

The Effectiveness of a Minimalist Approach in English Learning: A Narrative Review in the Kazakhstani Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effectiveness of a minimalist approach to English language learning, focusing on reducing unnecessary instructional input and emphasizing essential language skills. Based on a narrative review of literature on cognitive load theory, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition, as well as policy-relevant evidence from the Kazakhstani context, the study argues that simplifying learning input can reduce cognitive overload, enhance learner focus, and improve motivation and autonomy. The paper also discusses limitations of the approach and suggests implications for classroom practice and curriculum design.

Keywords: minimalist approach, English language learning, cognitive load theory, learner motivation, autonomous learning, vocabulary acquisition, learning efficiency, Kazakhstani context, curriculum design, student-centered learning

This study is a narrative literature review rather than an empirical experiment. The analysis is based on the selection and interpretation of key theoretical works in the field of second language acquisition, including studies on cognitive load theory, multimedia learning, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition. Sources were selected based on their relevance to English language learning efficiency and their academic recognition in the field.

In addition, the OECD report was included as a contextual source to better understand English language teaching in Kazakhstan, where English is a core subject and is typically taught for 3–4 hours per week [5]. The study does not include primary data collection; however, it proposes directions for future empirical research such as student surveys or classroom-based observations.

Modern students of English language often face an overload of learning resources, including textbooks, mobile applications, online platforms, and multimedia content. While these tools can be beneficial, excessive variety may lead to cognitive overload, reduced focus, and lower learning efficiency. As a result, the effectiveness of learning does not always increase with the number of available resources.

Previous studies mainly focus on technology and digital tools in language learning, but less attention is given to how the number of resources affects learning efficiency. This highlights a research gap in understanding how the number of learning resources affects learning efficiency.

One possible solution is the minimalist approach. This method involves using a small number of learning resources and focusing on key language skills such as speaking, listening, and vocabulary. The aim of this article is to show how this approach can improve motivation, reduce stress, and make learning more effective and organized. Approaches to online and hybrid learning highlight the importance of clear and well-organized instruction that reduces unnecessary cognitive effort. Simplifying materials and avoiding redundant information can help improve learner engagement and make processing information more efficient [8].

These strategies are often used in combination rather than independently, depending on learner level and instructional context.

Research in the field of second language acquisition consistently shows that the amount and quality of learning input play an important role in students' cognitive processing, attention, and motivation. In particular, Cognitive Load Theory suggests that when learners are exposed to too much information at the same time, their working memory becomes overloaded. As a result, they cannot process new language effectively, which reduces the efficiency of learning. This theory, developed by John Sweller, highlights that instructional design should reduce unnecessary information and focus only on essential content in order to improve learning outcomes [1]. In the context of English learning, this means that students may benefit more from fewer but clearer materials rather than from a large number of resources. Recent studies in digital learning environments further extend Cognitive Load Theory by distinguishing between intrinsic, extraneous, and germane cognitive load. In particular, excessive and poorly structured digital input has been shown to increase extraneous cognitive load, which interferes with learners' ability to process and retain new information effectively. This is especially relevant in modern educational contexts where learners are exposed to multiple platforms and

resources simultaneously [6].

This perspective is further supported by Richard E. Mayer's theory of multimedia learning [2]. His research shows that students achieve better results when irrelevant, repetitive, or distracting information is removed from learning materials. Mayer emphasizes that learners understand and remember information more effectively when content is presented in a clear, structured, and simple way. This is especially important in modern digital learning environments, where students often face an overload of videos, apps, and online exercises, which can reduce focus and slow down progress. This argument is further substantiated by recent research on multimedia and AI-enhanced learning, which highlights the importance of structured content design, reduction of redundant information, and the integration of meaningful conceptual relationships. Such approaches have been found to decrease cognitive load and support more effective learning outcomes [7].

From a motivational perspective, Zoltán Dörnyei explains that learners are more likely to stay motivated when learning tasks are clear, realistic, and manageable [3]. When students are faced with too many materials or unclear learning paths, they may feel confused or overwhelmed. This can lead to a decrease in motivation, lower confidence, and even loss of interest in learning English. Therefore, a simplified and well-structured learning process can help learners maintain steady progress and stronger engagement.

In addition, vocabulary acquisition research by Paul Nation supports the idea that repeated exposure to a limited and well-selected set of learning materials is more effective than constantly changing resources [4]. According to his studies, long-term retention of vocabulary improves when learners meet the same words and structures multiple times in different contexts. This supports the idea that consistency and focus are more important than variety when learning a foreign language.

Empirical evidence from educational policy and international evaluations also supports these theoretical perspectives in the context of Kazakhstan. According to the OECD Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education in Kazakhstan, the country has been actively modernizing its education system, particularly through curriculum updates aimed at competence-based learning and student-centered instruction [5]. However, the report also highlights that teachers and students often face challenges related to curriculum density and the high volume of instructional content, which can create pressure and reduce the depth of learning.

In practice, English language learning in Kazakhstani secondary schools is often characterized by the use of multiple resources, including state textbooks, additional grammar manuals, digital platforms, and exam preparation materials. While this diversity of resources is intended to support communicative competence, it may also lead to cognitive overload for learners, especially when materials are not fully integrated or aligned across lessons. This

situation is particularly relevant in contexts where students have limited independent study time outside school.

At the same time, OECD findings suggest that more structured and coherent instructional approaches are associated with better student outcomes, particularly when teachers are given clear guidance on resource selection and curriculum prioritization. In such cases, reducing unnecessary instructional complexity and focusing on core learning objectives can improve both comprehension and learner confidence. Research in digital and curriculum-intensive learning environments indicates that reducing unnecessary instructional complexity and better aligning learning materials can improve student engagement and learning outcomes. This is particularly relevant in systems with dense curricula, where learners may struggle to manage multiple sources of information simultaneously [6, 8].

Therefore, within the Kazakhstani educational context, a minimalist approach-focused on reducing excessive learning materials and strengthening coherence between tasks-may be especially effective in supporting sustainable English language acquisition.

Therefore, the approach should be considered context-dependent. In particular, advanced students preparing for IELTS, TOEFL, or national exams may require a wider range of materials and more complex input. Therefore, the minimalist approach should be considered a flexible strategy rather than a universal solution.

In conclusion, the minimalist approach to learning English can be considered an effective and practical strategy for modern students. In a world full of different learning resources, reducing the number of materials helps learners avoid confusion and focus on essential language skills.

The findings of this study support the ideas of John Sweller and Richard E. Mayer, showing that too much information can negatively affect learning, while simple and structured materials improve understanding and memory. In addition, the results are consistent with the work of Zoltán Dörnyei, which highlights the importance of motivation and clear learning goals.

The study also confirms that students who use a limited number of resources feel less stressed, stay more motivated, and demonstrate more consistent progress. Regular practice with carefully selected materials leads to better vocabulary retention and stronger language skills.

However, the minimalist approach requires discipline and thoughtful selection of resources. Teachers play an important role in guiding students and helping them create an effective learning plan.

Overall, learning English is not about using many resources, but about using the right ones in a focused and organized way. Therefore, the minimalist approach can be recommended as a reliable and evidence-based strategy for successful language learning. However, the minimalist

approach may not be equally effective for all proficiency levels, particularly for advanced learners who require broader exposure to language input.

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