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Research paper

The importance of language proficiency among business studies students

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Abstract

Language proficiency among business studies students are essential to their ability to gain knowledge as well as to communicate their thoughts and ideas to others. However, it has been found that students in the field of business put less effort and interest in improving their languge proficiency simply because they place greater importance on their core courses. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the reasons behind business students' lack of interest and to introduce innovative learning methods to improve their language proficiency. The government in its plan and policy for higher learning institutions has stipulated that language proficiency through the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) and the English Exit Test (EET) is compulsory for all students in order to gain entrance and to graduate. Thus, it is vital that students place importance in the language courses at the university. By means of an experimental method, data was collected through treatment of a control group and an experimental group on language learning. After the treatment was implemented, a short grammar test was given to the students. A structured interview was then carried out to determine students' interest in the language proficiency classes. The study found that language proficiency could be improved with new methods of input by means of digital story telling. Students showed interest when learning language rules were disseminated through innovative digital story telling. Further, it was identified that they were not sure of the basic grammatical elements at first but were more confident after the experiment. However, the study was limited to only a small group of business students and therefore for future research can be expanded to a greater group of students from different field of studies.

Keywords: *Business Studies Students; Digital Storytelling; Employability; Language Proficiency.*

1. Introduction

The English Language has generally been treated as an important language to learn in business communications. It is deemed a profitable business communication tool especially for local and international trading. International business transactions are normally conducted in the English language around the globe. Thus, most business schools have found it fit to include English language courses as part of their Business Studies Course programme. In effect, the Ministry of Higher Learning in Malaysia has practiced student placement tests for university entrance i.e. the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) for student entrance to local public universities and the English Exit Test (EET) for student graduate requirements. International Universities have also set English language requirements such as IELTS (International English Language Testing Systems) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Thus, besides being an important criteria for college or university enrollment, the English language is also an essential business communication skill for Business students.

According to Aziz (2016) in the New Straits Times, in a study of 70 countries, Malaysia is ranked 14 by the EF English Proficiency Index. However, the report states that many have not favoured the study as they feel that the language proficiency of students have not reached the wanted level. Studies have indicated that Malaysians still lack language proficiency (Soo & Hasan,2014; Soo & Wong, 2012; Samuel & Bakar, 2008).

Innitiatives have been taken by the government to improve language proficiency of students in recent years. In the year 2013, the English Language Standards and Quality Council was established with the aim of raising the standard of English among Malaysian students. This resulted in the second phase of the the Malaysian Education Blueprint endeavor of a Roadmap for English Language Education Reform in Malaysia which starts from 2015 to 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia Annual Report 2015, pp.164-165).

In the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015 to 2025 for Higher Education, one of the six student aspiration listed is language proficiency. This indicates that for the student to be equipped to face the 21st century workplace environment, language proficiency cannot be neglected and is vital to the development of the country's future workforce (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025, Ministry of Higher Education). Aziz (2016) asserted that new graduates in the workplace who are said to achieve excellent grades in exams, are seen to be incompetent in their command of the English language and one of the reason for this is due to lenient language grading in national examinations.

In meeting with the needs of the global economic workforce and international business trading, the current education system has been trending towards equipping students with as much knowledge of business theories and applications in their course outlines and in line with this agenda, the learning of the English language as a business communication tool has become part and parcel of the course features.

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In the case of the Business Studies setup at local universities, a sample of the business studies course structure for diploma courses would include the following:

Table 1: Course Structure for Diploma in Business Studies

Semester 1
Co-curricular 1
PrinsipAsas Islam
Integrated Language Skills: Listening
Semester 2
Co-curricular II
PemikirandanTamadun Islam
Integrated Language Skills: Reading
Semester 3
Co-curricular III
Integrated Language Skills: Writing

Source: Faculty of Business and Management, University Technology MARA website
https://fbm.uitm.edu.my/v2/index.php/programmes/diploma#general-program-content

Table 1 shows the general programme content for the Diploma in Business Studies course at UniversitiTeknologi MARA. For the first three semesters of the programme, business studies students are required to sit for three English language courses which are Integrated Language Skills courses. The purpose is to improve their language proficiency skill in the areas of listening, reading and writing.

A sample of the course structure for the Bachelor in Marketing and Entrepreneurship Studies is as follows:

Table 2: Course Structure for Bachelor in Marketing and Entrepreneurship Studies

Semester 1
Economics
Semester 2
Islamic and Asian Civilization
Semester 3
English for Academic Writing
Semester 4
English for Report Writing

Source: Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA website https://fbm.uitm.edu.my/v2/index.php/programmes/undergraduate/centre-for-marketing-and-entrepreneurship-studies#centre-general-program-content

Table 2 is a sample of the general course programme for the Bachelor in Marketing and Entrepreneurship offered at Universiti Teknologi MARA. In the course programme, students are required to complete two English courses in the 3rd and 4th semester as fulfillment of their programme requirement. Both language courses were offered to enable students to write business reports as part of their course structure.

From the samples of course content for Business Studies offered at the university, it is obvious that curriculam designers have included English as part of the course content in line with the government's aspirations for students as the future workforce for the country.

As such, it is clear that initiatives have been taken by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education to improve English language proficiency among Malaysian students in general and Business Studies students in particular, but the recurring frustrations of potential employers when students do not meet the standard English language proficiency for the workplace is still alarming. In view of this, the current study intends to investigate the students' lack of interest in improving their English language proficiency skills. Further, the study also considers an innovative method to teaching and learning by means of the use of digital storytelling to improve language proficiency. This will enable curriculum and policy makers alike to get a better overview of the issue at hand and to determine whether new methods should be employed to gain students' learning interest in the English language.

While the issue of the importance of English language proficiency for Business and Trading has been addressed, and the initiatives taken by the government through the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education quite clearly drawn out, the problem of business studies students still missing the mark needs to be considered. The next section of this paper will therefore focus on previous literatures that have been written on this area of study and the experimental method applied to provide possible solutions to the current dilema. Further, discussions and descriptive analysis would also be done based on the results received to come to a conclusion as well as to provide recommendations for the study.

2. Literature review

Student awareness of the importance of English language proficiency with regard to future employment is necessary for them to succeed in building a career as well as in contributing to the development of their country's economy. In a study conducted by Abdul Kadir and Wan Mohd Noor (2015), it was found that business major students had only medium level awareness of the importance of English for job employment. Some problems with respect to this was highlighted such as the decline of English and overall competencies and employability of graduates. This pointed to the fact that student efforts and student point of view over the issue has also to be taken into consideration when delving on this issue. Daily News (2014) reported that in the year 2012, the Education Ministry and Higher Learning Division revealed that out of 109,025 graduates, 55.4 percent gained employment, 24.7 percent were unemployed and 20.8 percent continued their studies. This means that with every five students, three get employed and one remains unemployed. It also reported Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan, the Executive Director of the Malaysian Employers Federation as saying that employers are increasingly viewing communicative ability as a major factor for hiring graduates. Another study conducted by Samuel and Bakar (2008) proposed that the appalling state of English language proficiency be undertaken by using an innovative tool namely, the Virtual English Language Tool where learning takes place in the virtual environment.

The situation in China is similar to Malaysia. Liu (2013, as cited in Abdul Kadir and Wan Mohd Noor, 2015) observed that several factors contributed to low level competency among students and one of which is self-efficacy. Graduates in China with fluency in English had higher probability of getting jobs in a competitive environment.

In another study by Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah and Misieng (2013), it was reported that the hike of unemployment among graduates were possibly attributed to their poor proficiency in English. Viewpoints from students showed that they deemed communicatie abilities as going beyond the borders of language proficiency. Thus, it could be concluded that improving student communicative abilities and their English language proficiency are not parallel and therefore should be treated separately.

Hodges and Burchell (2003) conducted a study on New Zealand employers' views of how well business graduates were prepared for the workplace. A number of competencies were expected of these graduates such as technical knowledge, personal attributes and oral and written communication skills. The findings showed that a number of employers expressed concern over the desired level of communication skills, particularly written communication skills.

In Australia, it was found that international students' intake for undergraduate and postgraduate courses were increasing rapidly at the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University (Harris, 2009). These students are not native speakers of English and therefore the Faculty introduced the Business Literacy and Numeracy Project to cater to the needs of these students. The efforts by the university was well received by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) for its exemplary ap-

proach in addressing English language proficiency and commended on best practice principles. Such need arises as English for business students to be competitive in the workplace is imperative. Using new methods to enhance learning of languages are constantly developed by researchers and educators to enable students to be motivated to learn as well as to encourage effective practices with regards to 21st century education. The introduction of digital storytelling is one such method to create interest in learning the English language. According to Bran (2010), digital storytelling with a combination of images, sound, and texts could attract the students' interest and enhance their learning achievement. Hung, Hwang and Huang (2012) conducted a study on the use of project-based learning and digital storytelling as an approach for improving students' learning motivation, problem-solving competence and learning achievement. The result of their experimental study indicated that the use of project-based learning with digital storytelling could effectively enhance learning motivation, problem-solving competence and learning achievement. In another study by Smeda, Dekich and Sharda (2014), a multi-site case study was conducted in an Australian school at primary and secondary levels whereby students and teachers were given the opportunity to use innovative learning experiences based on digital storytelling. The mixed method research found that digital storytelling is a powerful tool to integrate instructional messages with learning activities to create more engaging and exciting learning environments. Further, it was found to be a meaningful approach for creating a constructivist learning environment based on principles and practices of teaching and learning. The study also found that there was great potential in this approach for better educational outcomes for learners. Miller (2009) conducted a comprehensive study on digital storytelling. The study looked at the need for students to use effective written communication skills and strong literacy in technology. The objective of the study was to engage students in the writing process and integrate technology into daily learning activities. The study concluded that using digital storytelling as a means to enhance writing is beneficial to the classroom. However, careful planning should be considered before implementing the method. The study also asserted that digital storytelling would continue to be a quality learning strategy for classrooms of the future providing learners with a deeply meaningful learning experience.

Thus far, this section of the paper has described previous literature, summarising and explaining the issues and findings of the use of English for students' employment particularly in the field of business studies. Previous studies has also been discussed on the use of digital storytelling as a prescription for student learning motivation. In the next section, the experimental mixed-method approach to the study will be discussed at length before moving to the findings and results as well as conclusions and recommendations.

3. Methodology

In this section of the study, a description of the mixed method applied to the study will be discussed at length. The study focuses on the reasons behind business students' lack of interest in improving their English language proficiency and the use of digital storytelling as an innovative learning tool to motivate students and increase their interest in improving their English language proficiency.

The respondents. The respondents of the study consists of 30 students in the control group and 30 students in the experimental group. They were all students enrolled in the Diploma of Business Studies programme. Selection was based on a purposive non-random sampling method to ensure the students were all Business Studies students in their second year of studies at the university. The students were all bumiputras and aged between 18 to 20 years old. They had all sat for their SPM and gained entrance to the university as a prerequisite. In their previous ELC, the control group had the following scores: 9 students scored As, 17 students scored Bs and 4 students scored Cs. In the experimental group, the ELC scores from the previous semester was as follows: 3 students scored As, 16 students scored Bs and 11 students scored Cs.

The instruments. The instruments used for the study are pre and posttests, a grammar test, and a digital story. A semi-structured interview was also prepared for the study. The pre and post test consist of basic grammatical items to test the students' basic knowledge of the English language which could help in determining their proficiency levels. The grammar test applied to this study was carried out to determine whether students had understood the lessons to improve their English language proficiency. This would also provide support to the pre and post tests that were used for this study. Digital storytelling is a method of teaching and learning that is fairly new and innovative. The study adapts this method from recommendations of previous studies such as Hung, Hwang and Huang (2012), Smeda, Dekich and Sharda (2014) and Miller (2009). The digital story itself however, is an original story that has been copyrighted. The innovative method applied had previously been presented in the 2014 Invention, Innovation and Design Expo and won a Gold Award for Innovations. In the digital story, prepared from the movie maker software, basic grammatical categories are presented in the form of a story of the English family. Each grammatical category and its functions were presented as a member of the family consisting of Mr and Mrs English, and their children who are Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition, Conjunction, Article and Pronoun.

The procedure.The lecturer and students were briefed on the research to be carried out in their English course Before treatment was applied to the study, a pre-test was conducted for both the control and the experimental groups. In the experimental session, the control group was treated with the conventional method of teaching and learning. The experimental group on the other hand, was treated with the digital storytelling. At the end of the session, both the control group and the experimental group were given a short grammar test. This was followed by the post-test. Three students in the experimental group were then randomly selected for the semi-structured interview session. This was to validate how the students felt after the experiment was carried out on them.

Data analysis. Data collected from the pre and post tests and the grammar test were analysed using descriptive analysis. Data from the interview session were transcribed and analysed using qualitative procedures. After the experiment was conducted and the data tabulated for analysis, discussions were made to get the findings and results and to make conclusions and recommendations for the study.

4. Findings and results

Based on the objectives of this study which were to determine the reasons why students in the Business Studies programmes lack interest in improving their English language proficiency and to find out whether the implementation of innovative learning tools such as digital storytelling could assist in building interest, experimental methods were applied to the study.

In the interview sessions, students were asked the following questions: (1) Do you think that English is important for your course studies? (2) From a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your English language class? (3) Do you agree that the English language course should not be offered as part of your course programme? (4) In your opinion, what is the major factor for students lack of interest in improving their English language? (5) Do you think you would be interested to improve your English if innovative methods like digital storytelling were introduced in your course?

The results from the interview showed that all the students agreed that the English language course is important as part of their programmes' course studies. When asked to rate their English language class on a scale of one to ten, 66.67 percent of the students interviewed gave a rating score of 5. This indicates that they have an average interest in the class. The students were also asked if they agreed that the English language course were not offered in

their programme. Surprisingly, they all agreed that it should not be offered in their course programme. The reasons given were because they had already sat for the English language test in their High School examination (SPM) which had gone through standard grading measures and it had already qualified them for their Business Studies course. They felt that this was enough to gauge their English language proficiency. Further, they also believe that as they were majoring in Business Studies, it was not as important to concentrate in their English language coursein comparison to their core courses. The major factor or main reason cited for students' lack of interest in improving their English language was the students' attitude themselves. The students commented that they were lazy to take the initiative, it was less important compared to their other course subjects, English is difficult to master. When asked if the use of digital storytelling could compel them to learn and improve their English language proficiency, all the students agreed that it was a fun way to learn English and that they would be interested if such a method was employed in the classroom.
The results of the pre and post test for the control group are shown in figure 1 and 2 below.

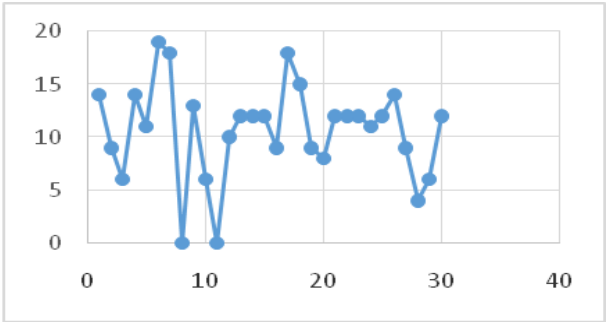

Fig. 1: Pre-Test Results for the Control Group.

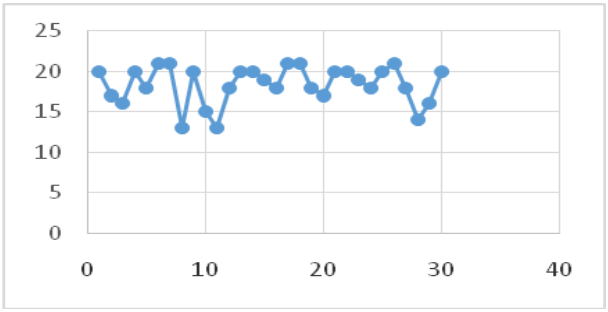

Fig. 2: Post-Test Results for the Control Group.

In figure 1 and 2, the scores were tabulated at a full score of 20. The average score for the pre-test obtained by the control group was 10.63. For the post test, the control group obtained a score of 18.40. Overall, the comparison of the Pre and Post test for the Control group was tabulated at an average of mean difference of 7.77. Thus, there were improvements made by the students in the control group when conventional methods were used in the class. The results of the pre and post test for the experimental group are shown in figure 3 and 4 below.

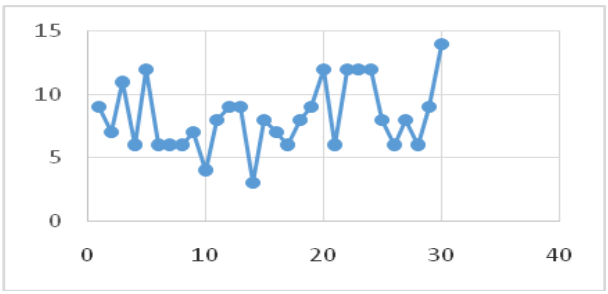

Fig. 3: Pre-Test Results for the Experimental Group.

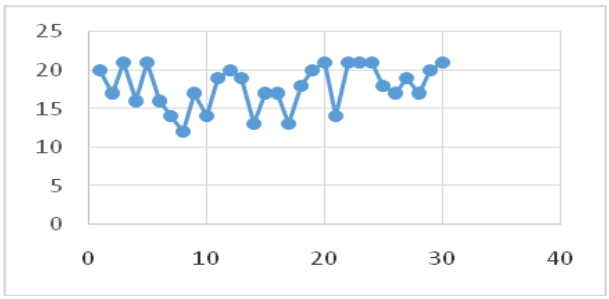

Fig. 4: Post-Test Results for the Experimental Group.

The same test that was administered on the control group was also administered on the experimental group. This conditioning would make it valid for comparisons of the scores. The average score for pre test obtained by the experimental group was 8.20. The average score for the post test obtained by the experimental group was 17.80.Overall, this brought to a difference in average of 9.60.
Comparison of the findings for both the control and experimental group therefore showed a significant difference before and after the experiment was implemented. However, the average difference from the experimental group (difference=9.60) was higher than that of the control group (difference=7.77). This could hence suggest that the impact of the session was greater for the experimental group in comparison to the control group. Further, several assumptions could be made based on the results. Firstly, the previous ELC scores of the control group suggests that on average they have a slightly better language proficiency level compared to the experimental group. Thus, although their average scores for the pre and post tests were higher than the experimental group, the difference between their scores fell short of the experimental group's scores. Secondly, the difference between the two groups in the post test average score was at par with a small difference of 0.6. The grammar test was administered to determine the students' level of comprehension in the class session. This would further validate the use of digital storytelling as a means for motivating students' learning and improving their language.

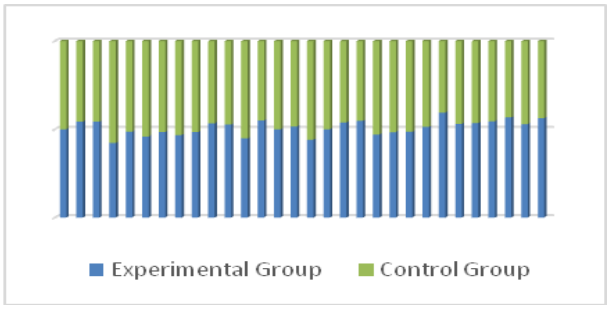

Fig. 5: Grammar Test Scores for the Experimental and Control Group.

Figure 5 shows the grammar test scores for the experimental group and the control group. The overall average score of the experimental group was 16.23. The overall average score of the control group was 15.50. Thus, for the grammar test the experimental group achieved a higher score than the control group.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings and results of this study, several conclusions and recommendations can be made. Firstly, the study found that Business Studies students do not treat the learning English as highly important for their programme. Although the government has mooted all kinds of strategy and has proposed in the Education Blueprint that students should aspire to have language proficiency, Business Studies students have yet to take their learning of the English language seriously. Secondly, students' lack of interest in improving their language proficiency were attributed to the students' own attitude of being lazy to take an interest in the subject, the students belief that English is less important compared to their

core courses and their opinion that English was difficult to master. Thirdly, the implementation of innovative learning methods such as digital storytelling sparked interest in students' learning and motivation and could be used to cultivate interest in the learning of English. Finally, using digital stories can also be a means to improving student achievement. From the findings and results of the study, it is recommended that new innovative methods be applied to the teaching and learning of English for this will help change students' false perception towards learning the English language. The study however, was only limited to a small group of Diploma in Business Studies students. Thus, for future research studies can be conducted at a larger scale and on students from different fields of studies.

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