*

The Vocab Trainer is a ten-question-per-round game designed to help learners pronounce and understand the meaning of words in context. It provides learners with in-depth explanations of both literal meanings and meanings in context. Learners are required to answer multiple-choice quiz questions. Once the correct answer is given, the game continues to show the rest of the questions. The game provides details on the answers after each round. Pronunciations can be accessed by clicking the "speaker icon." Learners can add the word to their vocabulary lists for later review by clicking "Add to List." Figure 2 shows these details.
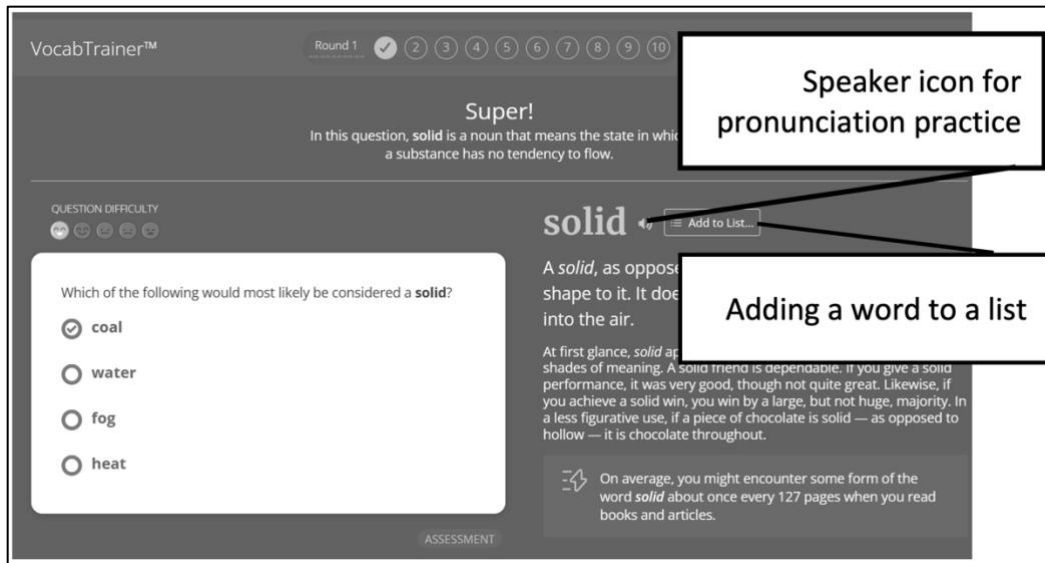
Figure 2 *The Vocab Trainer Challenge*

The Online Dictionary, shown in Figure 3, provides definitions and example sentences for each searched word. Users can choose examples based on their subject of interest and they can add the word to a personal list or share it on other media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, email) Word definitions for all parts of speech and word families are listed to facilitate understanding through context.
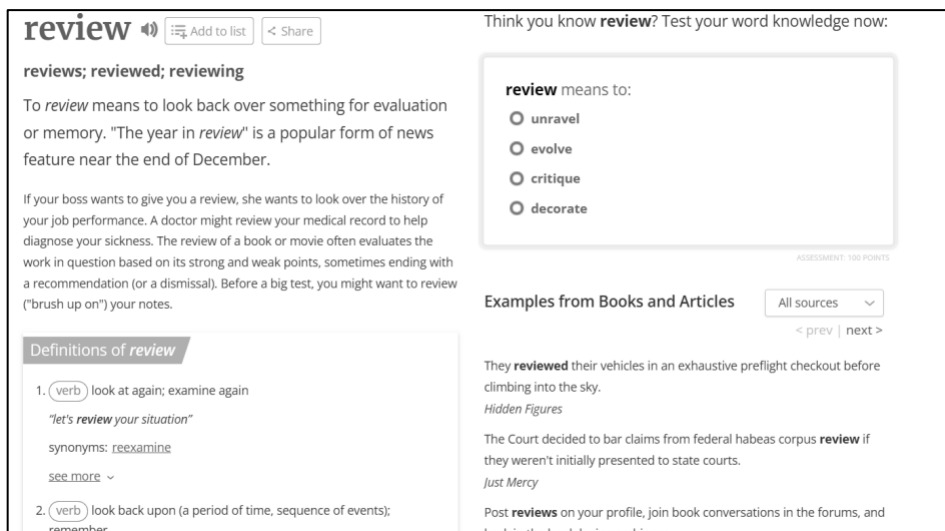
Figure 3 *The Online Dictionary Search*

The Vocabulary Lists feature, illustrated in Figure 4, provides thousands of existing word lists made by the website creators and other users. Learners can create a new personal list. They can start the process by clicking a *New List* icon on the *Vocabulary Lists* page, the site then takes the user to another webpage that assists in creating different lists with keywords. A user can create a list of words by uploading a file (list, article, chapter book, etc.) online or on his/her personal computer or typing in the words to be listed. Once a list is created, the app takes the user to a new page to choose task types for vocabulary practicing and learning such as flashcards, games, and challenges. The types of games offered are in the form of *Spelling Bee*, *Vocab Trainer,* and

Vocabulary Jams. The games are designed to help students practice spelling, usage, and comprehension. When teachers assign lists for students, they can monitor their progress through the web.
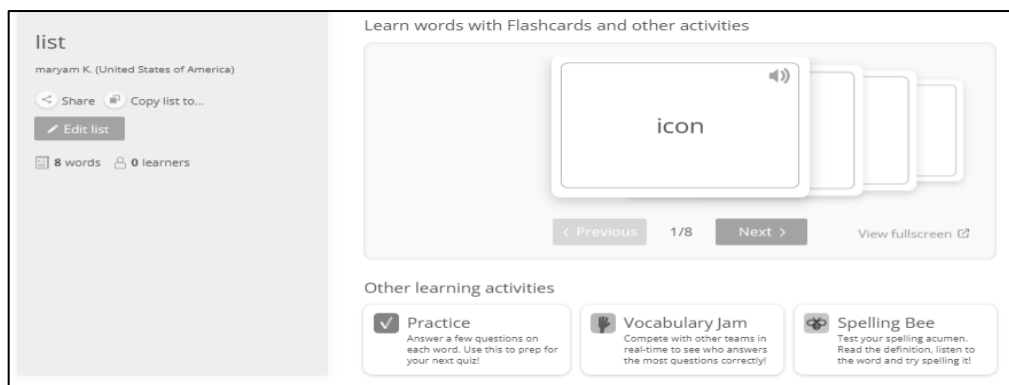
Figure 4 *Vocabulary Lists Flashcards and Other Activities*

Evaluation

Vocabulary.com utilizes various strategies to enhance vocabulary learning. The website incorporates adaptive learning, personalization, multiple exposures, contextualization, gamification, and immediate feedback. The website aims to optimize vocabulary learning and promote meaningful knowledge acquisition. Therefore, this section focuses on appraising the application based on three TESOL language and technology standards (Healey et al., 2008), as well as feasibility and quality factors (Egbert & Shahrokni, 2018) for further explanation.

Criterion 1: The app provides opportunities to use technology-based productivity tools collaboratively and individually in order to enhance students` language learning competence (TESOL Standard 1).

Vocabulary.com provides many opportunities for individual study and collaboration. One of the most captivating aspects of *Vocabulary.com* is the *Vocabulary Lists* section because it contains gamification elements. It offers an opportunity for learners to create their own lists and share them with other learners. The gaming and challenges make learning fun and engaging. Both learners and teachers can create a *Vocabulary Jam* competition to share with students for collaborative learning. Providing such opportunities to participate in a variety of engaging activities and games on *Vocabulary.com* reinforce vocabulary acquisition and results in the enhancement of language learning competence.

Criterion 2: The app can be used as a technology-based productivity tools as aids in comprehension (e.g., translators, electronic dictionaries) (TESOL Standard 1).

Vocabulary.com offers opportunities for contextual learning to aid in comprehension. The online dictionary provides example sentences, which benefit users' understanding through context. Additionally, a vast collection of idioms with detailed explanations of their meanings and usage, as well as examples of how to use them in speaking and writing, is available. This is especially useful for English language learners who may be unfamiliar with idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; the app helps them to understand the figurative meanings of these expressions and use them correctly in their own writing and speech. Figure 5 shows examples of idioms and their meanings.
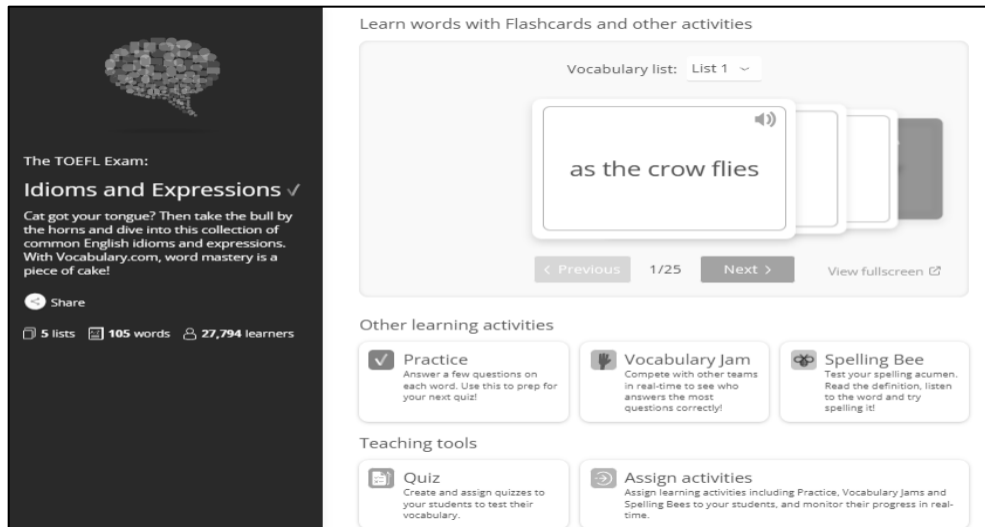
Figure 5 *Idioms and Explanation Example*

Criterion 3: Teachers can coherently integrate the app into their pedagogical approaches (TESOL Standard 2).

According to TESOL (2008), "Technology should be incorporated into teaching pedagogy so that students will not only effectively acquire a second language but will also develop electronic literacy skills" (p.15). The website supports teacher use of the Educator Edition inside or outside of class. Teachers can assign different lists for students to work on individually. Likewise, it supports instructional differentiation for mixed-ability classes and different disciplinary areas. For example, different lists assigned to different individuals can result in student learning based on their individual needs and capabilities. Additionally, if part of a teacher's pedagogy is supporting digital literacies in their classroom, Vocabulary.com can assist students in performing basic digital literacies, as they need to search, navigate, and access online information. Teachers using the application can assign students different tasks for meaningful vocabulary learning. Figure 6 shows the teacher's site for assigning tasks to students.
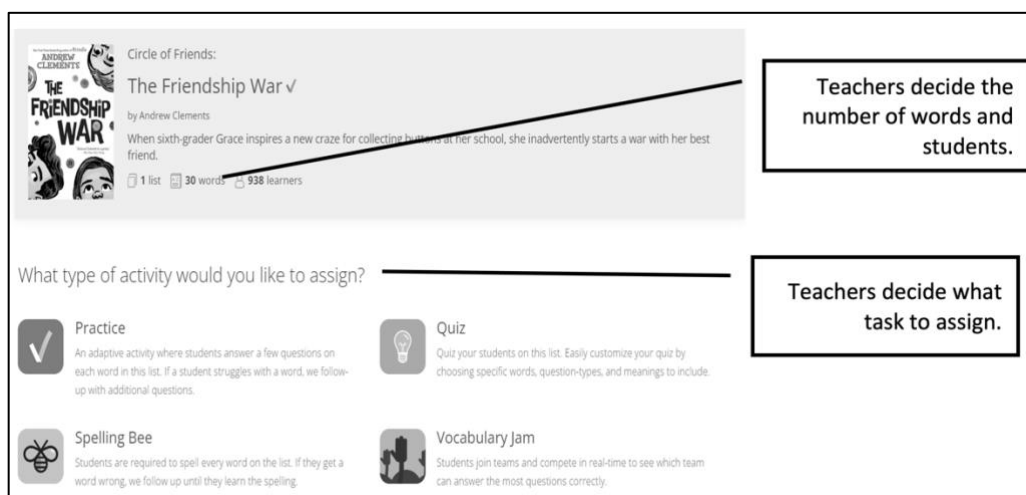

**Figure 6** ***Teacher`s View, Assigning Tasks***

Criterion 4: The app supports feasibility and quality factors (Egbert & Shahrokni, 2018).

Feasibility and quality factors provide a framework for evaluating the app's potential effectiveness to achieve technology and language goals.

- **Goal**: *Vocabulary.com*'s goal is clear; to improve users' vocabulary skills and build a stronger command of the English language.

- **Appearance**: It is very clear, easy to navigate, and user-friendly. The tool features are clearly labeled. The site is well-organized and intuitive, with clear instructions and helpful features. The platform also incorporates colorful graphics for the site content and icons. However, the website lacks visuals such as illustrations to support visual learning.

- **Appropriateness**: As stated in the site's Help Center, *Vocabulary.com* is appropriate for learners from 5th grade and up. Additionally, *Vocabulary.com* is a safe and secure platform that is committed to protecting users' privacy and personal information. Further, there are no ads or links to other websites on *Vocabulary.com*, which helps ensure a distraction-free learning experience for users especially younger ages.

- **Outcomes**: The platform's adaptive learning algorithm can be effective in supporting users' vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary.com offers a variety of resources and tools that can help users to continue learning and improving their language skills beyond the platform. However, the concentration is on reading, writing, and pronunciation. While this can be effective in building vocabulary knowledge, it may not be as effective in developing other language skills, such as speaking.

- **Feedback and Scaffolding**: Vocabulary.com provides detailed feedback to users as they learn new words and complete quizzes; language learning is supported via scaffolding and feedback (Egbert & Shahrokni, 2018). Users receive immediate feedback on their answers, which helps to identify areas to improve. Additionally, the platform tracks users' progress over time and provides performance analytics that can help them to track their progress and adjust learning habits. The "My Progress" feature displays users` a count of users' answers, the time invested answering, and the words they mastered. The website also provides points and badges after each round of questions and games. Its ranking system, which awards points and badges, can motivate users and allow students to monitor their progress (see Figures 7 & 8 for feedback and awards presentation). While such detailed feedback is provided, the form of feedback is a passive written description. Providing feedback from native speakers through electronic chat, along with resources like videos related to learned words, could enhance the value of the application.
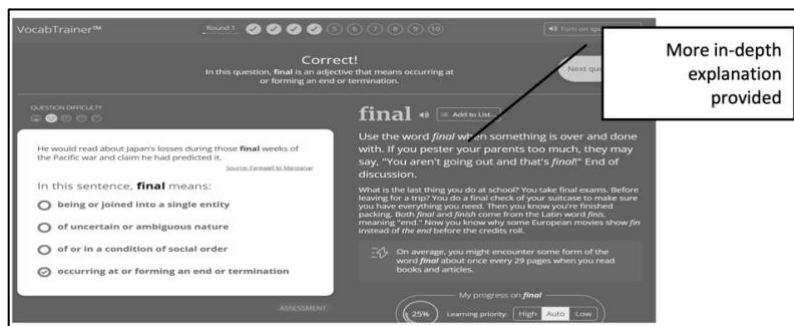
Figure 7 *Detailed Feedback*
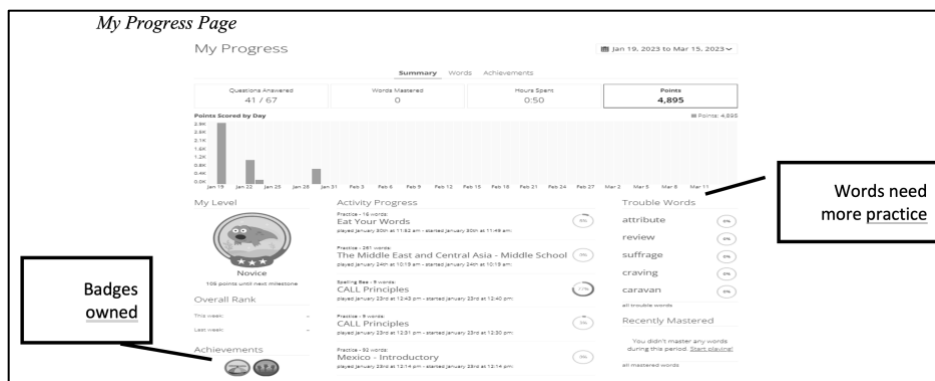
Figure 8 *My Progress Page*

Conclusion

Overall, *Vocabulary.com* is an excellent resource for students and teachers alike. With its personalized learning technology, extensive word database, and engaging games and challenges, it offers a comprehensive and effective way to improve vocabulary skills. The app met most of the criteria. It can assist teachers to create a class and assign all the activities offered in the learners' edition to students. It also includes the affordance to monitor individual students' progress on the site. While *Vocabulary.com* can be a valuable tool for building vocabulary knowledge, it should not be the only resource teachers' use in a language classroom. Supplementing it with other resources, such as textbooks, worksheets, and language learning apps can help provide a more comprehensive learning experience.

Additionally, to facilitate the enhancement of the learning journey on *Vocabulary.com*, it could be beneficial for the website designers to consider incorporating visual aids such as pictures, illustrations, and videos to aid in listening and speaking skills especially that the app is meant for users starting at a young age. As well, the addition of recording features that facilitate students' practice and improve their pronunciation skills could further optimize vocabulary learning on the platform.

To Cite this Review

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