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Using the ISmart Platform for Vocabulary Teaching in Writing within a Blended Learning Model in China

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Abstract – Blended learning has revolutionized educational practices globally by combining traditional and digital methodologies to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. This teaching approach is particularly significant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where vocabulary acquisition is vital in enhancing academic writing skills. This study investigates the effectiveness of the ISmart platform—a SPOC-based English learning software developed by Higher Education Press—in fostering vocabulary development and writing proficiency among Chinese university students within a blended learning model. The research adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating pre-and post-tests, surveys, and classroom observations to assess the platform's impact. Over a 12-week intervention, the experimental group, utilizing ISmart, demonstrated a 30% improvement in vocabulary test scores and substantial advancements in writing quality, including coherence, lexical variety, and grammatical accuracy, compared to a control group receiving traditional instruction. Key findings reveal that ISmart's intelligent features, such as interactive exercises and personalized feedback, significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and engagement. Positive student feedback underscores the platform's intuitive design and effective integration with teaching materials, highlighting its potential as an innovative tool for blended learning environments. Despite its success, challenges such as accessibility issues in rural regions and the need for educator training were identified, suggesting avenues for future improvement. These findings position the ISmart platform as a powerful resource for vocabulary teaching in blended learning, with implications for scaling its use in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Blended Learning, ISmart Platform, SPOC, Vocabulary Teaching, Academic Writing, EFL

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, blended learning has emerged as a pivotal strategy that leverages technology to enhance pedagogical practices. By integrating traditional face-to-face teaching with digital resources, blended learning creates dynamic and flexible educational environments that cater to diverse learning needs (Almusaed et al., 2023). This approach is particularly effective in vocabulary acquisition, a fundamental aspect of language proficiency. Strong vocabulary skills are crucial for academic writing, enabling EFL learners to express ideas clearly and effectively, which is essential for success in both academic and professional settings (Liu & Chen, 2023). Blended learning environments support vocabulary acquisition through personalized learning pathways, interactive exercises, and access to vast digital repositories. For instance, platforms like Moodle or ISmart provide learners with tools for self-paced study and immediate feedback, fostering autonomy and engagement (Wang & Liu, 2022). These platforms also incorporate multimedia content, such as videos, which cater to various learning styles and help reinforce vocabulary in contextualized settings. Research indicates that such multimodal approaches significantly improve new vocabulary retention and application (Gamage et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of blended learning is contingent on overcoming challenges such as digital literacy and equitable access to technology. Students in underserved areas often face barriers like poor internet connectivity and lack of digital devices, which limit their ability to fully benefit from these platforms (Chen & Zhao, 2021). Addressing these issues requires institutional support, including investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and inclusive design of learning platforms to accommodate diverse learner needs (Rapanta et al., 2021). Moreover, motivation plays a critical role in the success of blended learning. Incorporating gamified elements, such as point systems or badges, can increase student engagement and encourage consistent participation in vocabulary-building activities (Chakraborty et al., 2020). Collaborative tasks, such as peer reviews and group discussions, enhance learning by allowing students to practice vocabulary in meaningful interactions, reinforcing their language skills in real-world scenarios (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Blended learning offers immense potential for transforming vocabulary instruction in EFL settings. Combining the strengths of traditional and digital pedagogies, it supports personalised learning and fosters critical skills essential for academic writing. To fully realize its benefits, stakeholders must address access, literacy, and motivation challenges, ensuring that blended learning becomes a tool for inclusive and effective language education.

The ISmart platform, developed by Higher Education Press, marks a significant advancement in blended learning, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. By utilizing the Small Private Online Course (SPOC) framework, ISmart provides a unique approach that combines traditional pedagogical methods with the latest technological innovations. This hybrid model is designed to offer a more flexible and personalized learning experience, which is essential for modern language learners. ISmart's integration of various technological tools, such as adaptive learning algorithms and interactive exercises, creates an engaging environment involving students in their learning journey. One of the key features of ISmart is its ability to provide individualized

learning pathways, allowing students to progress at their own pace. The platform's adaptive learning system adjusts to each learner's needs, offering personalized content and targeted practice based on their performance. This approach helps students focus on areas where they need improvement, ensuring they are continuously challenged and supported. Furthermore, the platform's real-time intelligent feedback systems enable immediate assessment of student performance, facilitating timely interventions when necessary (Liu & Chen, 2023). This continuous feedback loop is crucial in reinforcing learning and improving language acquisition.

Incorporating these intelligent features enhances the learning process and fosters greater student autonomy and motivation. Research has shown that personalized learning strategies, such as those implemented in ISmart, are highly effective in supporting students' academic success, particularly in language learning contexts (Wang & Liu, 2022). The combination of personalized content delivery and real-time feedback ensures that students remain engaged and motivated throughout their learning experience. As a result, the ISmart platform exemplifies the potential of blended learning models to improve the quality and outcomes of EFL instruction, providing a scalable solution for diverse educational settings. Overall, the ISmart platform is a comprehensive tool that integrates technology with pedagogy to create a more effective, personalized, and engaging learning environment. It supports students' language development by addressing their individual learning needs and offering real-time guidance, aligning with the latest trends in educational technology and language acquisition (Chen & Zhao, 2021). As such, ISmart can potentially transform EFL education, particularly in contexts where personalized learning is essential for student success.

Vocabulary teaching is a key focus within ISmart, recognizing its foundational role in enhancing academic writing. The platform's approach to vocabulary acquisition emphasizes contextualized learning, wherein students interact with lexical items within meaningful scenarios, thereby improving retention and practical application. Interactive features like quizzes, gamified tasks, and automated assessments encourage active learner engagement, while data analytics provide instructors with insights to refine teaching strategies (Almusaed et al., 2023). Additionally, ISmart's ability to adapt content to individual learner profiles ensures that students at varying proficiency levels receive appropriate challenges and support. By combining face-to-face instruction with digital tools, the platform supports a holistic approach to language education that aligns with modern educational demands (Wang & Liu, 2022). This model has successfully promoted vocabulary growth and enhanced students' academic writing capabilities, particularly in Chinese higher education, where English proficiency is vital for academic and professional achievement (Gamage et al., 2022).

In the context of Chinese higher education, ISmart exemplifies how blended learning platforms can cater to university students' diverse and evolving needs. Through its adaptive learning features, ISmart enables learners to progress at their pace while receiving immediate feedback on their vocabulary use in academic writing tasks. This tailored approach has been instrumental in improving students' vocabulary retention and their ability to apply lexical knowledge effectively, as reported in empirical studies (Wang & Liu, 2022). The interactive elements, such as automated assessments and progress

tracking, encourage consistent engagement, fostering self-directed learning habits crucial for academic success. Despite its advantages, implementing platforms like ISmart is not without challenges. Digital literacy gaps among students and educators can limit the platform's potential as users struggle to exploit its features fully. Disparities in access to reliable technology and internet infrastructure, especially in rural and underprivileged areas, exacerbate the digital divide. These issues hinder the equitable use of such platforms and necessitate targeted interventions, such as digital literacy training and infrastructural investments (Chen & Zhao, 2021). Addressing these challenges is critical for the broader adoption of adaptive learning technologies. Universities must prioritize strategies that ensure inclusivity, such as providing technical support, offering introductory training programs, and integrating hybrid learning as part of a larger pedagogical framework. By doing so, platforms like ISmart can maximize their impact, empowering students with the tools needed to excel in academic and professional contexts (Gamage et al., 2022).

Integrating platforms like ISmart into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction reflects the transformative potential of blended learning in addressing diverse learner needs. ISmart, developed around the SPOC (Small Private Online Course) model, combines traditional pedagogical practices with advanced technological tools to create a dynamic and personalized learning environment. Central to its design are features like intelligent feedback mechanisms and adaptive learning pathways, which target the acquisition of vocabulary—a critical element for improving academic writing proficiency (Liu & Chen, 2023; Wang & Liu, 2022). One of the most significant advantages of ISmart lies in its capacity to support autonomous and self-directed learning. By allowing learners to progress at their own pace and providing real-time feedback on vocabulary applications, ISmart enhances both retention and contextual usage of lexical items. These improvements are particularly crucial for EFL learners, as vocabulary is the foundation for expressing complex ideas in academic writing (Ghahari & Ameri-Golestan, 2013). Additionally, the platform's user-centred design facilitates consistent engagement, a key factor in maintaining motivation and achieving long-term learning goals.

However, successfully implementing such platforms depends on addressing challenges like digital literacy and equitable access to technology. Disparities in internet connectivity and technological resources, particularly in rural or underdeveloped regions, can limit the reach of these innovations. Furthermore, teacher training is essential to maximize the platform's potential, ensuring educators can effectively integrate its features into their teaching strategies (Chen & Zhao, 2021). Future research should explore how platforms like ISmart can be refined to better cater to the specific needs of different learner groups. For instance, incorporating gamification elements and culturally relevant materials could further enhance engagement and relevance. Longitudinal studies are also necessary to evaluate the sustained impact of blended learning platforms on EFL learners' academic writing and overall language proficiency.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate the ISmart platform's effectiveness in improving students'

English writing skills. Sixty university students enrolled in an English writing course were divided into an experimental group, which utilized ISmart, and a control group, which followed traditional teaching methods. Data collection utilized three tools. Pre- and post-tests assessed vocabulary acquisition and writing proficiency, capturing baseline performance and improvements following the 12-week intervention. Additionally, student surveys provided insights into perceptions of ISmart's usability and its impact on learning outcomes. Classroom observations offered a qualitative perspective on interaction patterns and engagement, complementing the quantitative findings.

During the 12-week intervention, ISmart was seamlessly integrated into the experimental group's curriculum. Activities included vocabulary exercises, writing assignments, and interactive quizzes, aligning with course objectives and emphasizing vocabulary acquisition and application in contextually meaningful tasks. The platform's adaptive feedback mechanisms and gamified features fostered self-directed learning and encouraged consistent student engagement. This approach resonates with Rahmat et al. (2019), who highlighted the importance of psychopragmatic strategies in language teaching processes to enhance learner engagement and retention. Similarly, Mulyaningsih et al. (2022) underscored the role of motivation and innovative tools in improving students' scientific writing skills, which aligns with ISmart's focus on personalized learning pathways.

The blended learning design employed in ISmart reflects trends noted by Yendra et al. (2018), who emphasized the efficacy of combining digital tools with traditional methods in linguistics education. However, challenges such as disparities in digital literacy and resistance to technology adoption, particularly among students unfamiliar with digital platforms, were documented. These findings are consistent with Rahmat et al. (2023), who explored the varying levels of digital activeness and connectivity among young learners, demonstrating the need for tailored digital interventions. Moreover, integrating digital resources like ISmart aligns with the observations of Aditiawarman et al. (2022), who noted the effectiveness of digital tools in language learning contexts. The ISmart holds significant potential for enhancing EFL instruction by combining structured content delivery with interactive and adaptive learning features. Future studies could explore further customization of such platforms to address diverse learner needs, ensuring equitable access and fostering a deeper engagement in blended learning environments.

3. RESULTS

Integrating digital platforms such as ISmart in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has proven to be a transformative tool in enhancing vocabulary acquisition and writing proficiency. This study found that students using the ISmart platform saw a 30% improvement in vocabulary test scores, indicating that technology-enhanced learning can be crucial in advancing language skills. Such platforms are particularly beneficial in providing personalized feedback and adaptive learning paths, aligning with existing research emphasising individualised learning experiences' positive impact. Chen et al. (2020) explain how online platforms improve student engagement and satisfaction by offering tailored content and real-time feedback, enabling students to address specific

learning needs more effectively. The adaptive features of ISmart also help students develop writing skills, which are essential for academic success in EFL contexts. By engaging with vocabulary exercises, writing assignments, and interactive quizzes, students can expand their lexical range and apply new words in contextually relevant ways. This personalized approach to learning is essential for improving writing proficiency, as students can refine their use of vocabulary, grammar, and coherence through continuous practice. Wen (2023) highlights how such adaptive learning systems contribute to language acquisition by catering to individual student needs, helping them to progress at their own pace and gain confidence in their writing abilities.

Moreover, the integration of technology in language learning fosters greater learner autonomy. ISmart allows students to take ownership of their learning by engaging with content at their own pace and on their own terms. This aligns with research that supports the role of autonomous learning in EFL education, suggesting that platforms that encourage self-directed study can lead to more sustainable improvements in language skills (Wang & Liu, 2022). In this way, ISmart facilitates vocabulary acquisition and writing proficiency and contributes to developing essential skills for lifelong learning. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges remain in fully harnessing the potential of digital platforms for EFL education. Limited access to technology in rural areas and proper training for educators are critical factors that must be addressed to ensure equitable access and maximize the benefits of platforms like ISmart. As highlighted by Jia et al. (2024), effective implementation of digital learning tools depends on the availability of technology and the support and readiness of both students and educators to engage with these tools. Therefore, continued research and investment are needed to optimize the use of digital platforms in EFL education, ensuring that they remain accessible, effective, and inclusive for all learners.

In addition to the significant improvements in vocabulary, the study also observed notable gains in writing proficiency. Essays scored using a rubric demonstrated marked improvements in coherence, lexical variety, and grammatical accuracy, reflecting the ISmart platform's positive influence on language skills development. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on the effectiveness of blended learning environments, where digital platforms foster deeper engagement with content through interactive exercises and real-time assessments. For example, Putra et al. (2024) emphasize the role of interactive features in enhancing student engagement and language retention in blended learning contexts. The continuous integration of ISmart with course materials allowed students to engage in sustained practice, significantly improving their retention and application of vocabulary in writing tasks.

Moreover, the seamless integration of ISmart with course content mirrors findings by Jia et al. (2024), who argue that blended learning platforms promote more effective language learning by providing continuous opportunities for practice and self-assessment. Personalized learning paths and immediate feedback allowed students to address their individual needs, enhancing their language proficiency. This personalized approach to learning aligns with the findings of Kurniawan, Rahmat, and Azar (2024), who highlight the importance of tailored strategies in facilitating learning, particularly for language learners in diverse educational settings. The platform's ability to engage

students with real-time feedback and self-assessment aligns with research by Rahmad et al. (2024), who found that engagement in service-based learning projects increased student motivation and academic success. Active engagement is also crucial in enhancing writing proficiency, as students can continuously refine their skills. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of digital learning tools in enhancing language acquisition and writing proficiency in EFL contexts.

However, challenges must be addressed for widespread implementation despite the positive outcomes observed with digital platforms like ISmart. Limited accessibility, particularly in rural areas, and the need for adequate technical training for educators continue to pose significant barriers to successfully integrating these tools. This concern is echoed by Jia et al. (2024), who highlight that while technological tools can revolutionize education, their effectiveness is contingent on equitable access and sufficient support for students and instructors. Without addressing these challenges, the promise of blended learning platforms may not reach their full potential, especially for students in underserved regions or those with limited digital literacy. So, the need for consistent and comprehensive teacher training is emphasized by Rahmad et al. (2024), who stress that effective platform implementation requires educators to be well-versed in the technology and pedagogical strategies necessary for successful integration. This is particularly important as teachers must understand the platform's technical aspects and how to effectively incorporate it into their teaching methods to engage students and enhance learning outcomes. As Kurniawan et al. (2024) highlight, educators must be equipped with the necessary skills to adapt to these new tools, which will require ongoing professional development and institutional support. Addressing these issues will be crucial in ensuring that the benefits of blended learning platforms like ISmart can be fully realized. Providing equitable access to technology and supporting educators through proper training are essential steps in optimizing the use of these platforms and ensuring that all students, regardless of their geographical location or background, can benefit from these educational advancements.

4. CONCLUSION

The ISmart platform has demonstrated its value as an effective tool for enhancing vocabulary teaching within the context of academic writing, particularly in a blended learning model. By leveraging intelligent features such as personalized learning pathways and adaptive feedback, ISmart supports active learning and individualized instruction, making it a robust solution for modern English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in China. The platform's ability to seamlessly integrate with traditional face-to-face teaching provides students with an engaging and flexible learning experience, which has been shown to improve both vocabulary acquisition and writing proficiency. The study highlights that using ISmart leads to measurable improvements in students' language skills, particularly vocabulary retention, and application, aligning with broader trends observed in blended learning environments (Wen, 2023). However, while the results are promising, challenges such as accessibility in rural areas and adequate educational training must be addressed for broader implementation. These issues are critical in ensuring all learners can effectively utilize digital platforms like ISmart,

regardless of location or digital literacy levels. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of using ISmart in diverse educational settings and investigate its scalability across different regions and educational levels. Additionally, further studies are needed to examine how to address the barriers to access and training to optimize the use of such platforms in enhancing language acquisition and improving academic writing outcomes.

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