

The Perceptions of KUIM's (Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia) First Year Undergraduates in Learning English Using 'Tell Me More' Software

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF KUIM (KOLEJ UNIVERSITI ISLAM MALAYSIA) FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATES ON LEARNING ENGLISH USING ‘TELL ME MORE’ SOFTWARE

ABSTRACT

The use of technology in language learning has expanded rapidly worldwide during the last few decades. Studies on the effects of technology-enhanced instruction on achievement and studies on students' attitudes regarding learning with technology have also increasingly been reported (Salaberry, 2001). Technology includes computer-mediated communication via email, incorporated task-based Internet activities, interactive publisher-produced CD-ROM, interactive software, threaded discussions and many others. This paper focuses on the perceptions of students at Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia (KUIM) towards learning English as a second language using 'Tell Me More' software. This software has been used in KUIM for many years and for the past few semesters, it has been made compulsory for all first year undergraduates to self-access the software for at least an hour per week. Various feedbacks were received but most of the responses were positive. Most of the respondents favoured learning English using the software, but they still preferred conventional classroom English lessons.

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology in language teaching has been expanded rapidly in the last few years. Many ESL (English as a second language) instructors nowadays use technology in their classrooms such as computer-mediated communication via email, incorporated task-based Internet activities, interactive publisher-produced CD-ROM, interactive software, threaded discussions and many others. Many studies on the effects of technology on achievement and students attitudes regarding learning with technology have been reported (Salaberry, 2001). This paper reports on a survey of students' perceptions towards learning English using an interactive software TELL ME MORE (TMM). More specifically, it reports on the first year university students' perceptions on learning English independently using TMM self-access interactive software.

A number of advantages for students related to the general use of technology in classrooms have been reported. These include increased motivation, improvement in self concept and mastery of basic skills, more student-centered learning and engagement in the learning process (Stepp-Greany, 2002). Additionally, there seems to be a beneficial multimedia effect, especially for low achieving students, when it is used to illustrate concepts and organize factual information (Nowaczyk, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Verbal Interaction

According to Liaw (1997), teachers should offer English language learners a language-rich environment in which students are constantly engaged in language activities. Children need to be able to interact with each other so that learning through communication can occur. Computers can facilitate this type of environment. The computer can act as a tool to increase verbal exchange.

In a study conducted by Liaw (1997), computer books were used to investigate whether computers increase verbal interaction between students. These computer books are interactive stories that appear on the computer screen as an actual book with text and illustrations. There are also a variety of interactive choices students can use to read the story, including: real voices that read aloud, music, and sound effects. The story is also highlighted so readers can follow along with the text.

This study was conducted by recording student interactions while using the computer books. Students were arranged in groups of three to read the stories. Their types of speech used with each other were analyzed. Even though the children had limited English language proficiency, they engaged in various modes of language functions to accomplish their reading of the computer books. They made many comments to each other. They also shared opinions and made suggestions. The quality of talk was also analyzed by Liaw (1997). The amount of computer related talk and story related talk was measured. Initially, there was a lot of computer related talk, but as the students became more familiar with the format of the stories and software, their talk became story related in subsequent sessions.

Overall, the study concluded that verbal interaction and the use of a variety of language functions by English language learners can be facilitated by the use of the computer. The group's computer book reading environment fostered language development by providing an opportunity for verbal interaction. The use of the computer can be a useful supplement to the traditional curriculum of the ELL classroom by promoting verbal communication and the acquisition of English.

Vocabulary

One way to use computers for English Language Learners is to teach vocabulary. Kang and Dennis (1995) write, "Any attempt to treat vocabulary learning as learning of isolated facts certainly will not promote real vocabulary knowledge". Students need to learn vocabulary in context and with visual clues to help them understand. Computers can provide this rich, contextual environment. The computer also allows students to become active learners in a one-on-one environment. Computers can incorporate various learning strategies as well as accommodate a variety of learning styles.

Kang and Dennis (1995) conducted a study to determine whether or not the use of computer facilitates the vocabulary development of beginning English language learners. The type of studies done by the students was definitions, picture and context. At the end of the study, Kang and Dennis concluded that learning a language using computer does help to improve the students' vocabulary development.

Reading Skills

Computer software and games provide many fun opportunities for students to practice literacy skills. There are numerous software packages for improving spelling, phonics skills, grammar and sight word vocabulary.

When English Language Learners are learning their second language, any and all language experiences are valuable to assist in reading ability. There are several ways in which technology can be used to improve reading ability. Most simple reading texts are also very primary in content. Computers can increase the interest of students.

Another benefit of using computers for reading instruction is that the computer offers immediate feedback on performance. They also can provide added practice when necessary. According to Case and Truscott (in Ybarra and Green, 2003), students have been able to improve their sight word vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Computer based reading instruction also allows for "increased interaction with texts, attention to individual needs, and increased independence through an ability to read texts they would not otherwise be able to read."

Writing Skills

As demonstrated, computers and software can help English language learners develop vocabulary skills and knowledge. Computers can also help ELL students develop their writing skills. Lewis (in Ybarra and Green, 2003) recommends that composition for beginning learners should be a guided activity so students do not become frustrated. Writing paragraphs in a language that is still somewhat unfamiliar to students can be difficult. When using a computer, however, the use of graphics can make this much more enjoyable. Using clip art can also help students to convey their thoughts more clearly.

Mireia Trenchs (in Ybarra & Green, 2003) performed a case study of three students learning Spanish as their second language. The study was done in New York City. Trenchs used electronic mail as a medium of instruction to improve writing in the students' second language, in this case, Spanish. Students voluntarily engaged in e-mail transmissions with Trenchs. They were not graded on their messages, nor were their participation mandatory at all. The goal was to allow students to improve their writing skills in a way that is communicative and a part of their everyday lives.

Trenchs ultimately discovered that using electronic mail as a supplement to the classroom curriculum can be effective. The students voluntarily used the e-mail. They were self-motivated to use their new language in a new and creative way for them. One of the

benefits of using electronic mail included the scrolling feature that allowed the students to view the incoming message and use its structure as a model for creating a response. The scrolling feature also allowed students to easily edit and revise. The major benefit of using e-mail as a language learning activity is the fact that students are using meaningful language and authentic text.

According to Lewis (1997), grammar skills can also be demonstrated and reinforced using computers. The teacher can direct students to somehow highlight a specific part of speech (e.g. nouns) throughout their writing. To highlight, students have a lot of choices, such as underlining, italicizing, or changing the font size, color or type. Using a computer as a medium for studying grammar is much more motivating for a student as opposed to writing with a pencil.

Description of TELL ME MORE Language Software

TMM is Europe's best selling language software used by major schools, universities and corporations. TMM is a complete learning solution with 200 hours of material and over 1000 exercises per level, multimedia video and sound and state-of-the-art speech recognition. TMM speech recognition technology recognizes what one says, assesses the pronunciation and corrects any mistakes. This software is suitable for all levels from Level 1 for beginner to Level 3 for advanced. It addresses all the skills in language teaching – reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar and culture.

TMM also offers oral practice in using English providing language activities which require students to communicate with each other. Situational, functional and structural emphases all have their place in the book in an environment of interactive learning in which students are encouraged to develop their skills and abilities in the transferring of information and opinions between themselves using the target language as the medium for this communication.

THE STUDY

At the end the first semester 2006/2007, a questionnaire on students perceptions towards learning English using TMM interactive software was administered to students enrolled in the first semester English language proficiency course. The questionnaire was adapted from Stepp-Greany (2002). The total of 41 students completed the questionnaire.

The study was designed to elicit answers to the following questions:

1. Were the lab and the software accessible and useful to students?
2. What was the perceived effect on language skills?
3. Did the students enjoy the TMM activities?
4. Did students perceive that they gained confidence as a learner and gained technical skills?

The questionnaire contained 30 statements with which students were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed. These statements elicited information about students' perceptions on a) the use of computer lab, b) the effects (benefits) of TMM on language skills, c) the effects of TMM on students interest and enjoyment of learning English d) the effect of TMM on students' technical skills and confidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the purposes of this paper, data are reported in numbers and percentages of students' responses for each statement, as shown in the tables.

Perceptions Concerning Access to Lab and Computers

Most students (65.71%) agreed that they had adequate access to a computer. Additionally, they seemed to prefer a lab environment, with over 80% reporting that they liked the learning environment of a regularly scheduled lab. About 60% expressed a desire to do all the activities at their own computer without any lab access. Less than 69% expressed a preference for having access to the lab at any time, without any scheduled lab.

NO.	STATEMENT	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	Access to the lab or to a computer was adequate.	0	0.0	4	11.43	23	65.71	8	22.86
2.	I liked the learning environment of having a regular scheduled lab period.	0	0.0	0	0.0	28	80.0	7	20.0
3.	I would prefer the flexibility of being able to do all the activities at my own computer without any sessions in the lab.	1	2.86	13	37.14	20	57.14	1	2.86
4.	I would prefer the flexibility of not having a regular lab period, but of being able to go to lab at any time to do the required activities.	1	2.86	10	28.57	21	60.0	3	8.57

Table 1 : Students' Perceptions Concerning Access to Lab & Computers

Perceptions Concerning Effects of TMM on Learning

Time Invested Only 28.57% of the students felt that they invested more time on the technology-enhanced course than they would have in a regular English class. Majority

(71.43%) would prefer a regular English class. This is due to the reason that the students were still new to learning using technology and they were not really geared up to it. After all, this was the first time they learn English using interactive software. Perhaps more time is needed for them to get used to this new idea.

Learning Culture Almost 74.28% of the students perceived that they had learned more about English culture from the software than they would have in a regular class and that the information from the lab activities contributed greatly to their knowledge of English culture (97.14%).

Communication Skills Students seemed to believe that the lab activities were beneficial to their communicative skills. Majority of the students agreed that their listening and reading skills had improved in English as a result of the lab activities (88.57%)

Value of Specific Components In response to questions about the learning benefits of specific components, majority of the students (94.29%) believed that they had learned a significant amount from the interactive software.

Writing Skills Only 54.29% of the students believed that their writing skills had improved when evaluating the general effect of technology-enhanced instruction on writing skills. Another 45.71% students did not feel that they had improved their writing skills at all. Perhaps, this is due to the reason that the students had more practice on other skills (reading, speaking and listening) than writing.

Reading Skills As for the reading skills, about 88.57% of the students perceived that they have improved their reading skills in English as a result of the lab activities. On the other hand, only 11.43% did not improve their reading skills.

Grammar and Vocabulary More than 80% of the students believed that the information from the lab activities contributed greatly to their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. Most of them had very little exposure to English as a second language due to the reason that their major area is Arabic language. Hence, after dealing with this software for one semester, they have made some improvement.

NO.	STATEMENT	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5.	I put more time into this class than I would have invested in a regular English class.	0	0.0	25	71.43	10	28.57	0	0.0
6.	My listening skills in English improved as a result of the lab activities.	0	0.0	4	11.43	27	77.14	4	11.43
7.	The information from the lab activities contributed greatly to my knowledge about English culture.	0	0.0	1	2.86	27	77.14	7	20.0

8.	I learned more about English culture in this class than I would have learned in a regular English class.	0	0.0	9	25.72	13	37.14	13	37.14
9.	My reading skills in English improved as a result of the activities.	10	0.0	4	11.43	26	74.28	5	14.29
10.	I learned a lot from the interactive software.	0	0.0	2	5.71	28	80.0	5	14.29
11.	My writing skills in English improved as a result of the activities.	10	0.0	16	45.71	19	54.29	0	0.0
12.	I learned more English language skills than I would have learned in a regular English course.	0	0.0	7	20.0	25	71.43	3	8.57
13.	The information from the lab activities contributed greatly to my knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary.	0	0.0	6	17.14	24	68.57	5	14.29

Table 2 : Students' Perception Concerning the Effects of TMM on Learning

Perceptions Concerning Students' Interest and Enjoyment of Learning English

More than 97% of the students agreed that the computer lab made the course interesting and they seemed to enjoy the lab sessions. This is due to the reason that the lab sessions were a totally different from a conventional classroom environment. Hence, having a different environment made them feel better and enjoyed the sessions.

Majority of the students (91.43%) found the interactive software to be enjoyable. This is not surprising because TMM software has all the features that this group of students required to improve their English. Furthermore, learning using this software is also new to them, so it is a change for them to escape from the usual classroom environment which uses textbooks.

NO.	STATEMENT	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
14.	The learning experience in the computer lab made this a more interesting course.	0	0.0	1	2.86	27	77.14	7	20.0
15.	I enjoyed the interactive software.	0	0.0	3	8.57	24	68.57	8	22.86

Table 3 : Students' Perceptions Concerning Students' Interest and Enjoyment of Learning English

Perceptions Concerning Effects of TMM on Students' Technical Skills and Confidence

In terms of technical skills, learning using technology may also contribute to students' ability to be familiar with the computer. As a result of learning English using TMM, 92.57% of the students believed that they gained technical skills on the computer. Hence, this leads to their confidence in using technology. About 91.43% of the students believed that they gained confidence in their ability to use the technology successfully.

Learning English using this software also enable students to gain their confidence in terms of dealing with the activities. From the survey, 88.57% of the students perceived that they have gained confidence in their ability to do the activities in the software.

In addition learning English using this software also enable the students to learn independently. As this software is a self-access software, they are supposed to explore all the activities on their on. From the survey, 88.57% of the students believed that they have gained confidence in their abilities as an independent learner.

NO.	STATEMENT	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
16.	I gained confidence in my ability to do the activities.	0	0.0	4	11.43	25	71.43	6	17.14
17.	I gained confidence in my abilities as an independent learner.	0	0.0	4	11.43	31	88.57	0	0.0
18.	I gained technical skills on the computer as a result of this course.	0	0.0	4	11.43	26	74.28	5	14.29
19.	I gained confidence in my ability to use technology successfully.	0	0.0	3	8.57	27	77.14	5	14.29
20.	I was initially frustrated by having to learn to use the computer components.	5	14.29	15	42.85	14	40.0	1	2.86

Table 4 : Students' Perceptions Concerning the Effects of TMM on Students' Technical Skills and Confidence

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has illustrated the perceptions of a group of university students about learning English using interactive software. These were the beginning language learners who perhaps had limited English skills as well as limited motivation and performance. The students' perceptions regarding the effect of using this software on their learning of English requires follow up study.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that using the Tell Me More software has positively affected the students in terms of improving their language skills, level of grammar and vocabulary as well as their technical skills and confidence level.

Besides that learning English using this software is very new in this institution and perhaps this can be a platform in which the instructors need to discuss in order to improve the lab sessions for the following semesters. Whatever that is lacking, need to be improved and upgraded to enable students to learn better.

This study has several limitations. The information is merely survey and the factors that may influence student perceptions such as students' ability, prior experience with technology and personality background were not considered. Nevertheless, since little research is available on student perceptions about language learning using a variety of multimedia, this study may provide insights to other institutions currently implementing the implementation of technology enhanced instruction.

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