

The Impact of Online Games on Vocabulary Acquisition: Primary School Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a very crucial aspect of language learning. It enhances student engagement and promotes an innovative learning environment. Traditional rote memorization of words has been replaced by gamified activities using various online platforms. Incorporating games into the classroom results in having positive effects on language learning, simultaneously increasing students' interest. As a result, many educational institutions are now integrating online games into their curricula. The research paper aims to explore the impact of using online games on primary school students' vocabulary acquisition. Specifically, it examines how primary school teachers in Georgia utilize online games in their English classrooms to enhance students' vocabulary skills development. Furthermore, the study also identifies the challenges that teachers encounter in the process. The study took a quantitative research approach, an online questionnaire was distributed to 30 English language teachers in primary schools in Georgia. The findings of the study revealed that the gamified activities contributed positively to primary school students' vocabulary acquisition process. Moreover, gamification promoted students' engagement and interest in vocabulary learning. The study also highlighted several challenges faced by the participants, such as technical issues and limited access to electronic devices. Based on the findings, the study offers recommendations for the successful integration of online games into language classroom curricula.

Keywords: gamification, vocabulary acquisition, language learning, teachers' perspectives, young learners

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Introduction

The integration of digital tools in English classrooms has changed traditional teaching methodologies. If before, language learning was a highly demanding process, now it has become interesting and entertaining for young learners. Educators are trying to explore new platforms to increase students' engagement and promote the language acquisition process. The digital tools could enrich lexis, improve language skills and develop communicative competencies. However, as with any tool, a closer examination is important to determine their influence on learning outcomes.

Despite the increased use of technology in language classrooms, there is still a debate regarding its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, digital tools can provide a game-based, collaborative, engaging and/or interactive learning environment. For example, Kahoot is an excellent tool for not only drilling activities, which aid language learning, but also for its ability to host competition and engagement (Kaur & Nadarajan, 2020). Taskcard is well-known for its collaborative characteristics. It enables students to work individually as well as in groups. Moreover, it has it allows teachers/students to integrate multimedia (Borisovna & Vladimirovna, 2015). Embedding pictures, videos, and audio can make language learning more interesting and involving since students usually feel more motivated to share real-life experiences rather than to engage with animated content. Moreover, these applications enable students to stay anonymous and demonstrate their abilities without fear of judgment. On the other hand, they have possible drawbacks as well. Truong mentions several disadvantages of Kahoot, including dependence on technology and distracting features, such as background music. Truong and Dinh (2024) also claims that Kahoot's competitive nature is not a benefit but rather a drawback. Similarly, studies on platforms like Padlet and Taskcard have revealed several challenges. In the study, which collected students' perceptions, the participants mentioned challenges such as difficulty for students with limited technological knowledge and reduced real-life social interaction (Etfita et al., 2022). Another possible disadvantage could be that it is not possible to detect to whom the work belongs. Even though the anonymous feature was mentioned as one of the advantages, it could be a disadvantage as well. Students might write some hurtful messages which are hardly controllable.

Therefore, it is important to study the implications of technology-assisted learning. While online platforms may have a potential positive influence, they require further examination of their influence on vocabulary enrichment and the development of communicative competencies. This study aims to contribute to the discussion about the integration of digital tools into language learning and inform future teachers about possible drawbacks to consider before implementation.

This study has four main research questions:

1. What are some digital tools that could be applied to English language learning in primary school?
2. How does incorporating digital tools impact language acquisition (particularly in terms of vocabulary enrichment and the development of communicative competencies)?
3. What are some possible benefits and drawbacks of using online tools in language learning classrooms?
4. How do primary school teachers and students respond to digitalized learning activities?

To get answers to these questions, the paper will review the literature on the language acquisition process and its approaches. Then it will overview of possible benefits and drawbacks that the implementation of digital tools may have. The literature review will also touch upon the definition of communicative competencies and key aspects that should be considered for a successful learning experience. The next subchapter will examine Georgian primary school teachers' perspectives and provide findings from the survey.

Literature Review

Language Acquisition Theories

How children acquire language has been a long debate. In the 1950s, several psychologists studied the language learning process in young children and challenged existing theories. In 1957, Burrhus Frederic Skinner introduced the idea that children learn through imitation and gave the foundation for behaviourism. However, this theory was soon questioned by Noam Chomsky (1959), who compared language acquisition to instinct. He argued that “children are biologically programmed for language and the language develops in the child in just the same way as biological functions do” (Chomsky, 1959, as cited in Kovacs & Benko, 2014). The theories regarding language learning develop because of the complexity of both language and the human mind. However, due to the space limitations, this study will focus on two theories, behaviouristic and social-cognitive, since they are particularly relevant when applying digital tools in the English language classroom due to their drilling and collaborative nature.

Scholars Lightbown and Spada (2011, as cited in Kovacs and Benko, 2014) summarized the concept of behaviourism with the phrase “say what I say”. This very simply explains the main idea of the behaviourist perspective. Behaviourists viewed “[...] language learning as habit formation and thus saturated students with dialogues and patterns drills designed to contradiction learners to produce automatic, correct responses to linguistic stimuli” (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 3). According to Skinner (1984, as cited in Burhanuddin & Ahmad, 2021), besides drilling, for successful language learning, the new material should be built on previous knowledge. Also, it is important to give consistent rewards and immediate feedback.

Lev Vygotsky proposed the idea that children acquire language through communication with adults and peers and by that, he challenged Piaget's (1926) claim that children learn independently. In this work, he introduces the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights that learning happens through guidance or scaffolding. Scaffolding is a temporary support which enables students to complete tasks that extend their capacities (Vygotsky, 1934). The support may include several strategies, such as asking guiding questions, demonstrating examples, giving hints and breaking big tasks into smaller ones so that they are easily achievable (Bransford et al., 2000). Vygotsky's theory is directly linked to the concept of communicative competencies. The following chapter of the literature review reveals that communicative competencies extend to language skills and cover social and cultural understanding. Therefore, by applying ZPD in the classroom, students develop not only language-related competencies but also contextual knowledge.

In the 1960s, computers appeared in language teaching. Language learning theories and approaches existing before required a shift to a new reality. Therefore, the application of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has started. CALL refers to “... any process in

which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language” (Beatty, 2013, p. 7). How behaviouristic and communicative language learning theories apply to CALL is described in Warschauer and Kern’s text “Theory and Practice of Network-based Language Teaching”. From a behaviourist perspective, CALL facilitated vocabulary and grammar drill exercises. Bringing computers into language learning not only increased students’ motivation but also reduced teachers’ workload. Now, computers could give students feedback instantly (2000). Warschauer and Healey (1998) also touch upon this benefit in their article “Computers and language learning: Overview”, published 2 years before the previously mentioned work. They state that “the computer was viewed as a mechanical tutor which never grew tired or judgmental and allowed students to work at an individual pace” (p. 57). From a socio-cognitive perspective, computers became mediators that facilitated human interaction. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has enabled students to communicate with peers outside the classroom through CMC tools such as emails and Relay Chat (2000). Moreover, technology has made task or project-based learning more accessible, which gives opportunity students to express their creativity through language practice (Warschauer & Healey, 1998).

This sub-chapter is intentionally called “language acquisition” and not “language learning”. Until the late 1980s, there was a lack of research on second language learning. Traditionally, children were taught English only after the age of ten because learning languages was considered to be a highly demanding subject, however, studies have shown that children acquire a foreign language most effectively if they start at an early age (Kovacs & Benko, 2014). The researchers, Kovacs and Benko (2014), in their book *The World at Their Feet: Children’s Early Competence in Two Languages through Education*, offer a table adapted from Krashen (1981) and demonstrate the difference between these two terms. According to findings, language acquisition is an unconscious process, like a child learns their 1st language. Meanwhile, language learning is a conscious one. Another key distinction worth mentioning is the teacher’s role. During the acquisition process, the teacher is a co-communicator, while in language learning, a teacher is in charge of the process.

Legutke et al. (2009) believe that language should be acquired by various creative and innovative methods rather than learned. For instance, Hafernik (1983) believes that writing skills could be developed by peer review, and Uberman (1998) states that games aid lexis improvement. Therefore, the lesson plans in primary schools should be designed so that they aid vocabulary acquisition through games rather than rote memorization. As for writing skills improvement, students should be encouraged to use phrases acquired through playful activities rather than to force them to memorize grammar rules and structures beforehand and then leave feedback on each other’s work. By integrating both behaviouristic and socio-cognitive strategies, a more effective and engaging learning experience is hoped to be fostered.

Communicative Competences

Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), along with Jack C. Richards (2005), define communicative competencies by comparing them to grammatical competence. They acknowledge the importance of strong grammatical knowledge. However, they emphasize the distinction between knowing how to form grammatically correct sentences and how to use them appropriately in communication. Richards further talks about this distinction in the Cambridge University Press YouTube video, where he provides a good example to fully comprehend the concept of communicative competencies. He compares two ways of

requesting a glass of water: First, “Please get me a glass of water”, and second, “What is wanted by me is a glass of water” (Richards, 2012a, 1:41). By demonstrating these two examples, he explains that even though both of the sentences are grammatically correct, the second one is not natural for everyday communication. To avoid unnatural use of language, the modern syllabus should not only focus on grammar rules but also incorporate functions, communicative tasks, fluency and accuracy activities, as well as contextual texts (Richards, 2012a, 3:05).

Richards lists five key components of communicative competencies. Starting with accuracy, which involves mastering grammatical knowledge, syntax, and pronunciation. It is followed by fluency, which refers to the learner’s ability to maintain communication flow. Third is complexity, observing how vocabulary and grammar knowledge expand over time. Then is appropriacy (Richards, 2012b), which involves using language appropriately for “context, situation, participants and relationship between participants” (Richards, 2012a, 2:30). Finally, communicative capacity shows what range of topics a learner can discuss. Richards highlights that while teaching a language, activities for each strand should be used interchangeably (Richards, 2012b).

Digital Tools in Education

In today’s digital era, integrating technology into language learning has become more accessible than ever. Teachers can easily find free printable worksheets or even online activities. Due to the wide use of iPads, smartphones and other digital devices, students are already used to using technology for entertainment. This allows teachers to incorporate them into the language learning process. Researches suggest that the digitalization of education has changed English language teaching and made classroom interactions more dynamic and student-centred (Suwartono & Aniuranti, 2019, as cited in Pachuashvili, 2023). Therefore, today, representatives from the educational field try to make language acquisition more engaging, involving and interesting. They aim to decrease the cognitive demand and increase the enjoyment. For example, grammar translation or learning lexis by heart is not an option anymore. Instead, approaches such as watching cartoons, listening to nursery rhymes, and playing games seem to be effective. By incorporating technologies and fun activities such as games, teachers can create an interactive learning environment which increases students’ motivation for learning. This subchapter aims to overview of the benefits and drawbacks that incorporating online activities in the classroom.

Researchers mentioned below have proven that incorporating online games into education can be beneficial in many ways. For instance, Kim et al. (2018) claim that gamification can increase students’ engagement and motivation. This is not surprising because students enjoy games due to their entertaining nature and less cognitive demand. Moreover, many games allow students to compete with each other. Healthy competition is one of the main components of motivation and motivation is one step forward in language learning.

Besides motivation, gamification has been shown to improve learning outcomes. James et al. (2024) conducted a comparative study between using gamified mobile applications (GAM) and non-GAM approaches. Their findings indicate that “the use of GAM increases students’ achievement of learning outcomes” (p. 11). Another advantage that games have is that they improve recall and retention (Kim et al., 2018). Su Xin-Li et al. (2021) in their paper claim that the games aid retention of vocabulary. A study conducted by them showed that

multimedia helps students with low confidence boost their confidence and enhance their vocabulary.

Also, another very relevant aspect for this paper is that incorporating online games allows collaborative work. According to Pachuashvili (2023), using digital tools in the classroom significantly increases interactions. Nowadays, there are various online platforms, including Padlet, Prezi, and Task Cards, that support students working in groups or pairs. Since the lesson focuses on social cognitive language acquisition theory, this benefit is particularly relevant for this paper.

Last but not least, it is important to highlight digital tools' ability to provide instant feedback. Since “immediate feedback is usually more effective than delayed feedback” (Kim et al., 2018, p. 44), incorporating online activities that inform students about their performance could be quite beneficial. Pachuashvili (2023) highlights that instant feedback is useful not only for students but teachers since it saves lots of time and effort. Therefore, the digital tools incorporated in the lesson plan in the next chapter were chosen specifically due to their ability to provide immediate feedback.

While online games can positively influence learning, several researchers have also identified potential drawbacks. One of the concerns highlighted by Kim et al. (2017) is the risk of addiction. Like other enjoyable activities, playing games can also cause dependency. Although competition can have a positive influence on language acquisition, it may also create an urge in some students to continue playing until they beat their peers.

Another challenge noted by Kim et al. (2017) is that “games utilize fictional and virtual worlds. Due to this fact, some people are easily distracted from situations within the game while playing the game” (p. 13). This distraction can cause students to lose their ability to focus on lessons. Moreover, since games are highly engaging, students may be overexcited. This can lead to noise and chaos in the classroom. Similarly, Schmid (2008) argues that multimedia can sometimes be overwhelming for learners, which further complicates classroom management.

Knowing the potential drawbacks of gamification can help teachers plan their lessons more effectively and predict possible disruptions and ways to deal with them. However, by highlighting these challenges, this paper does not aim to discourage the use of digital tools in education. Instead, it aims to inform educators about potential issues so that they can address them. By listing several advantages of online activities in the first part of this sub-chapter, the paper emphasizes the positive impact that digital tools have on students. Therefore, the paper aims to encourage future teachers to integrate digital tools into their lessons as much as possible. The lesson plan in the following subchapter could be an example of how digital tools can be applied in practice.

Methods

The research took a quantitative approach to collect and analyze data. Since questionnaires are a widely used tool for data collection, consisting of structured questions and predefined response options that participants complete to provide relevant information (Taherdoost, 2021), it was sent to the primary school English language teachers from Georgia. The questionnaire included 5-point Likert scale items, multiple-choice and a few open-ended questions. This design enabled the researcher to determine participants' agreement on

particular sentences. Multiple-choice questions are effective for assessing a range of cognitive skills, from simple recall to analysis and evaluation (Brame, 2013). “The Likert scale [typically consisting of] a five-point scale is used to allow an individual to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement”, and offers more nuanced responses than a binary yes/no format (Evans, 2023).

Participants

The study sample consisted of primary school English language teachers from Georgia. Among the participants, 90% were females and 10% were males. Most of the respondents were relatively early in their teaching careers, with 73.3% having five or fewer years of teaching experience. Meanwhile, 16.7% had over 10 years of experience.

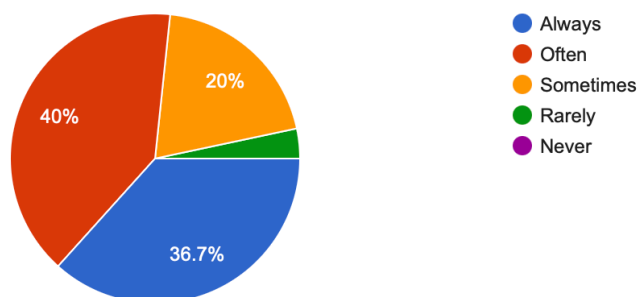
Procedure

The study was conducted online. The questionnaire was distributed directly to some of the teachers through social media platforms. Later on, the information was shared in Facebook groups, specifically targeting primary school language teachers. The interested participants were requested to contact the researcher. After verifying that they met the selection criteria, the survey link was sent. The questionnaire was voluntary, anonymous and took around 15 minutes to complete.

Findings and Discussion

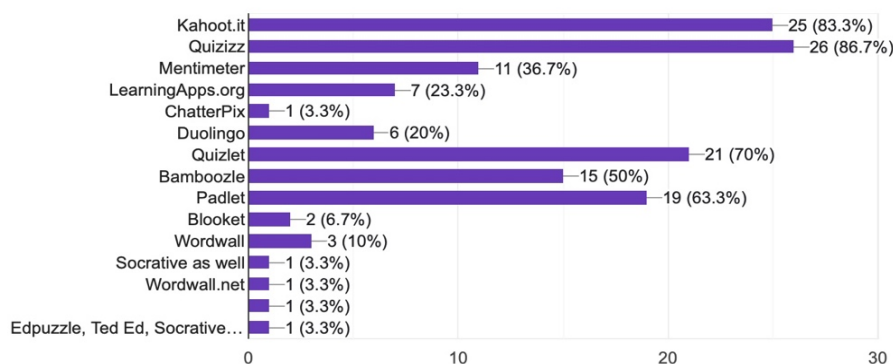
Figure 1

Frequency of Integrating Digital Tools in English Lessons



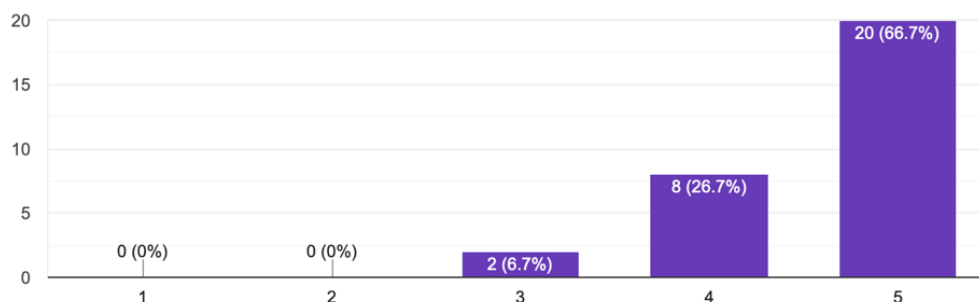
The figure illustrates how frequently teachers incorporate digital tools into their English lessons for primary school children. The responses are distributed as follows: A combined 76.7% of teachers reported using digital tools “always” or “often”, indicating a high frequency of integration of technology into their classrooms. The 20% reported using them “sometimes”, indicating occasional use. Only one respondent selected “rarely”, and none indicated “never”, which could imply almost universal adoption of digital tools in primary English language teaching.

Figure 2
Effective Online Platforms



This figure presents various online platforms that teachers find most effective in teaching English. Quizizz (86.7%) and Kahoot it (83.3%) are the most preferred, followed by Quizlet (70%), Padlet (63.3%) and Bamboozle (50%). Other platforms like Mentimeter (36.7%), LearningApps.org (23.3%) and Duolingo (20%) received moderate support. The questionnaire results have revealed that teachers find game-like tools most effective. Tools offering collaborative work also score highly. In contrast, platforms that are less game-like are rarely used.

Figure 3
Importance of Digital Tools for Language Acquisition



The figure illustrates how the respondents rated the importance of digital tools for English language acquisition in Primary school on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). The results reflect a strong consensus among teachers about the educational value of digital tools. The majority of respondents rated digital tools as highly important: 66.7% selected 5 and 26.7% selected 4. Only 6.7% gave a neutral rating. No one noted it as unimportant.

Table 1*Agreement With Statements on Digital Tools and Vocabulary Acquisition*

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Digital tools help memorization of new words	56.7 %	40.0%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Digital tools make vocabulary learning more engaging	80.0%	16.7%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Digital tools aid contextual vocabulary learning	53.3%	23.3%	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Digital tools help students learn new vocabulary through social interaction	50.0%	40.0%	6.7%	3.3%	0.0%

Most respondents strongly agree that digital tools make vocabulary learning engaging. The majority of participants also believe that it can aid contextual learning and memorization of new words. Fewer respondents agree that digital tools help with vocabulary learning through social interaction. This result might suggest that even though digital tools are seen as strong individual learning tools, their collaborative or communicative aspects may be less convincing.

Table 2*Agreement on the Impact of Digital Tools on Language Skills*

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Digital tools can improve listening comprehension	56.7%	23.3 %	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Digital tools can improve speaking skills	30.0%	43.3%	23.3%	3.3%	0.0%
Digital tools can improve reading comprehension	33.3%	50.0%	13.3 %	3.3%	0.0%
Digital tools can improve writing skills	26.7%	36.7%	36.7%	0.0%	0.0%

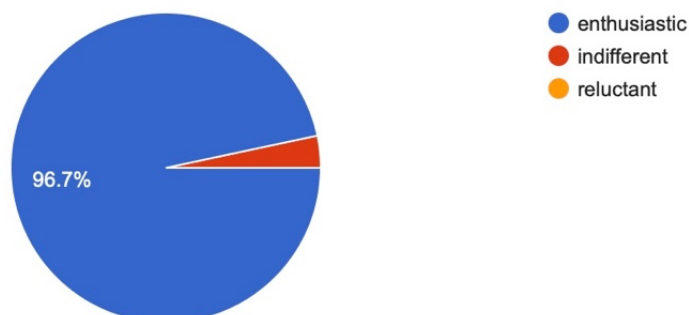
The table shows participants' agreement with statements on how digital tools can improve four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most respondents strongly agree that digital tools enhance listening comprehension, while speaking, reading and writing received a higher level of agreement. Neutral responses were most frequent for writing and speaking. Very few participants disagreed with any statements. The variation across skills may reflect the different capabilities of tools, stronger in receptive skills (listening, reading) than in productive ones (speaking, writing).

Table 3
Challenges in Using Digital Tools

Challenge	Percentage
Technical issues	66.7%
Time constraints	53.3 %
Classroom management	46.7%
Assessment difficulties	26.7 %
Large class sizes	23.3 %
Lack of tools	20.0 %
Lack of training	0.0 %

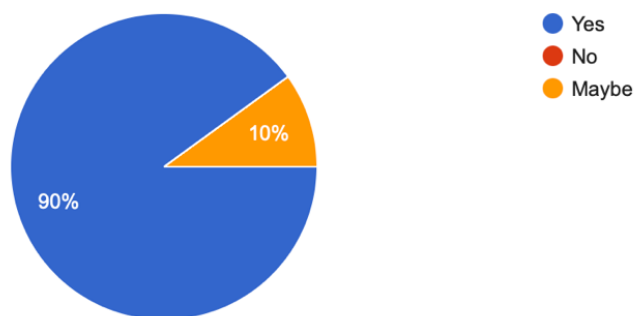
The table presents responses from 30 individuals about challenges faced when incorporating digital tools into English lessons. The most commonly mentioned are technical issues (66.7) and time constraints (53.3%). Classroom management is also considered to be a challenge (46.7%), followed by assessment difficulties (26.7) and large class sizes (23.3%). Even though 30% of the teachers in the survey mentioned that they have not received any training in using digital tools in the language classroom, lack of training is not considered to be a challenge. This could suggest that teachers, even those who have not received formal training, feel adequately prepared.

Figure 4
Students' Response to Online Activities



This figure shows how students typically respond to online activities in the English language classroom. The majority of the teachers believe that their students are enthusiastic, while 3.3% think that they are indifferent. These positive response indicates strong student engagement with online activities. This enthusiasm contrasts with the earlier chart, where technical and time constraints were challenges. Despite barriers, students appear to be motivated, suggesting that teachers may benefit from integrating digital tools into their lessons.

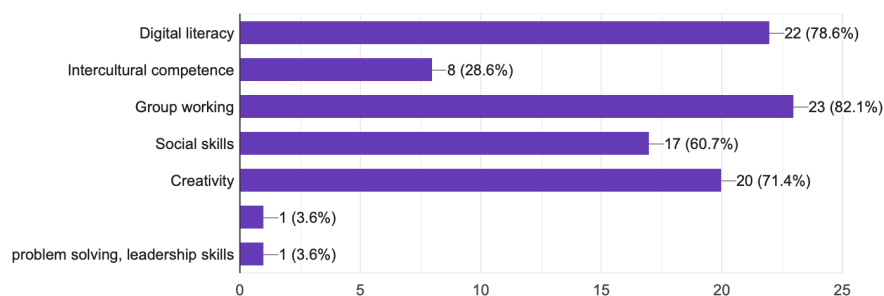
Figure 5
Broader Skill Development Through Digital Tools



In your opinion, does incorporating digital tools into English language lessons help develop skills beyond language proficiency?

The figure shows that 90% of respondents believe incorporating digital tools in English lessons helps develop skills beyond language proficiency, while 10% are uncertain. No one disagreed.

Figure 6
Other Skills Developed Through Digital Tools



The figure lists specific skills believed to be developed. The top skill is group work (82.1%), followed by digital literacy (78.6%), creativity (71.4%), social skills (60.7%) and intercultural competencies (28.6%). Problem-solving and leadership skills are rarely mentioned (3.6%). There is strong agreement on the broader educational value of digital tools in the English language classroom.

Research Limitations

It is important to recognize the number of limitations this study has. One significant limitation is its narrow scope, as it focuses on English language teachers from Georgia. The inclusion of teachers from a broader range of institutions, such as public, private or specialized language schools, might have shown different outcomes. Another potential limitation could be the small sample size. It was challenging to find more than 30 volunteers to complete the questionnaire. This limitation, along with others, could impact the generalizability of the findings. Also, the focus on a single nationality further limits the globalism of the study. To get more generalized results, it would have been better if participants from various countries had been mixed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored primary school teachers' perspectives on the use of online games and digital tools in the English language classroom, with a focus on vocabulary acquisition and the development of communicative competencies. Drawing from both theoretical insights and the data collected through questionnaires, completed by 30 Georgian primary school teachers, the following conclusion can be drawn:

Firstly, the integration of digital tools in primary English language classrooms is widespread, with the majority of teachers reporting frequent use. Tools such as Quizizz, Kahoot! and Quizlet, which are known for their interactive and game-based nature, are especially preferred. It could be suggesting a preference for platforms that foster engagement and motivation among young learners. Based on teachers' perspectives, these tools not only enhance vocabulary learning but also support contextualization and memorization, although their impact on communicative or collaborative vocabulary use appears less visible.

Secondly, the findings suggest that digital tools are perceived as effective in developing receptive language skills, listening and reading, while their effectiveness for productive skills like speaking and writing is considered limited. This may reflect the current design of most online tools, some of which prioritize individual practice over real-time interaction. Besides language skills, teachers believe that the use of digital tools contributes to the development of broader competencies such as teamwork, digital literacy, creativity and social skills, reinforcing the notion that online tools can support holistic educational goals beyond linguistic proficiency.

Despite some challenges, including technical issues, time constraints and classroom management difficulties, teachers generally view integrating digital tools into the English language classroom positively. Interestingly, a lack of formal training was not considered a barrier, which may indicate growing digital competence among educators or reliance on self-learning.

Finally, the study demonstrates the valuable role of online games and digital tools in enhancing vocabulary. Even though integrating digital tools into the classroom is generally seen as beneficial, especially for learner engagement and receptive skill development, further emphasis on communicative, collaborative and productive aspects could make digital tools even more effective in language education. Future research might focus on the long-term impacts of these tools on language improvement and communicative competence, as well as on strategies to better integrate speaking and writing activities into digital platforms.

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