

【研究ノート】

Let's Look at Spellie—An Online Game for English Language Learners

Kelly Eileen Rose

スペリをやってみよう — 英語学習者のためのオンラインゲーム

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Abstract

The popularity of the online English word game, Wordle, demonstrates a zeal for such games, and there is no shortage of similar browser-based vocabulary games. This paper examines the free, online English vocabulary game, Spellie, and its effects on English language university students. During the 2023 academic year, students at a small private university in Hiroshima, Japan trialed the game and detailed their opinions in a qualitative survey. The trial suggests that Spellie has potential to be a positive tool for vocabulary development in both an English-language classroom as well as individual study.

Introduction

In today's digital world there is no shortage of English language vocabulary games. As the popular online English language word game, Wordle, takes the world by storm one can easily see the potential for its classroom use (Serrels et al., 2022). Indeed, a basic internet search yields several similar games both free and for a fee (McAuliffe, 2023). This study details a look into one such vocabulary game, Spellie. While this free online vocabulary game is purported to be "a daily word puzzle for young learners", it also holds the potential for successful inclusion in an English language learning context for all ages (Porter et al., 2022).

Vocabulary development is crucial when learning a language. As the British author Evelyn Waugh quipped, "one forgets words as one forgets names. One's vocabulary needs constant fertilizing, or it will die." Fisher and Frey (2014) emphasize the importance of specific word study in content classes by utilizing, "wide reading, selecting words to teach, modeling word solving and providing students opportunities through collaborative conversations to actually use their growing vocabularies." Specifically addressing word solving skills, the authors recommend that teachers point out, "prefixes, suffixes, roots, bases, word families, cognates—basically anything inside the word that can help the reader figure out the word." Likewise, they encourage the use of additional resources, "such as dictionaries, thesauri, and even asking other people. Teachers can also model these word-solving strategies using technology such as smartphones or computers," and highlight the

use of games during instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Luckily, all of these recommendations for teachers can be accessed by using Spellie in a classroom capacity.

English language learners especially need dedicated instruction with English spelling rules and phonemic awareness (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014). However, methods for teaching vocabulary in a language classroom are debatable with some teachers favoring an indirect approach in lessons whereas other requiring an explicit focus on vocabulary. Brown (2007) acknowledges the necessity for the latter approach when he recommends, “rather than viewing vocabulary items as a long and boring list of words to be defined and memorized, lexical forms now play a central role in contextualized, meaningful language. Learners can be guided in specific ways to internalize these important building blocks of language” (Brown, 2007). He further recommends instructors to, “allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning.” Given this crucial need for specific vocabulary development teachers must incorporate such techniques regularly in their lessons—something which Spellie can certainly accomplish.

Student Background

This study involved eighty-seven, first-, second-, and third-year students studying at a small, private university in Hiroshima, Japan. All participants were English language learners with Japanese as their native language. The study included students from all five departments at the university: Education, Welfare, Nutrition, Psychology and Global Communication, the latter requiring a higher amount of English language courses than the other departments. Most responses were conducted during a compulsory English Communication course, with some responses being done in other elective English language courses at the university. All students in the study had their own digital device (ipad mini) provided by the school, which they used to play the Spellie games and provide anonymous feedback in a short survey.

Spellie Vocabulary Game

Modeled after Wordle, Spellie’s rules are quite simple. Players are allowed six attempts to guess a particular English word, with color-based feedback provided after each attempt. When playing in the default color mode, correct alphabet letters in the correct placement in the word are colored green. Letters which are used in the word but not in the correct place are orange and letters not in the word are clear (in a blue background). The on-screen keyboard also follows this color system. There are three levels (easy-medium-hard) which are renewed every day. The easy level is a four-letter word taken from a Canadian elementary school second grade word list with the first letter provided. The medium level is also selected from the second-grade word list but is a five-letter word and does not provide the initial letter. The hard level expands to six letters, uses a fifth-grade Canadian word list, and does not provide the first letter. As players guess words, they can unlock emojis, which are saved in the device, along with an archive of all the previously played words. Additionally, in the archive players can see their attempts and play any levels not

completed. Finally, players can copy their scores to share on social media. Screenshots of these features are provided in appendix A.

Spellie also provides customizations within its browser-based interface. There are several options the user can select such as high contrast color theme, keyboard layout (QWERTY or alphabetical), selecting upper- or lower-case alphabet letters for the onscreen keyboard, and enabling/ disabling a spell checker and hints. While these options may seem relatively minor, in a classroom environment they provide customization needed to accommodate a range of students. For example, the author of this paper used the high contrast color mode when projecting in the classroom. More about Spellie's features will be discussed in the findings portion of this paper.

Classroom Application

The default method for playing Spellie would be simply to recall previously memorized vocabulary and type guesses, adjusting as needed when provided with any hints or the color-coded feedback. However, when playing the game in a classroom setting, teachers can follow Fisher and Frey's (2014) guidelines by demonstrating the logic process aloud, reviewing phonological concepts, and modeling the metacognitive process for students. In this study, the author projected the "easy" level to the whole class, noting the initial letter and four-letter word size. Students discussed potential words which began with the initial alphabet letter in pairs while the teacher wrote their suggestions on the whiteboard. Before typing the first guess, the author narrated aloud the logic process following English spelling rules, such as trying a vowel as the second letter or common blends like c-h or b-r. Together, the class chose words to guess, with the author typing, and noting the ensuing feedback (whether the letter is used in the word, and its placement). The hints feature proved valuable in this process as it helped narrow down potential letters. As the class continued guessing English words, they unlocked emojis too, adding to the dynamic energy of the room. Upon guessing the correct word and students understanding the process of the game, pairs or individuals can continue the medium or hard levels. While not exactly done in this study an idealized example is provided in Appendix B showing how a teacher could use Spellie to reinforce English spelling rules, phonics practice, and logic skills in a cooperative way.

Another possibility for the classroom is to use the archive section for vocabulary practice. As the easy and medium levels are based on a Canadian second grade elementary school word list, and the hard coming from a fifth-grade Canadian word list, English language students would be exposed to an array of four, five and six letter English words. Any words that were not played could be done and past attempts are saved to the device. Teachers could ask students to review previously played words and engage in a word journal, add to a collaborative word wall, or identify words for further study. Thus, Spellie has the potential for not only a daily game but a digital record of learning ripe for further personalized study.

Individual Study Application

There is also potential to incorporate Spellie into a learning plan as a self-study tool. Because the words update every day, students can easily access the website for a quick game at their convenience. Only an internet connected device is needed, allowing an individual to add extra studying during free time such as waiting in line or riding a bus. Additionally, the game can be played on a multitude of devices as well. The social media sharing option can provide a motivational element for individuals wanting a more competitive experience.

Findings

When analyzing students' qualitative survey data in this study one can see a positive impression of Spellie and its unique options. Of the eighty-seven responses, sixty-three indicated favorably to playing the game, and fifty-seven showed a willingness to play the game in the future. Only five students reacted negatively towards playing the game and four indicated they would not like to play it in the future. When asking participants to indicate how Spellie could help in their English language studies, unsurprisingly the highest responses were English vocabulary and spelling development (fifty-five and fifty-two), followed by a social learning element (twenty-six) and individual study (fourteen). In the written comments over half indicated a positive adjective with "fun" being the most common. Four students appreciated the logical element with one writing, "I think it is good because I can train my thinking and spelling skills," and another succinctly stating, "it's good for my brain!" Three wrote that they wanted to continue playing Spellie in the future. However, the written comments were not all positive. Five participants used the word "difficult" to describe their experience, but of those five, two still enjoyed the game. "I feel this game is a little difficult. But it was fun." Another player indicated having difficulty, but as Fisher and Frey (2014) recommended, used a dictionary to help their learning process.

Regarding Spellie's features, the majority appreciated the various levels offered. In fact, two participants wrote comments with one stating, "a lot of level [sic] is good for me" and another hoping to play more challenging words. In classroom practice this variety of levels proved to be useful when accommodating different learner needs. Because it offered three distinct levels of vocabulary words, instructors could use the game with a range of English language learners nearly eliminating any additional course preparation. The fact that all three words update on a daily basis was another popular feature with participants, gaining thirty-five responses. This would easily allow teachers to use Spellie as a daily warm up activity in the classroom or individual students to incorporate Spellie as part of a daily study habit.

The third highest ranked feature was Spellie's hints option. This is something unique to Spellie in comparison to similar vocabulary games (McAuliffe, 2023) and proved to be very useful both in classroom teaching and for the participants. In their written comments five players mentioned needing the hints in some way. During instruction, the author

revealed hints at certain points of the logic process which aided demonstrating the metacognitive technique of narrowing down possible words.

Other features which did not have as much support in the survey responses but nevertheless should be noted were the emoji collection (14 responses), ability to type words easily (12) and the QWERTY or alphabetical keyboard option (7). The ability to collect emojis appeals to visually based learners and can serve as a positive motivation for some. By typing any word correctly, even if it is not the designated word, players can be rewarded. One participant commented it is like receiving a digital “sticker.” Perhaps this is due to the high number of image-based words present in Spellie’s corpus (Sousa, 2011). Likewise, the other pragmatic features may not have been obvious to participants new to Spellie but is noticeable when comparing to other online vocabulary games. It is clear that Spellie has been thoughtfully crafted and the author certainly appreciates the flexibility such options provide in adapting to her English language learners.

Spellie Survey Questions	87 responses
How did you like playing the Spellie game? (likert ranking 1-5)	45 Strongly positive (rank 5) 18 Positive (rank 4) 19 Neutral (rank 3) 02 Negative (rank 2) 03 Strongly negative (rank 1)
Would you like to continue playing the Spellie game in the future? (likert ranking 1-5)	38 Strongly positive (rank 5) 19 Positive (rank 4) 26 Neutral (rank 3) 04 Negative (rank 2) 00 Strongly negative (rank 1)
Which features do you like about the Spellie game? (choose one or more)	64 There are various levels (easy-medium-hard) 35 There are new words every day 25 There are hints 14 There are pictures. I can collect emojis. 12 I can type and change my letters easily. 07 I can choose the keyboard layout (QWERTY or A-Z)
How can the Spellie game help you to learn English? (choose one or more)	55 I can practice vocabulary 52 I can practice spelling 26 I can play with my friends and learn together 14 I can play by myself when I have free time.

Areas for Improvement

While there are numerous positive aspects using the Spellie game within an English language setting, there are some shortcomings. One area of weakness for teachers is a lack of word list customization. The content for each level is taken from vague Canadian wordlists. On the website it states, “there are three daily puzzles of increasingly difficulty. The easy puzzle uses short words within Grade 2 vocabulary. The hard mode is challenging but uses words within the Grade 5 vocabulary” (Porter et al., 2022). There is no way to edit words or upload a personal word list putting teachers or self-study learners at a

disadvantage if they would like to use Spellie to reinforce words specific to their instruction. Another drawback for teachers is a lack of a provided answer key. To know each day's words, one must take the time to play each level, creating additional pressure on some instructors when preparing for their classes.

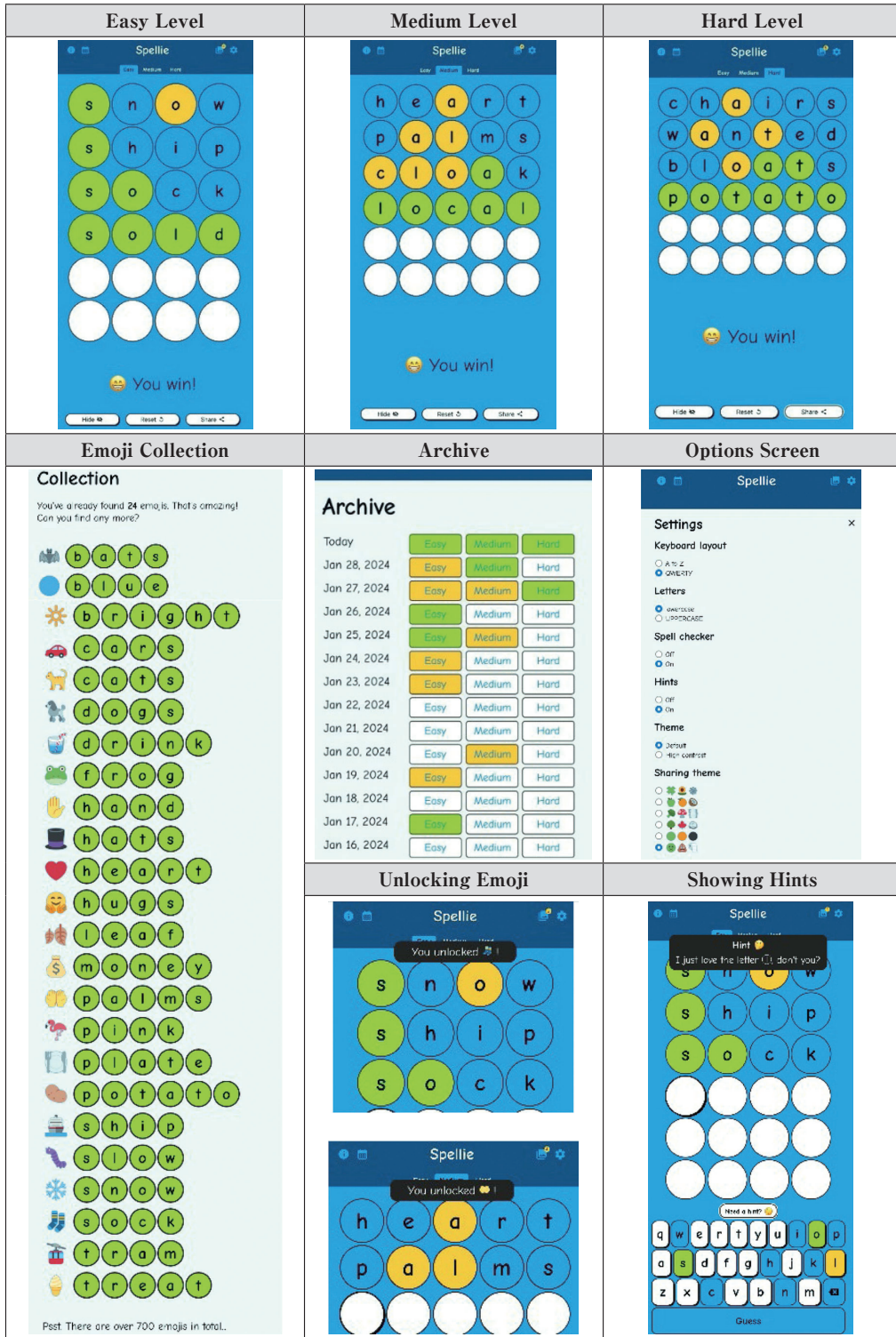
Future Projects & Conclusion

From its humble creation as a child friendly Wordle adaption, one can see that Spellie possesses potential for language learners as well (CBC News, 2022). Although small-scale, the English language learners surveyed in this study indicate Spellie's positive role in a language class. In addition to the metacognitive process detailed by the author in this paper, other areas for further exploration could include incorporating Spellie as a regular classroom or self-study tool. Could it enhance individual learning acting as a repetitive daily habit for individual learners? How would English language students respond if the game were to become a regular feature as a cooperative warm up activity? Would Spellie suit other reflection-based vocabulary study such as word journals or word-of-the-day activities? Whichever the method, explicit English vocabulary development should continue in language learning education. As Fisher and Frey (2014) remind us, "All learning is social; vocabulary instruction should leverage interactions between teacher, student, and text such that students are continually growing in their ability to describe, explain, and query." With the variety of online vocabulary word games available, players can choose the games which best suit them. For many teachers and English language learners, Spellie is certainly worth a try.

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Appendix A: Screenshots of Spellie



Appendix B: Idealized Classroom Scenario Demonstrating Metacognitive Process

Teacher	Hello class let's look at today's easy level word. How many letters is it?
Students	Four
Teacher	Yes, and what is the first-place letter? What letter is at the beginning?
All	S
Teacher	Good. Now, talk with your partner about the four-letter English words you know that begin with S. You can write your words on the memo paper. Ready? Go!
<i>Students talk quietly and write words on memo paper while teacher walks around the room listening for words and writing on the whiteboard.</i>	
Teacher	Ok class. I heard you say some words. What's this word (pointing to whiteboard)
All	Snow
Teacher	Good, and how about this word?
All	Soup
<i>Process continues until all words on the board are said by the class.</i>	
Teacher	Are there any other words I can write on the board?
Student 1	chef
Teacher	How do you spell the word?
Student 1	S-H-E-F
Teacher	Thank you for thinking of this word. I see why you spelled it this way. The word "chef" begins with a "sh" sound. However, the correct spelling is c-h-e-f. (writes on the whiteboard)
Student 1	Oh no! (laughing)
Teacher	No, don't feel bad. It's not the correct spelling, but it's the correct sound, "sh." There are many English words which begin with s in the first place and h in the second place. Class, what are some words we know that begin with sh?
<i>Students talk quietly and write words on memo paper while teacher walks around the room listening for words and writing on the whiteboard.</i>	
Teacher	I heard "shut" "ship" and "shal." (<i>Points to words on the whiteboard.</i>) We know "shut" means "close" like shut the window (<i>demonstrates closing the classroom window</i>). A ship is a very large boat (<i>shows an image on the projector</i>). We say "shall" when we suggest something. We can say "shall we eat lunch?" or "let's eat lunch." (<i>looks at whiteboard</i>) Oh no, look at the spelling. Two of these words are spelled correctly, and one word is not correct. Which word is incorrect? Talk with your partner.
<i>Students discuss in pairs</i>	
Teacher	Ok class. Is this word, "Shut" spelled correctly?
All	Yes.
Teacher	Yes, it's S-H-U-T. Where is the vowel? It is in the second place or third place?
All	Third place
Teacher	Yes. S and H are in the first and second places. Together they make the "sh" sound. So, the vowel will probably be in the third place. What is the vowel?

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All	U
Teacher	Yes, and sounds like “uh” . <i>Shuh</i> ...and a T in the fourth place. (<i>pronounces slowly and clearly</i>) <i>Sh -uhh-t</i> . Shut. Now, how about this word? Ship. Is it spelled correctly?
All	Yes.
Teacher	Good. Let's spell it together (<i>pointing to each letter</i>)
All	S-H-I-P
Teacher	Yes, and what sound does the “I” make? Is it like ice cream or like insect?
All	Insect
Teacher	Now, how about this word. S-H-A-L Is it spelled correctly? Yes or no?
All	No
Teacher	Tell me the mistake. Talk with your partner.
<i>Students discuss in pairs. Teacher monitors and guides when needed.</i>	
Teacher	Ok class, good discussions. This word has two Ls so the spelling is S-H-A-L-L. The easy level word only has four letters so we will not use this word. Now, let's type our first guess. How about SOAP? How do you spell it?
<i>Students spell the word while the teacher types. The colored feedback shows a green S, clear colored O and A and green P.</i>	
Teacher	So, we know the first letter is S and the fourth letter is P. We also know the vowels O and A are not used. Let's try a different vowel. Which words use E, I, or U?
<i>Students discuss.</i>	
Teacher	Good discussions. How about this word, SLIP? How do you spell it?
<i>Students spell the word while the teacher types it. The result shows a green S, clear colored L, green I and green P.</i>	
Teacher	Great! We know three letters now. The first letter is S, the third letter is I and fourth letter is P. So, which words on the board do you think we should try next?
<i>Students discuss while teacher monitor and circles possible words on the white board.</i>	
Teacher	Yes, many of us want to try an SH word. Should we try SHIP or SHUT? Who wants SHIP? How about SHUT?
<i>Students raise hands or shows thumbs up/ down gesture.</i>	
Teacher	It looks like most of us want “SHIP.” How do you spell it?
<i>Students spell the word while the teacher types it. The colored feedback indicates all green letters and “You win” appears on the screen. Teacher summarizes while pointing to whiteboard and screen.</i>	
Teacher	Wonderful class. We guessed the correct word in three tries! We know the first letter is S, so we guessed SOAP. We learned the first and fourth letters S and P were correct, but the second and third letters O and A were not used. We tried SLIP and we learned the vowel I in the third place was correct. Our final guess SHIP was correct.

Appendix C: Spellie Survey Questions (relevant to this study)

How did you like playing the Spellie game? (1 lowest – 5 highest)
Which features did you like about the Spellie game? (choose one or more) <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ There are various levels (easy-medium-hard)◆ There are new words every day◆ There are hints◆ There are pictures. I can collect emojis.◆ I can type and change my letters easily.◆ I can choose the keyboard layout (QWERTY or A-Z)
Would you like to continue playing the Spellie game in the future? (1 lowest – 5 highest)
How can Spellie help you to learn English? (choose one or more) <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ I can practice vocabulary◆ I can practice spelling◆ I can play with my friends and learn together◆ I can play by myself when I have free time.
Please write your suggestions or anything you would like to say about the Spellie game.

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