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ACCOMMODATING LOW PROFICIENCY ESL STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING NEEDS THROUGH AN ONLINE WRITING SUPPORT SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This article shares the personal experiences of a teacher–researcher (TR) in accommodating the language learning needs of a group of low proficiency English as Second Language (ESL) undergraduates at a local public university in Malaysia through the introduction of an online writing support system. Research studies have shown that low proficiency ESL students lack motivation and determination towards improving their language proficiency, especially their writing skills (Hsu & Chuen, 2008). Hence, they need to be supported in their language learning processes. In order to find appropriate ways to do this, the TR conducted a needs analysis survey to gather information about their language needs. The data analysis revealed that students found writing to be the most difficult and complex skill to master among the four language skills. Thus, to help them, the TR designed an online writing support system using the e-learning platform of the university to support them. In relation to this, this paper will first report on the findings obtained from the needs analysis and then explain how the online writing support system will help to cater to these needs.

Keywords: e-learning; needs analysis; writing proficiency; low proficiency ESL learners; online writing support system

INTRODUCTION

English is a global language that is universally acknowledged as one of the major lingua franca of the world. In the Malaysian educational context, English is taught as a second language. It has been observed that although Malaysian students have between 11 to 13 years of exposure to formal English lessons in schools, their command of the language is still far from satisfactory. Chong, Tan and Mardziah (2011) revealed in their study that a growing number of Malaysian students are unable to produce coherent utterances or written text in English. Institutions of higher learning in Malaysia who are the main receptors of these students are

facing the problem of helping these students improve their English language proficiency to a level required for successful academic pursuits (Chan & Yap, 2010). This is an alarming situation which needs to be addressed, as Malaysia is a developing nation aspiring to be a key player in the global business world.

In view of the above problems, Malaysian public universities have been conducting English language courses to help improve the standard of English among their undergraduates. In the case of the teacher researcher (TR)'s university, a variety of additional English language courses including a language clinic were conducted by the language school for the undergraduates. At the same time the university requires that the students pass four units of English in order to graduate. Despite these efforts, students' response has been lukewarm and various excuses were given by them. They mainly complained that finding time to attend the language clinic and the extra language classes was difficult as these clashed with their regular classes. The TR was interested to find out whether this problem could be solved if the activities are offered to them online. Towards this end the TR embarked on a study to design an online platform that will meet the undergraduates' English language learning needs in the given university environment. This paper will discuss the findings of a needs analysis conducted in relation to the study and relate them to the learning design of the intended online platform .

REVIEW OF PAST STUDIES ON ONLINE LEARNING

Online technology has been found to be effective in language learning among local Malaysian undergraduates due to its interactive features. Nadzrah, Hafizah and Azizah (2010) found that the use of blogs via the online discussion board in an English course among low English proficiency undergraduates at a local university enabled shy learners to express themselves via writing and make meaningful contributions on the blogs thereby enhancing their confidence level. Similarly, an action research study using blogs conducted by Zaini, Kemboja and Supyan (2010), reported that undergraduates benefitted from the blogging activity which helped to improve their writing proficiency.

Related to these studies, Thang and Bidmeshki (2010) found that an online ESP course had a positive impact on students levels of motivation and autonomy. In addition, Tam, Kan and Ng (2010) revealed that a computer-mediated environment is ideal for low proficiency learners who lack confidence using English in the face-to-face setting. Similarly, Hsu and Chuen (2008) reported that low proficiency undergraduates benefitted significantly from a supplementary website. They responded positively and were motivated to learn English via the online learning facility. Apart from boosting students' confidence and motivation levels, online tools have also led students to be more independent learners as reported by Pramela, Supyan and Sivapuniam (2011) in their study on the use of online forums (OLFs) to conduct discussions outside the formal classroom.

Elsewhere, Recep and Aysel, (2010) reported that university students in Turkey participated in online writing activities via the learner and tutor blogs. The students were given the flexibility of

selecting materials to work on, thus ensuring the element of independent learning in that process. This indirectly cultivates a sense of autonomy and increases success in writing. Likewise, Kessler and Bikowski (2012) found that the use of collaborative wiki project with a group of Mexican university students improved the quality of writing, increased levels of motivation and group ownership among team-members.

The literature review as reported above suggests that an online writing support system will help support language learning especially among low proficiency ESL learners. Inspired by this knowledge the TR endeavours to develop an online writing support system tailored to the needs of the ESL learners at the university she currently teaches.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

The respondents for this study were selected from among first year undergraduates from various fields of discipline, namely Social sciences, Art & Design, Humanities, and Computer Sciences. These students obtained Bands 1 and 2 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), where the former is classified as “Extremely Limited User” and the latter as “Limited User”. These students were enrolled in the Preparatory English Course (LMT 100) in the first semester as offered by the language school. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed but only 138 questionnaires were returned. However, only 80 questionnaires were used for the purpose of analysis.

Research instrument

The research instrument used in this study is a needs analysis questionnaire administered to all students from the LMT 100 Preparatory English Course. The questionnaire is used to obtain relevant information regarding the English language needs, their problems and challenges faced in learning English and also their suggestions and ways for improving their command of English. It is divided into three main sections. Section 1 consists of questions on personal background of the respondents. The second section consists of five questions, which requires students to rank the language skills according to the level of importance, level of difficulty, steps for improvement, interesting ways to learn English and it ends with an open-ended question requesting information on the use of technology and internet resources in the language classroom. This is followed by the third section which comprises 20 multiple-choice questions requesting students’ views and perceptions on the four language skills. The four-level Likert scale requires the students to rate the statements from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data as reported and discussed in the following section.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Out of the 80 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 27.5% (22) are male and 72.5% (58) are female; 21% (17) of the students are in the category of MUET Band 1 and the remaining 79% (63) belong to MUET Band 2.

Table 1 below reports on students' responses to the five items enquired in Section 2.

Table 1: Students' responses to the questionnaire

QUESTIONS	BAND 1(B1)	BAND 2(B2)
1. Which is the most important skill in learning English?	Writing-59% Speaking-41%	Writing-56% Speaking-44%
2. Which task is the most challenging in learning English?	Writing essays in English-47%	Writing essays in English-44%
3.3 Steps to improve English proficiency	Discuss with English teacher-70.5% Consult friend - 41% Use internet resources - 41%	Discuss with English teacher-68.2% Use internet resources-48% Language clinic-38%
4. Interesting ways of learning English	Small group discussions-70.5% Online language activities and resources-47% Language games-35%	Small group discussions-65% Language games-49.2% Online language activities and resources-49%
5. Can the use of technology and internet resources help improve your English proficiency skills?	Yes -100%	Yes-100%

As revealed in questions 1 and 2 of Table 1, both Bands 1 and 2 (B1 & B2) students viewed the writing skill as being the most important and the most challenging task in learning English. This is followed closely by the speaking skill. Thus, it would appear that these students' major problems are productive skills. Responses to question 3 indicates that these students considered teachers' support to be of prime importance as shown by the high scores of 70.5% for B1 and 68.2% for B2. This reaffirms the need for teachers to be actively involved in supporting these learners' language learning processes.

Both groups of students indicated the use of internet resources as a useful means to improve their English proficiency. This confirmation lends support to the TR's belief that the introduction of an online support system will be an effective way to support them.

However, a slightly different trend is noticed in the responses to question 4. The students from both B1 (70.5%) and B2 (68.2%) perceived small group discussions to be the most interesting way to learn. This is followed by preference for “online language activities & resources” and “language games”. Students’ interest in the use of technology is further supported by the responses to the fifth question which asked the students whether their language skills could be improved by using technology and internet resources. Their answers were unanimously “yes”.

For the third section of the needs analysis, the students were asked to respond to statements that probe into the problems they faced in learning each of the four skills. While the findings revealed that students have problems with all four skills, writing skills and speaking skills were highlighted as the most problematic. Table 2 below provides a descriptive summary of the respondents’ writing needs.

Table 2: Students’ responses to the questionnaire: Major problems and needs

Problem statements	Causes/Reasons	Needs
6. 94% are not confident in writing essays in English.	Lack of basic language structures and vocabulary. Lack of self-confidence.	Need regular practice writing short, simple sentences and paragraphs to overcome lack of confidence in writing.
7. 88% experience difficulty writing essays because of limited vocabulary.	Lack of vocabulary and weak grammar.	Need to improve command of vocabulary and grammar.
8. 91% finds writing research papers, assignments and lab reports in English a challenge.	Lack exposure to writing academic texts and lack of vocabulary.	Need exposure and practice in academic writing and relevant vocabulary.
9. 65% do not write emails and send short text messages (sms) in English.	Lack of use of English in authentic social communication.	Need to use English in authentic social communication.
10. 94% use translation method when writing in English.	Weak in English syntax and vocabulary.	Need to reduce using translation method; increase practice in constructing sentences and paragraphs in English.

Majority of the students expressed a lack of confidence in writing essays in English as they found it very daunting. The reasons for these weaknesses are mainly due to low command of vocabulary and basic language structures. At the same time 65% stated that they are not

comfortable to use English as a medium of communication for sending emails and short text messages to friends. In addition 94% of them frequently translated their thoughts from Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay Language) when writing essays in English. Hence, the provision of an online writing support system can provide an avenue for them to interact in English among their friends under the moderation of the TR. Equally important is the aim to practice writing so that they can be less dependent on the translation method.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ONLINE WRITING SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR LOW PROFICIENCY ESL STUDENTS

Based on the findings from the needs analysis, the following online writing support system is proposed. The TR will utilise the language school's eLearn@USM portal as its online platform to implement the online writing support system since the students expressed strong interest to learn English with the use of technology and internet resources. The eLearn@USM is a highly interactive platform, thus allowing the TR to incorporate interactive activities and tasks in the design of the online writing support system to support students' writing development.

Among the main features in the eLearn@USM portal are activities (in the form of exercises/tasks, lessons, feedback) and forum. Other features in the online platform are language games, internet resources and Wiki. These features are very interactive, thus they will promote active communication between TR-student/s and students-students as well as group work. The system turns the role of the teacher into a facilitator and mentor rather than an instructor. At the same time the system enables the teacher to monitor and assess the students' progress online.

(a) Interactivity

The interactivity feature aims to provide opportunities for regular writing practice and authentic social communication among students. By giving students ample writing practice, it is hoped that students will gain confidence in writing sentences and paragraphs in English, thus reducing their dependence on the translation method. The interactive elements in the activities will stimulate various forms of communication between the TR-student/s, student-student. It will also be a platform that allows students to view each others' work, to provide feedback and comments, to discuss topics in small groups and most importantly to learn from each other. This will be accomplished through the various features in the platform. The TR can assign writing exercises/tasks to students individually or in groups via the assignment feature. Feedback can be provided to students as and when the need arises.

The forum feature can be used to interact with a wider audience. It can be used as a discussion forum where the students will be given a topic and they have to discuss by providing written comments on it. These comments will be open for all the participants to view and also to react to their friends' comments. This activity encourages students to write short and simple sentences in

response to the topic, which is a much needed practice among weak learners. This will eventually reduce students' anxiety and fear of writing, thus helping them gain confidence writing in English. Students are also able to provide peer-feedback to their friend's written work, hence encouraging peer-support through written communication. This promotes autonomy as students are independently giving their views and helping their friends improve their writing.

(b) Collaborative learning

The TR will utilise the groupwork feature to encourage collaborative learning towards writing in small groups. The groupwork element was identified as the preferred method by the students since they stated that small group discussions are one of the interesting ways to learn English. Weak students prefer groupwork over individual work because they can support each other in the writing process and they do not feel "alone" and "helpless" completing a written task. The Wiki feature in the eLearn@USM platform is for group writing. It allows the TR to assign students for group writing tasks which require them to write an essay as a group. The most important feature in Wiki is that the TR is able to view students' writing as it progresses. This is a crucial step for the students as they need to practice writing short paragraphs to gain confidence and also to improve on sentence structures. Feedback from the TR can be provided to one student as a specific feedback or to others in the group, as a general comment on their progress. The TR can view the on-going discussion between group members via the written comments on the topic given. Besides that, the TR also plays the role of facilitator as she monitors the flow of discussion and can opt to intervene to provide guidance if necessary or requested by the students. This fulfills the students' needs to be able to refer to the language teacher when necessary. At this juncture, the TR can provide motivation and affirmation to students who are actively participating and to the less active students, she can encourage them to try to write a simple comment about the topic discussed. This enables the TR to help develop and motivate students with different levels of confidence, motivation and proficiency levels through constructive feedback.

(c) TR as a facilitator and mentor

The TR plays multiple roles in this online platform. She will play the role of facilitator as she will be able to observe and facilitate all the written online activity that is taking place. She will also be available for consultation online when the students need assistance or clarification with their on-going discussion. This allows students to write to the TR anytime when they need to. Besides monitoring their work and progress, the TR also can provide encouragement and motivation to students to address their problems and needs in writing.

(d) Language games and internet resources

Language games will be incorporated as vocabulary-building activities to provide the necessary vocabulary exercises to help students improve their command of the language. This is

to meet their poor vocabulary and grammar level, which indirectly affects their writing quality. Therefore, it is vital for students to build and expand their vocabulary and strengthen their foundation of grammar in order to become better writers. Links to relevant websites will be provided for students to browse other additional resources on their own. This is included so as to cater to students' requests to learn English through language games.

(e) Students' progress

The TR is able to monitor students' individual and group progress throughout the semester. This can be done by monitoring their log-in and log-out times and also based on their written work and contributions online towards the tasks provided.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents the language needs and problems of a group of low proficiency ESL undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia. It is believed that the findings are somewhat similar to those in other Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia. Hence the online writing support system designed for these students if proven to be effective in supporting these students would have wide applicability. Before this can be determined it is essential for this system to be tested first which will be the intention of the TR in the next stage of her research. If it is proven effective then the next thing to do is to propose its use to other contexts and also to consider incorporating features that will benefit the students in developing other skills as these low proficiency students do face difficulties in acquiring the other language learning skills too.

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