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Integrating E-Learning Portal in ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia has adopted communicative approach and e-learning in language teaching and learning to empower the students with an ability to communicate in situations. Nevertheless, English language is still considered a major problem for students to master, specifically communication skills. This study investigated the potential impacts of integrating e-learning portal in ESL classroom. 20 students from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu were involved in a task demanding them to complete an oral presentation via e-learning portal. Students were tasked to integrate all the knowledge gathered from the e-learning portal and project their creativity during their oral presentation assignment. Active participation and interaction were requested during the oral presentation. From the study, it was found that the students overall had a positive perception towards using technological tools to aid their language learning. This study indicated that the integration of technology such as the e-learning portal with English language facilitated the language learning process and transformed the traditional passive experience to a new exciting experience in a non-threatening learning environment. The study revealed that the integration of e-learning portal in a communicative learning environment could reduce students' psychological hindrance to enable them to express their opinions freely and to communicate actively with others using English language. Thus, this innovative venture in teaching and learning of language is able to enhance students' language proficiency, problem-solving and communication skills.

Keywords: technology, learning portal, e-learning, communication skills.

Introduction

In the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) English language has no longer become a need, but a necessity. English language has been widely used all over the world as a channel of information delivery and the demand for good communication skills in the English language has increased significantly the responsibility of the English language teacher. Richards (2006) stated that the ever growing need for good communication skills in English has created a huge demand for English teaching around the world, as millions of people today want to improve their command of English or ensure that their children achieve a good command of English. The global demand for English has formed an immense mandate for creative, innovative and quality language teaching and language teaching materials and resources. Therefore, the Malaysian government has put on serious attention in implementing and injecting the use of ICT in the country's educational system. The development of many infrastructures to support E-learning, teaching and learning softwares as well as technological teaching aids has been their main concern. Further, teaching institutions have shifted the teaching method of English to using technological tools as many researches emphasize on the effectiveness of the integration. Technology and ICT should now be seen as the integral parts of education

(Laborda & Royo, 2007) to act as potential remedies in improving the Malaysian students' deteriorating standard of English.

E-learning can be defined as the use of computer network technology, primarily over an intranet or through the Internet, to deliver information and instruction to individuals. Rosenberg (2001) stated that e-learning refers to any system that 'generates and disseminates information and is designed to improve performance'. Govindasamy (2002) mentioned that normally e-learning includes most kinds of electronically supported learning and teaching. Khan (2001) revealed that web-based learning, Internet-based learning, and computer-based learning are all frequently used terms for e-learning. More precisely, e-learning encompasses both Internet-based learning and computer-based learning, which consist of components of online learning.

Additionally, Hallkett (2002), described e-learning as a modern method in learning where the norm of knowledge transfer from teaching to learning has changed. E-learning provides ample opportunities for learners to improve knowledge and skill through internet and computer networks. Learners use the online learning environments not only to get information pertaining to the course content, but also as a site to interact with other participants (Pramela & Bee Eng Wong, 2009). Nevertheless, Noraien et al. (2013) revealed that e-learning portal is a less popular tool compared to other social media as the students' (secondary school) view on using a learning portal for language learning purpose was negatively demonstrated by the total number of visits. Apparently Hennessy et al. (2010), Means et al. (2010), Farrell and Isaacs (2007), and Hare (2007) caution that there is as yet insufficient data or clear trends to make solid conclusions about the impact of e-learning on language learning. Therefore, this study is conducted with further enhancement of the elements involved in the e-learning portal to allow students (university students) to communicate well under friendly and less-pressured setting. The main objective is to explore the impacts of integrating communicative approach and technology in ESL classroom.

Literature Review

The advanced development in ICT provides numerous methods in language teaching and learning. Computers are great new ventures to browse out for information on the net (Johnson & Eisenberg, 2006). Researchers like Kern & Warschauer (2000) claimed that computer networking places a concrete medium for meaningful communication. They stress that learners' language communication skills can be enhanced in many unique ways through the implementation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and communicative language teaching.

Kozma (2005) stated that specific applications of ICT can positively impact student knowledge, skills and attitudes, as well as teaching practices, school innovation, and community services. The concept of e-learning integration into an educational system begins with the teacher and the ways in which teachers teach. A teacher deciding to use technology needs to consider how it may provide a solution to a particular problem of practice they have within their learning environment. ICT can impact student learning when teachers are digitally literate and trained to use ICT as well as creative in teaching approaches. Thus the integration of ICT and communicative language teaching (CLT) is seen to be able to lead students to higher order thinking skills, provide creative and individualized options for students to express their understandings, and leave students better prepared to deal with ongoing technological change in society and the workplace.

Haddad and Draxler (2002) conducted a research in the UK and Africa and they identified two main reasons why teachers use ICT in the classroom. The teachers felt that their own use of computers benefited their learners and their learners also benefited from

using computers themselves. The learners were seen to gain confidence, self-esteem and renewed motivation. Further, they categorized technology use in the classroom at five levels namely presentation, demonstration, drill and practice, interaction and collaboration. They noted that when the pedagogy shifted from a teacher-centered classroom environment to a more learner-centered environment, the effectiveness of ICT was enhanced.

E-learning initiatives created a variety of learning alternatives which go beyond the traditional classroom settings. Johnson, Hornik and Salas (2008) define those initiatives as "training or educational initiatives which provide learning material in online repositories, where course interaction and communication and course delivery are technology mediated". In this context, e-learning initiatives continue to grow as they expand into a wide range of educational needs, with a variety of teaching and learning modes, approaches and styles, underlining the broad range of both its use and complexity (Ozkan, Koseler, & Baykal, 2008).

The evaluation of e-learning initiatives is not a straightforward process as there are many factors contribute to the success of e-learning systems. E-learning environment should provide innovative learning opportunities, thus extending the traditional learning approaches. The learners should be in control and responsible of the learning process. Therefore a multidimensional approach is needed and equal attention should be emphasised in the evolution from theoretical foundations to practical implications during the assessment of e-learning effectiveness.

On the other hand, Fullan (1999) noted that when the culture within a school does not support e-learning, the culture usually wins out. Teachers usually face challenges when beginning to use e-learning such as the lack of support by administrators, technical support problems, technology breakdowns, and a lack of the necessary technological tools. Nevertheless, when there is a collaborative and supportive work culture the opportunities to make a difference in both teacher and student learning are high. Therefore, it is advantageous to diagnose the need for an effective change transformation program combined with e-learning implementation to address the barriers and challenges transpired.

Thus, while teaching a language, a teacher is supposed to select learning activities in such a way as to engage learners in meaningful and authentic language use (Richards and Rogers 1986). These kinds of classroom activities actually bring the student into the focus of learning, which was not the case in earlier language teaching methods, supporting the model of a teacher-centred classroom (Al-Mutawa & Kailani 1989). It is active participation instead of passive reception which distinguishes communicative learning from traditional lecturing.

Methodology

This study was conducted at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu involving 20 students from Business Communication Course conducted by the researcher. They were divided into four groups with five members in each group. They were tasked to complete an oral presentation and develop a video to be uploaded in the e-learning portal within the duration of four weeks. Their assignment should include all the elements in the educational pages published in the e-learning portal. Apart from that, students were encouraged to have daily interaction with their peers via the forum section focusing on the task-related activity as well as non-task related activity. An interview session was held with each group to elicit their experience and opinions completing an assignment via e-learning portal. This study attempts to provide the students' perceptions on the usage of technology in ESL language learning classroom. The students were exposed to variety of

technological tools to help them enhance English proficiency and the data related were gathered for further discussion.

E-Learning Portal

E-learning portal was developed in accordance to the activity's needs. It is a site where students can visit to improve their English language knowledge. The site was only accessible by the students of Business Communication Course and the students were given full access to it using the password provided.

The portal consists of several main educational pages:

   a.   Activities page consists of two parts; Vocabulary and Idioms.
   b.   Let's Talk page displays English basic social conversations for different settings and occasions.
   c.   Homework/Forum page displays important announcements and assignments for the students to refer to as well as for students' discussion.
   d.   My Video section embeds interesting educational English videos.
   Materials were uploaded every week and the students were informed to visit the site to check on new added materials and any related issues can be discussed in the forum page. This learning portal was seen as a significant tool for the students to acquire language skills and it also exposed the students to essential skills for independent learning.

Results and Discussions

This study revealed a positive perception on e-learning portal provided for the students to complete their assignment. All the four groups agreed that e-learning portal has a great impact on their learning experience and has a significant role in instruction of students in higher education. They agreed due to several reasons:

G1:   *…it is a very interesting activity and we feel motivated to complete our assignment…can improve our communication skills…*

G2:   *All the pages in the learning portal are very interesting…we can communicate freely…not afraid to talk…*

G3:   *…we like this activity where we can improve our language structure, vocabulary…we can learn the social expressions…*

G4:   *this portal gave us the opportunity to talk through the forum place…we have great discussion amongst all the students…*

All the groups have different perceptions when asked about the most interesting educational pages of the learning portal.

G1:   *let's talk page is very interesting…the dialogues relate to our everyday conversation…sometimes we tend to forget to communicate politely and even it is a simple social expression we don't know when or where to use it…*

G2:   *well we can improve our vocab and learn more about interesting idioms…very interesting…very good for our oral presentation or communication*

G3:   *…we really love the videos…we enjoy watching all the videos and from the videos we learn a lot especially the moral values behind the story…*

G4:   *emmm we love the forum page where we can discuss freely on our task …we can talk and argue and we can get many views from all the students…*

From the observation, students actively interacted with each other when new materials were uploaded every week. The interaction specifically focused on the task they were assigned as well as comments and sharing of ideas on the materials published. The interaction and discussion prove that the students put great emphasis in completing the assigned tasks. Also, a noticeable aspect of collaborative learning was seen to take place when the students shared their insights on the matters pertaining to the assignments given. As for non-related task interaction, students tend to share information and social wishes among them with positive feedbacks.

It can be concluded that e-learning portal provide a non-threatening environment for language learning as the students communicate well under friendly and less-pressured setting. Additionally, most students were provided with ample opportunity to participate in the discussion. Thus, it helps increase student's language proficiency. Further, the students claim that they enjoy communicating with peers using the learning portal and technology has helped learning becomes even more interesting.

Apparently the e-learning portal have increased students interest towards learning English language as they were exposed to more opportunities to use the language as well as participate in an interactive way. They assert that technology level lowers their anxiety level, thus motivate them to participate in the discussions held as it lowers their anxiety level. In other words, it boosts their confidence to use English language more in daily communication. More importantly, they are able to construct meaningful sentences with appropriate vocabulary, tenses as well as using idioms learnt.

Conclusion

E-learning portal has brought vast changes to the lives of students and teachers as technology assures optimistic future for language teaching and learning. In fact, many educators and researches believe that when endless efforts are put to integrate technology in ESL classrooms, teaching and learning of language would be well developed. With upcoming researches and advancement of technology in the future, technological tools will function as the aids for language teachers to design more stimulating and effective lesson plans. Subsequently, the research shows that learners gain educational benefits from the technology as learning becomes more relaxed and spontaneous. Thus, active participation from teachers or language instructors is very crucial to ensure that the existing technology will be fully utilized for the benefits of ESL learners.

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